

Sustainable
Livelihoods
in
Southern
Africa

Decentralisations in practice
in southern Africa



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SLSA team

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I. Introduction

Decentralisation, like good governance or sustainable development, is one of those concepts everyone from the World Bank to top officials in national governments seems to think is a 'good thing'. But the meanings attached vary widely. And whilst donors and governments all want to support it – it is now part of the well-worn lexicon of development clichés – it has failed palpably in many instances to deliver the results claimed of it. Why then is it so popular and what does it entail in practice?

The Sustainable Livelihoods in Southern Africa (SLSA) programme case studies illustrate that decentralisation is rarely a singular process but consists of multiple processes that occur in different spheres of activity, taking on a variety of forms which may push outcomes in different directions. For example, in any one area we may observe attempts at local government reform, creating a new tier of locally-elected councils, alongside an array of decentralised committee structures including catchment, borehole, grazing, woodlot, or wildlife management committees or councils, with varying forms of membership and authority.

Across southern Africa, government and donor initiatives have invested considerable resources in community-based natural resource management, local government capacity building and in re-empowering so-called traditional authorities – all with the aim of improving livelihoods and natural resource use and sustainability. Very often there is little co-ordination between such initiatives; some may complement each other, but, frequently, there is overlap, confusion, ambiguity and high transactions costs for those expected to participate. Understanding what, when and how change has taken place is frequently a complex task for decision makers, let alone poor communities expected to participate in these new structures.

The reality on the ground – found consistently, if with differing particularities across the study areas – is a picture of complex, overlapping systems of administration and management, often with parallel systems in existence, offering different lines of accountability, funding streams and forms of authority.

Given the variety of practices and processes associated with decentralisation, its multiple meanings may accompany very different, and indeed, divergent development agendas. In



recent decades its prominence is, in particular, associated with two quite different, some would argue contradictory, trends:

- the process of structural adjustment and its frequent corollary of public sector retrenchment
- the emphasis on local forms of governance and the rise of participatory approaches to development.

These broader trends are each connected with different perspectives on decentralisation. Many variants exist either as distinct constructions of, or complex interrelationships between the following: political or democratic decentralisation; deconcentration or administrative decentralisation; delegation; devolution; fiscal decentralisation; privatisation; and participatory local governance. In practice decentralisation 'policy' broadly reflects three discourses, each creating in its wake different organisational forms, namely:

- Democratic decentralisation – government at the local level creating opportunities for competitive local electoral politics and, within this competition, an enhanced local voice and improved responsiveness. Multi-purpose elected councils with tax-raising powers are the result.
- Decentralisation for efficient service delivery – moving the control over, and delivery of, services to the local level – is assumed to result in improved efficiency. It may also allow for user-pay schemes for certain resources and therefore local-level cost recovery. User committees may oversee the management of such services.
- Project-based/sector-focused committees – local management and control over resources – are seen as the key to success of community-based resource-management initiatives. Committee structures overseeing such activities are the key organisational mechanism.

This broad characterisation, however, should not be used to substitute for or underplay the complexity, messiness and confusion of 'real' decentralisations in southern African contexts.

2. The mainstream view

Notwithstanding the plurality of practices and processes bound up with conceptualisations of decentralisation, a dominant reading of decentralisation has colonised policy discourse, which includes the following:



- the existence of bodies separated by law from the national centre, in which local representatives are given formal power to decide on a range of public matters
- a political base in the locality, not the nation
- limited area of authority, but entrenched right to make decisions on areas within their jurisdiction
- local authorities commanding resources that may be spent and invested at their own discretion.

A range of assumptions underpin this idealised state of affairs. These include that:

- Elections to posts are free and fair, and, through competition by elites for posts, a local competitive politics will emerge.
- Money and resources will be available from the central state, or from local taxation.
- Alternative sites of 'traditional' or 'customary' authority will erode over time in favour of a new democratic politics at the local level.
- Approvals for expenditures, plans and other initiatives occur at the local level, not at the centre.
- Confidence and capacity for exercising voice at the local level emerges through participation in democratic bodies (councils, committees and so on).

The argument runs that if natural resources are managed at the local level, by communities or local government, then they will be looked after better and more efficiently, resulting in improved opportunities for sustainable livelihoods. Systems of accountability are more effective and transparent as a result, and local leadership can make effective demands on the central state. Such decentralised arrangements thus allow more community participation and therefore the voices of people are more likely to be heard in policy decisions. Resource users as 'participants' can express claims and demands to officials and institutional bodies, informally or through plans and contracts. In effect a model of responsive governance and service delivery is presumed, with strong links to accountability, representation and democratic empowerment. The social and political environment is benign, the actors are rational decision makers according to goals and objectives set in policy, and the outcomes are fairly distributed. Creating new 'open' environments for decision-making decentralisation, so the argument



goes, opens opportunities for a 'flattening of power' over resource use as hierarchical control gives way to a level playing field for the expression of (and response to) claims on resources. Individuals as actors in a competitive political environment are, as a result, increasingly exposed to decision-making environments that were previously beyond their reach.

Key factors in new decentralised systems are 'responsive' local authorities (efficient, informed, goal-seeking) comprising local councillors and other forms of elected officials, greater scrutiny of process (either electoral – votes mean 'good' or vote-seeking behaviour – or executive decision making) and perhaps local judicial processes.

All this, of course, implies a model of democracy, accountability and, crucially, legitimacy both premised on (and drawn from) largely Western-liberal social and political traditions that have formed over hundreds of years and include various levels of scrutiny and checks and balances to ensure that rules are adhered to and, increasingly, individuals are assisted in making their claims. Even so, there are still frequent inefficiencies, instances of corruption, nepotism and a large degree of political apathy within these 'competitive' political arenas.

As our examples drawn from southern Africa demonstrate, not surprisingly the application of imported models in local Zimbabwean, South African and Mozambican environments presents considerable problems for realising in practice the policy 'fantasies' underlying much of the rhetoric about decentralisation. This, in turn, has major implications for people's livelihoods, and requires a more context-informed analysis of what decentralisation(s) might or might not offer in practice.

3. Decentralisations in southern Africa

Overview

Whilst the decentralisation thrust of much current policy is rooted in neo-liberal thinking on efficiency of service delivery (in increasingly market-oriented environments), alongside often vague, Western-liberal conceptions of 'good governance'. In fact in southern Africa contemporary decentralisations had earlier antecedents in colonial policy in the context of 'native' land administration – one of the most important being control through proxy local leaders (including local 'traditional authorities').



In common with wider development thinking during the 1980s – particularly that surrounding the adoption of liberal market ideology and the ‘rolling back’ of the state – southern African countries witnessed considerable development of decentralisation policy during the last two decades, as highlighted in the following sections.

Decentralisation in Zimbabwe

Shortly after independence, with the Prime Ministerial decree of 1984, a new decentralised system was installed in Zimbabwe to parallel the party cell structure established during the liberation war. Village, ward and district committees (Vidcos) became the basis for planning and administration of development and were superimposed on a system of ‘traditional’ authority involving chiefs and headmen. This ‘tradition’ had been highly shaped by colonial intervention, and many such authorities had collaborated with the Rhodesian regime, making them illegitimate in the eyes of the new government and party officials. Conflicts between these two authority structures were widespread and often incapacitated the new structures, which, despite the promises of government, received neither much devolved power nor resources, and failed in many instances to establish their legitimacy. In the latter part of the 1990s, the Vidcos were effectively abandoned, to be replaced by a hybrid form of administration that brought the ‘traditional authorities’ back in.

Democratic decentralisation has been attempted in Zimbabwe with the establishment of elected unitary rural district councils (following the Rural District Councils Act of 1988) to which a permanent transfer of functions and authority from central government was supposed to have taken place. However, this process has been stridently criticised as a process of phoney decentralisation producing rural district councils (RDCs) lacking in power and resources with unfunded mandates. In practice this process has been instrumental in facilitating central government control of the rural majority of the country’s population and has been characterised as an exercise geared more towards attracting money from donors.

However, in the field of natural resources management, Zimbabwe is held up as more of a decentralisation ‘success’. Local resource-user committees have mushroomed and the Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (Campfire) programme for devolving the management and revenue from safari hunting and ecotourism has become



internationally renowned and lavishly funded. There has also been considerable movement in expanding the scope of decentralised water resources management. In 1998 the new Water Act ushered in a catchment-based system replacing the largely commercial farming-dominated river boards. The new system was based on the concept of integrated water resource management and devolved responsibility for management decision making (principally the issuing of permits and fee collection) to lower, sub-catchment levels. Although the establishment of these institutions was delayed by emerging donor-government problems, by 2000 catchment councils in at least two basins, the Save and Mazowe, were up and running. Embedded in the integrated water resource management (WRM) discourse is the notion of broad-based user participation – including previously disadvantaged communal and small-scale, predominantly African farmers. The actual functioning of the institutions in recent years has been affected by existing and new political-economic faultlines at a local level, which serve to challenge many of the ideals of user-based decision making and pro-poor empowerment embedded in this decentralisation discourse.

Since the emergence of a challenge to the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front's (Zanu-PF) authority from a credible opposition party, there has been an ongoing process of party politicisation with decentralised institutions – from RDCs to water point committees – having to show strong support for Zanu-PF. In the case of the new water management institution there is a close linkage between water demand, the efficient collection of tariffs sufficient to cover institutional overheads, and the major changes in land use taking place at a local level. The revenue base of these institutions – large commercial farmers – is being replaced by a complex array of 'newly-emerging' water users in the form of fast-track settlers.

Decentralisation in Mozambique

Post-independence and pre-1990, Mozambique experienced 'democratic centralism' under one-party rule. In 1990 amendments to the Constitution ushered in a regime based on democratic principles and on multi-party politics, which appeared to have changed things significantly. However, this has not unfolded rapidly or smoothly. The granting of more autonomy to lower levels of government came to be seen as one of the avenues to improving the state's capacity to deliver basic services and re-establish the legitimacy of government



institutions at the local level. The approach therefore follows the orthodox 'bureaucratic decentralisation' discourse.

The Public Sector Reform Strategy, launched in June 2001, identifies decentralisation and deconcentration of functions as two main avenues to improve the effectiveness and the efficiency of the public sector at all levels. The Global Strategy for Public Sector Reform (2001–2011) identifies the main drivers as being:

- rationalisation of structures and deconcentration of government services
- the simplification of procedures in relation to service delivery and the improvement of government relations with citizens
- improvement to financial management systems and the accountability of local state structures
- increased participation of local communities in activities of the local state structures.

The policy narrative does not specifically identify an impact on the livelihoods of the poor but concentrates rather on greater participation and enhanced legitimacy of local state structures. However, none of this deals with local government accountability. This issue is dealt with by other legislation, still in draft or pending implementation. There is also a sense that this is an attempt to improve local governance in a context where some of the key governance reforms (elected local authorities, devolution of certain fiscal and policy powers to the district level, and so on) are not in place and, most likely, will not be for the foreseeable future.

The key question, then, seems to be whether there is room for real enhancement of local governance without first putting in place those reforms. Generally, the response to this has been formulated as follows: by fostering a more active and organised civil society (a favoured emphasis of many donors), a more responsive civil service, and a culture of local dialogue, the public sector reform process can ease government fears about decentralisation in rural areas as well as improve the chances that it will be successful. Reforms underway are therefore seen as 'stepping stones' to a more thorough democratisation of the state. There appears to be an explicit recognition that the Mozambican state authorities, and particularly the ruling



party, may not have fully embraced the concept of local government accountability, as evidenced by the very limited granting of municipality status to areas throughout the country.

Initially a reform law was passed (on the eve of the 1994 multi-party elections) that envisaged the 'municipalisation' of all cities and districts. However, the law never came into force, largely as a result of doubts concerning its constitutionality. To deal with this problem, amendments to the Constitution were made in 1996, which provided for municipalities, defined as legal entities of population and territory endowed with autonomy, including financial autonomy. The municipalities comprise two types: municipalities and villages – the former in cities and towns, and the latter in administrative posts.

The subsequent passing of municipal reform legislation in 1997 now means that urban and rural areas are differentiated. The legislation provides that all urban areas and some rural conurbations are to be administered by elected local governments (representative assemblies and mayors), with devolved powers to manage the urban environment and to provide basic urban services on the basis of their own budgets, to be funded through own-source revenues and intergovernmental transfers. However, to date only 23 urban municipalities and ten rural centres, one for each province, have been established.

Most of the rural population has been left out of the reform package, however, and will consequently be subject to continued central rule. Rural areas (where 77% of the country's population live) have been excluded from political decentralisation, and are governed as part of a three-tier deconcentrated system (central government, provincial government, and district administration). 'Responsive' local authorities are therefore not part of the picture for these areas.

The picture emerging in Mozambique is of a highly selective commitment to democratic decentralisation and a hesitant central government, entrenched in a long tradition of centralised party-based control, worried about the consequences in the rural areas, particularly where opposition political affiliations thrive.

That said, in the context of a continued commitment to centralism, and a strong dependence on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and donor projects, the rural areas – such as those in the study areas of Zambézia – have witnessed the flourishing of a range of decentralised



project-based activities, with user committees and local community participation at the centre. Most of these, however, are highly dependent on external subventions of resources, and their sustainability – in terms of providing an alternative democratic base for rural demands on the state – is certainly questionable. For example, the case study from Derre illustrates how external involvement in local resource management issues can lead to localised conflict, in particular where there is fuzzy accountability and overlapping authorities. In Derre, the perceptions of new institutions as 'elite movements' and the poor knowledge of community rights with respect to new institutions threatens to scupper attempts at better local management and control of key livelihoods resources.

Many of the project-based local-level committees and management bodies have used various pieces of sector-specific legislation, such as the Land and Forestry Law and the Wildlife Law, as springboards. Although these two laws have a different philosophical approach to the issue of local involvement in decision making and resource allocation, particularly in relation to where the benefits for the rural poor are to come from, they have both broken new ground in terms of devolving power to the local level. However, as a result of their formulation within fairly narrow policy boundaries and the lack of integration with the broader debates about democratic local governance, these initiatives have sometimes been regarded with suspicion by local and central state authorities. The contestation of the role of community land committees by the national surveying department and the unwillingness of the national forestry department to see independent management councils levying their own revenues from forest licensing, are evidence of this.

A further drawback of sector-bound decentralisations is that they rarely fit with the reality of rural livelihoods, which tend not to be compartmentalised into separate institutional arrangements dealing with different resources. Different local-level institutions established through a variety of initiatives can become sites of struggle and serve to diminish rather than harness the potential of local peoples' participation.

Decentralisation in South Africa

Decentralisation in South Africa is centred on the creation of a multi-tiered system of elected local government throughout the country. The first local government elections were held in



1995 and 1996, with a subsequent round in 2000. The system of elected local government is designed to address the inequalities inherited from the apartheid era and give South Africans a voice in decisions that affect their lives. Two main forces drive decentralisation in South Africa. The first is the belief that many functions can be undertaken more effectively at local levels of government, and the second is that national government wants to relieve itself of existing, or potential, fiscal pressure and administrative responsibilities. Great emphasis has been placed on participation of the electorate in the decision-making processes and accountability of the democratically-elected authorities to the electorate. Funding for local government comes from a mix of own revenues (for example, service charges), project-specific funding provided by government line departments, such as the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry or Department of Public Works, and budgets allocated by the National Treasury, the so-called 'equitable share'. In parallel, a degree of 'administrative decentralisation' (or deconcentration) is also underway, as national government departments, such as the Department of Land Affairs, delegate powers to an expanding network of provincial and district offices.

The process of democratic decentralisation in South Africa is greatly complicated by the continued existence of so-called traditional leaders – chiefs, headmen and tribal authorities. Traditional leaders exercise considerable power in the rural areas, especially in the key area of the administration of communal land, and often find themselves in competition with elected local councillors. The institution of traditional leadership is recognised under the Constitution, but the roles, functions and powers of traditional leaders have not been adequately clarified by government, leading to considerable tension between unelected chiefs and elected local councillors. The White Paper on Local Government (1998) states merely that traditional leadership will play a role that is 'closest to the people', leaving considerable scope for interpretation according to different local concerns and strategies of power.

In South Africa there is clearly a strong commitment to multi-tiered government and considerable resources have been invested in the creation of new local authorities. But there is also some hesitance in implementation on the part of government, and the ruling African National Congress (ANC) in particular. Despite its currently massive majority mandate, the ANC remains suspicious of alternative power centres, particularly in the former 'homeland'



areas. There is a strong impulse towards central political control. For some, decentralisation can be seen as part and parcel of wider ANC-driven interest in confronting (or at least containing) the established authority of traditional leaders, particularly in the former bantustans.

Along with the creation of local political authorities there has been an imposition of complex technocratic tasks on local government, ranging from planning and infrastructure development to financial management, before capacity has been built. This potentially raises future problems for implementation, and, in the longer term, questions of credibility and legitimacy of the new authorities if the development benefits are not delivered.

It has yet to be seen to what extent the current decentralisation process represents a shift in political and institutional power. The resources and responsibilities vested in the local sphere of government continue to be set largely by other spheres of government, particularly line departments at provincial and national levels, such as Water Affairs, Public Works and Housing. The actual transfer of even the limited powers already agreed to is beset by a range of problems, including very real issues of institutional inexperience and lack of capacity, but also less tangible issues of institutional foot-dragging on the part of certain line departments. A high degree of rivalry and uncertainty would also appear to exist within the sphere of local government, particularly between the directly-elected local municipalities and the indirectly-elected district municipalities. Here, too, central government has not adequately clarified the division of responsibilities between the two tiers of local government or a precise timetable for the transfer of certain powers, currently exercised at the district level, to local municipalities.

3. Negotiating access to resources

However, these overview sketches of decentralisation policies across the three countries only tell part of the story. By looking at how local people negotiate access to resources – whether land, water or wild resources – the SLSA case studies show how complex the local political and administrative realities really are. By looking ‘from the ground up’ a different, more complex perspective on decentralisation in practice is suggested. The case studies asked how people actually gain access to resources and through what institutional means? Negotiating this access in the context of decentralisation is by no means a straightforward



matter, as the case studies have highlighted. A number of themes emerge across the case studies.

Negotiating institutional complexity

Decentralisation is, in practice, made up of differing and multiple processes and engages a variety of actors. It is, therefore, far from the singular process envisaged by thinking on local government reform, and involves interactions far more complex than simple 'transfer of power' notions embedded in the standard decentralisation literature. At the local level people must negotiate access to resources within varying institutional frameworks and legal orders and contend with multiple and, sometimes, conflicting procedures.

The tendency for NGOs and administrative authorities working in parallel to establish a multiplicity of institutions in certain localities was evocatively described by one old man in Bajone, Mozambique, as the 'committee disease'. These new institutions have been parachuted onto communities and attempt to lump together people from different social groups and political parties and from administrative and traditional authorities. The same man described the resulting conflict and disorder as like having a cat and mouse living together in the same room. However, he went on to explain that he attends meetings held by most of the groups operating locally in the hope of gaining benefits from each. This is, of course, not cost free, and many local informants commented on how they weigh the benefits of participation, depending on the possible returns. In the Mozambique context, NGO and donor projects are favoured, and indeed are the dominant source of local revenue. In many respects, government is seen as distant and irrelevant, and formal processes of government decentralisation have little local relevance. The challenge instead, from a local perspective, is to have a good idea of what is on offer from the donor/NGO projects and to strategise accordingly. In such circumstances linkages between donor/NGO work on the one hand and local informal or 'traditional authority' on the other becomes of key importance.

In Zimbabwe the recent establishment of water catchment institutions, defined by hydrological boundaries, overlying existing administrative and political boundaries, raises a number of problems of institutional access and overlap of responsibilities between decentralised



institutions. Sub-catchment council hydrological boundaries were overlain on political and administrative boundaries established when the villages, wards, districts and provinces were carved out under the local government decentralisation process. When RDCs were formed, they became the focal administrative points where stakeholders met and discussed district development issues. In addition, complaints and problems were channelled to this forum, particularly by people from communal areas. The decentralisation process surrounding water reforms shifted their focal point to catchment and sub-catchment councils. People who were used to reporting to their district council now report water issues to a sub-catchment council which may not be in their 'district' or area. They are forced to travel long distances to report water issues in unfamiliar institutional environments. By default, participation and representation becomes limited to stakeholders who are situated near the sub-catchment council office (or able to afford the costs of access) at the expense of those located further from the sub-catchment council offices and/or unable to cover such costs. Even when able to make the necessary journey, poor reverse flows of information on new 'procedures' can often mean that 'new stakeholders' arrive at catchment council offices without the right documentation.

This has implications for access to new institutions by precisely those stakeholders supposedly addressed by sectoral reforms. It also poses key questions for parallel 'decentralised' institutions, together within broader development activities in natural resource management (including environmental protection and water quality protection).

In Chipinge district, a disjunction exists between local authority power and Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA) processes of resources management. The former perceives the establishment of tariff collection by the latter as a form of 'virtual taxation' of the local people (who are, after all, the constituents for local councillors). Implicit in the council's concerns is a reticence to be associated too closely with new policies and institutions perceived as extractive at a local level. Of particular concern is the centralised destination of local revenue-raising activities. Future coherence and co-operation between the two decentralised institutions will be essential, not least in ensuring that RDCs act to enforce compliance by water users who refuse to pay the new levies. At present there are problems evident in RDCs assuming this role given the linkage between permit issue and current land claims (against which permits are granted). RDCs are responsible for authorising land claims. An increasingly complex



pattern of decentralised institutions and patterns of authority and power is emerging in rural Zimbabwe.

For local communities in such districts of Zimbabwe and elsewhere in southern Africa, this environment of increasingly multiple decentralisation represents a major challenge for access to key livelihood resources. Understanding the maze and marking out effective routes within it in order to achieve major livelihoods goals requires levels of knowledge, decision-making capacity and access to key resources including time, transport options and political patronage networks. In many case these resources are already in short supply.

Box 1: Finding a way through the institutional maze

As this case study from Zimbabwe shows, different people gain access to borehole water through different routes depending on their social status, affiliations and connections. Forms of decentralisation in practice are thus closely related to social capital 'routes' through the 'institutional maze'. Mai Tendai lives in Kesani village in Ward 4 of Sangwe communal area in Zimbabwe. She has been a member of the village borehole committee since its establishment five years ago when the District Development Fund (DDF) sunk it. In recent years she has been the committee treasurer in charge of collecting fees from members for repairs. However, in the last year no-one has paid their dues, and a number of those who were key to the committee at its establishment have left. These people, including the local village headman, have sunk their own boreholes in their own plots, hiring in private contractors for the work. Access to these is limited usually only to family members, relatives and some close friends. Without the influence of the headman and some other influential members of the village with connections in Chiredzi, the possibilities of getting the borehole fixed by DDF have diminished. Mai Tendai and the other committee members' repeated efforts to see the councillor failed. This is exacerbated by their infrequent visits to Chiredzi, and their lack of knowledge of the officials to talk to when they go to the council offices. In the last months the borehole has not been working at all, and those who are not in good books with private borehole owners must travel to the nearby river and draw water from the dry sand river bed.

Mai Tendai's brother-in-law also lives nearby. He is a young man and only recently married. He has a very small plot of land, and was also a member of the borehole committee until last year. However, he decided that the situation in Sangwe was not going to get better and he joined the



war veterans in the invasion of nearby farms. He now has a plot there, and, although times were tough at the beginning, the government paid for private contractors to sink boreholes in the new resettlement areas. He carries a Zanu-PF party card, and helped the war veterans in organising young people for the farm occupation. He has kept his homestead and farm plot in Sangwe, and most often his children stay there with their mother, but he says that in the long term he might move completely to the resettlement if that is where government is going to offer resources and assistance. Mai Tendai originally came from Maonye village in Ward 1 in Sangwe, and many of her relatives still live there. They have benefited from much more assistance over the last ten years than in Maonye village to the north. This was because the local councillor and headman were well connected. They attracted donors, NGOs and government to come and help them. The density of boreholes in the area is twice as high. With the support that came from outside they were well maintained, and fewer people bothered with their own private supplies. As a result the committees are more organised and effective, and the possibilities of getting DDF, council or NGOs to do something was improved. However, today no-one sees council people or DDF as they are all in the resettlement areas, and the NGOs have long left.

Accountability, authority and legitimacy

In the southern African context a common source of competition and conflict over authority at local levels – particularly over the governance of natural resources – is that between new local government players and so-called ‘traditional’ authorities.

In Zimbabwe, for example, this is illustrated by the conflict between traditional leaders in Chimanimani and the Budzi Sub-Catchment Council (SCC). Traditional leaders, and their respective communities, argue that the chief is the custodian of traditional water sources and rivers and performs traditional ceremonies to appease the water spirits, while Budzi SCC argues that all water is state water and the SCC is the custodian of water on behalf of the state. The conflict has threatened the legitimacy of the SCC, as it has come to be represented by some as an extension of the colonial institutions that sought to override and discard people’s customs and beliefs.

So-called ‘traditional’ authority in southern Africa, of course, owes much to colonial interventions. In Mozambique traditional authority as a lineage-based system of indirect control



was instituted by the colonial authorities in 1942, although this was partly based upon indigenous forms of organisation and authority. Post-independence, the state's attempt to eliminate this system and replace it with party-based organisations was a failure. The main reason for this has often been identified as the rural population's enduring recognition of traditional authorities as legitimate leaders. The government has shifted its position towards traditional authorities of late, and started a process of recognising them as community representatives once again. Donor advice has been generally supportive of this re-entrenchment of the traditional authorities, who are characterised as being on the whole, as the 2002 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) document 'Support to decentralisation and deconcentration processes in the public administration' notes, a 'strong foundation for collective action within the community' and as offering 'a social structure through which a development program can mobilise the collective energy that exists at the community level'. In Zambézia province the separation of powers at local levels has been creating confusion for many of the actors involved, as Box 2 shows.

**Box 2: Land committees and traditional leadership
in Zambézia province, Mozambique**

On the one hand, the provincial government land services and the NGO ORAM (Rural Association for Mutual Support) have been working with local land committees that were established as part of the land tenure reform programme. In terms of this sector legislation, these bodies become the legally empowered institution for the management of community land in a particular area, once a community has decided to delimit and register its land. On the other hand, the decree (Decreto 15/2000) that reinstates the colonial era institution of 'official' traditional leadership (now termed 'community representatives' and in operation country-wide) includes a land management function as one of the attributed powers. In several cases where private land applications have been made by outsiders to an area, there have been disputes as to whether the local land committee or the official 'community representative' (or indeed a general meeting of community members called for the purpose) is the institution that ought to be consulted. These institutions can also mirror local-level power struggles; the land committee for Bajone is dominated by members of the local Catholic congregation, perhaps reflecting the influence of its donor 'partner', whilst the local chief (and now newly elected community representative), is a Muslim. Not surprisingly, both assert their right to be consulted on land issues affecting the community.



In South Africa power is also being shared at a local level between traditional authorities and new elected local government institutions, which potentially leads to conflicts of interest. Initially, traditional authorities were wary of local municipalities in rural areas. Box 3 illustrates the division of responsibilities between two key agents of local government at Mdudwa, the traditional sub-headman and the elected ward councillor.

Powers in the village are entrusted to institutions which have radically different agendas. As shown above, both tribal authorities and elected councils possess certain powers and are not in a position to completely meet the needs of rural people, thereby forcing an uneasy coexistence and ongoing rivalry between the two.

Power and politics

Inevitably during processes of decentralisation in settings that are highly politicised, there are plenty of opportunities for capture of these processes by local elites, government officials and private players attempting to retain or gain control of resources. In some cases established elites challenge the new roles of emerging political actors at a local level under conditions of democratic decentralisation. These are challenges over who acts as 'gatekeeper' to resource benefits and can lead to the blurring of authority and accountability at a local level. They may bring deadlock to and delays over initiatives established by all levels of government and, crucially, reinforce existing divisions within communities.

Whilst power may be devolved in a form of democratic decentralisation, there are many ways in which power and resources (such as control over key financial assets, for instance) can be controlled by bureaucrats. For instance the position of mayor in Mozambique's new municipalities confers an ability to appoint key *vereador* officials. Whilst these section heads are nominally accountable to local Parliament, this frequently does not happen in practice, leading to considerable tension between the *vereadors* and the elected officials (*deputados municipais*), who are accountable to their electorate (in theory) and are hence partly responsible for channelling resources their way.

Also, traditional chiefs may 'manufacture' participation in order to facilitate community consultation over the issuing of licences in return for favours (cash, or otherwise), or favour



Box 3: Power struggles between political leaders at Mdudwa village, South Africa

Questions have been raised in the village about the role of the elected local government in land allocation. There were claims by some members of the Qaukeni Municipality that no land in rural areas could be legally allocated without the consent of the municipality. Their information is based partly on new legislation that shifts a number of development-related responsibilities to the elected authorities, and on a circular that was sent to municipalities from the provincial government stating that land should not be allocated without the consent of the local municipality. The Qaukeni Municipality, however, insisted that, in terms of the draft amendment to the Local Government: Municipal Structures Act, rural (that is, communal) land in the municipal area is the responsibility of the tribal authorities and that the municipality only has jurisdiction over land matters in 'urban' (that is, non-communal) areas.

People in Mdudwa are divided between the institutions of traditional leaders and elected local government. Those who support the current local councillor are labelled by the sub-headman as anti-chief. Some of these people feel that the sub-headman prevented them from acquiring sufficient land. They want the current local councillor to be more involved in land allocation, although others want the sub-headman to continue with land allocation and the local councillor to be involved only in development projects.

People in Mdudwa have very little power to challenge the authority of their headman. Although there is discontent with how he manages certain affairs of the village, such as land allocation, his power has rarely been openly challenged. Those who complain see the headman as representing one of the two clans within the village. There are allegations that he exercises his powers to favour certain households and marginalise others. There is little that the ward councillor can do about the situation. His powers are limited to influencing development projects funded by, or through, the municipalities. In this he is frequently undermined by the headman who, for example, argues that the recent water scheme and the public telephone in the village are a waste of money. He even discourages those who are campaigning to have electricity installed in the village by telling them that they will have to pay huge amounts of money once it is installed.

a particular constituency at the expense of others, as the case study from South Africa in Box 3 illustrates.

Many new 'local' authorities cover wide areas of dispersed rural populations, with the administrative centre often a great distance from where people live. Frequently those consulted



are in physical proximity to the local authority and/or sub-catchment council. This process narrows the range of participants and helps to establish an entrenched 'elite participants' group, who, through the distribution of benefits, may become more powerful – particularly as the demand for participation increases. Other individuals may claim or receive a right to participate, but fail or are unable to take an active role either by default (due to language in some cases) or the physical problems of reaching the required site for participation, as the example of the Budzi SCC shows. One chief in Chipinge district argued that the time and cost in attending catchment council meetings (that he was expected to attend) was not met by the Z\$500 allowance paid to attendees: 'What is better? To come to Budzi using your allowance or to stay at home and cultivate your fields', he said.

The 'elite capture' of decentralisation processes is reinforced, in the Mozambican context, by the fact that the decentralisation discourse implicitly contains a narrative along the lines of 'it is not part of the political culture in Mozambique, and especially in the rural areas, that poor people will criticise or question or demand explanations from a government official in relation to his or her performance'. The legacy of strong centralised party control runs deep and is perhaps being reinforced by competitive multi-party politics, particularly in areas where the opposition is popular. Lack of participation is also reinforced by another trait of the local polity: government intolerance to dissent. As one interviewee in Bajone commented:

... the person who questions anyone from the district government is considered from the opposition, so then people do not want to express their opinions.

Party politicisation is clearly particularly marked in Zimbabwe at present – most evidently in the sudden emergence of decentralised committee-based structures in the new resettlement areas. This has parallels with the decentralised village and ward committee structure of the 1980s. But the crucial difference is that, whereas previously the committees were meant to separate politics from planning and administration, there is now no such pretence. Positions of authority – and indeed land in these resettlement areas – are only allocated to those not associated with the opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Local elites – particularly ruling party Zanu-PF supporting war veterans – claim a greater right to land, and even (in the case of Tsovani irrigation scheme) water, on the basis of their liberation war credentials and party affiliation.



Clearly this has little to do with Zimbabwe's supposed democratic decentralisation policies. At best RDCs have been left out of the decision-making loop and at worst they have been actively closed down by war veterans and youth militias accusing them of opposition party sympathies. But even decentralised resource-user groups in Zimbabwe – such as water point committees – are now heavily politicised with, for example, supporters of opposition councillor candidates excluded from membership.

Relationship between the central state and local authorities


Even before the political turbulence of the last few years the ostensible attempts at decentralisation in Zimbabwe, in practice, allowed the further entrenchment and extension of centralised state power. Many of the now celebrated Zimbabwean initiatives under the Campfire umbrella can be seen in this light, with local committees implementing previously unimplementable laws and regulations over natural resource use in the remotest rural areas. In the Zimbabwe case study areas, Campfire committees and the programme in general were viewed with some disdain as summed up by one interviewee:

Campfire money is being looted [by committee members] and little finds its way back to the community. If it does, it will not be adequate to meet my family's daily requirements and other necessities. The whole process reduces me to the status of a beggar. I am a man! Campfire is more about the national park than us. We used to hunt and eat meat often, but now there are too many restrictions yet our crops are being severely damaged by problem animals every year and the compensation is too little and untimely.

Even the Traditional Leaders Act of 1999, which provides for salaried chief and village headmen posts, could be argued to serve as part of the state's attempt to extend its hegemony deeper into rural areas at a time of political discontent. Chiefs and headmen are back – but only on Zanu-PF's terms. As one war veteran put it:

We as war veterans, we work hand in hand with traditional leaders as long as they tow the party line... We want chiefs who support our programmes and party and we do not want those who work with the enemy.

The central state may even block decentralisation processes entirely. One theory advanced for the motivations behind the as yet limited devolution of powers in Mozambique is that it



leaves the elite in control of the majority of the country's natural resources. The crushing of the idea of nation-wide district municipalities, which had been introduced in 1994, paved the way for continued direct state administration of 90% of Mozambique's territory, ensuring continued central control of the main economic resources of the country: fish and prawns, beaches for tourism, forests, mineral deposits, and others.

The Amatole District Municipality in South Africa, however, has had more success vis-à-vis its relationship with central government (see Box 4 on the following page).

However, the situation found in Amatole District Municipality is not replicated elsewhere in the region. The capacity for integrated district planning and development, where line ministries devolve control and resource to the local authority is, as the case study work has found, extremely rare.

The more common situation is to have a series of line ministry initiatives operating – around, for example, water, agriculture and tourism – often with donor sector-based support. These line ministry initiatives very often establish separate, sometimes competing, local institutional structures for implementation and management. Sometimes such efforts operate closely with local government (as in the Campfire programme in Zimbabwe), sometimes in consultation (through, for example, discussions at district council-convened sectoral committees), but, very often, such efforts are separate from local government efforts and may compete with them.

Resources and capacity

In decentralisation processes observed in southern Africa there is commonly a tension between downward accountability and resource flows. In practice, decentralisation processes often appear to relocate assets to the centre while devolving responsibilities to local levels. Central governments, while sometimes happy to devolve accountability downwards, are loath to let go of vital revenue streams, especially at times of fiscal reform (as in South Africa), high donor dependence (as in Mozambique) and economic crisis (as in Zimbabwe).

Yet local authorities need to generate local-level resources for development (in lieu of large centrally designated block grants). Examples of this divergence include the return of local taxes to the 'centre' by municipalities in Mozambique (commonly to the Ministry of Planning



Box 4: Decentralised land reform in South Africa

Like most other local government structures in the country, Amatole District Municipality completed an integrated development plan (IDP) in 1998–1999, a strategic planning document intended to provide a blueprint for development within its area of jurisdiction over a five-year period. Unlike most other councils, however, the Amatole IDP placed considerable emphasis on land needs and the potential for land reform, something that was implied in the IDP process but was widely ignored in other areas. The attention given to land issues in Amatole can be attributed to a range of factors, including a sympathetic, committed and well-informed council that was already attuned to the land issues in its area, pressure from NGOs (such as Border Rural Committee), and well-organised and articulate communities that were able to take full advantage of the public consultations that were part of the IDP process.

Amatole District Municipality undertook the formulation of a Land Reform and Settlement Plan (LRSP) for the central sub-region of the council's area of jurisdiction. According to the LRSP document, '[t]his was done on the basis that the communities resident in this spatially-defined area had identified the resolution of "land issues" and settlement needs as their top priority'. The LRSP was prepared by a multi-disciplinary team of consultants, under the supervision of a steering committee comprised of representatives of Amatole District Municipality, the local councils within the sub-region, the Department of Land Affairs, the provincial Department of Agriculture, the provincial Department of Housing and Local Government, farmers' unions and the Border Rural Committee.

The purpose of the LRSP is to provide a comprehensive plan for the future development of land reform and settlement in the central sub-region – in the areas of land tenure, land administration and spatial approaches to settlement development. Funding of R33 million over two years has already been provided by the Department of Land Affairs, and the programme is expected to benefit 12 000 households. Over R14 million has already been spent in the first financial year. While it is too early to judge the success of this innovative approach to land reform, the progress to date is certainly impressive and is already beginning to influence the Department of Land Affairs and local government structures in other parts of the country. The provincial office of Land Affairs has a goal of transferring 50% of its budget to local government for implementation of land-reform projects and says that it could also envisage transferring staff to local government structures to assist with implementation.



and Finance in Maputo), and the process of fee collection through catchment councils on behalf of ZINWA in Zimbabwe.

There is no legal framework for district planning and investment financing in Mozambique. The only government regulation that exists is a set of guidelines for district development planning issued in September 1998 by the Ministry of Planning and Finance and the Ministry of State Administration. Even though some districts have district development plans (DDPs) and district annual plans, there is no legal requirement to prepare them. There is no district budget. Since the district has no budget and all funding decisions are taken either at the national or provincial level, it is very hard for the local population to hold district officials accountable.

Across the region, the problem of multiple resource flows (through line ministries, through donor/NGO projects, and to local government directly) where district-based staff are expected to respond to multiple authorities, makes it very hard to hold district-level sector staff accountable, weakening even further the authority of a district or municipal administrator and his/her relevance vis-à-vis the local population. Also the high turnover of district officials is a source of great instability and uncertainty to any effort at building improved capacities for participatory district planning.

4. Livelihood implications

What are some of the livelihoods impacts (both explicit and implicit) of decentralisation processes in practice?

On the positive side, despite the limitations, demand-led service delivery can be enhanced through the creation of localised political channels for expression, for instance through the creation of local-level representative government, as in the case of Amatole in South Africa (see Box 4). In Zimbabwe, the demand-led delivery of water in sub-catchment councils has witnessed an improved and efficient delivery of water to irrigation schemes that uses 'agreement water' as they demand of ZINWA to deliver water timely and efficiently. This has seen members of Chibuwe Irrigation Scheme receiving an adequate supply of water, to which the success of the winter crop has largely been attributed.



However, there may be a heavy price to pay if demands are not reciprocated by delivery and, as the case studies show, enhanced capacity for articulation and channelling of demands has not necessarily led to better quality service. Growing alliances and localised interest groups can assist in channelling and amplifying demands. However, the nature that these groups take may be inherently exclusionary (for example, in the form of the National War Veterans' Association in Zimbabwe) if affiliation is an overtly political process.

On the negative side, decentralised management over resources may be susceptible to changes in 'interest and involvement' in local management institutions by key individuals (usually from richer households) who help to cement and finance community initiatives. An example of this came from Zimbabwe, where the increasing capture and control of private household boreholes in some communities removed key members of management structures responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of communal boreholes. The fickle nature of such management structures creates an additional level of vulnerability and uncertainty for poor households at a local level.

Access to land as a key resource and the role of locally 'empowered' traditional authorities is a major question in all three countries. Whilst traditional authority may not be 'arbitrary', there are issues of transparency and accountability that problematise informal processes. In the South Africa case, the legacy of past conflicts can hinder access under such a system. In Zimbabwe, the current political affiliation of households and individuals is a strong, determining factor in access to 'new lands'.

5. Decentralisations in practice: Some conclusions

Rather than relying on idealised notions of decentralisation, and so perpetuating policy fantasies, the SLSA studies suggest that, before decentralisation projects are initiated, certain factors need to be taken into account. Five issues are highlighted here, based on the SLSA findings.

Avoiding the creation of parallel structures and forms of authority

Multiple, parallel decentralisations – combining democratic decentralisation through local government reform (or creation) with the 'committee-isation' of development through



'community-based' initiatives – characterises the SLSA study areas. For poor people trying to make their way through this institutional jungle, the costs may be high. It may be both highly time-consuming (attending meetings, visiting different offices, negotiating across authority structures) and potentially require cash that they can ill afford to spend (bribes and travel). It may also be contingent on political allegiance and be costly in terms of using 'political capital'. In other words, in many circumstances (very common in southern Africa it seems) decentralisation – or at least the version(s) being promoted currently – may not be good for people's livelihoods at all. This is not to say that decentralisation in its ideal form is a bad thing per se, but that, in practice, there are some big question marks, tensions and trade-offs in realising these ideals in the southern African context.

The 'committee disease' noted by a resident of Bajone, Mozambique, characterises many of the study sites. Efforts which result in parallel and competing decentralisations are a problem when one effort undermines another, and both may be funded by the same donor. It is almost too obvious to mention, but apparent, that decentralisation efforts have to be 'joined-up', with parallel processes avoided and different efforts (for example, in deconcentration of line responsibility and the establishment of multiple-tier local authorities) co-ordinated across donor, NGO and government organisations.

Donor efforts have sometimes made matters worse by failing to see the interaction, for example, between sector-based support (via line ministries or NGOs) and administrative and political reform of local government. Efforts in one area often appear to cancel the other out. In addition, the seeming naivety about local political dynamics and the politics of the informal have been apparent in ill-conceived interventions which result in increasing conflict and overlap.

Getting to grips with underlying political dynamics

The ideals of democratic and participatory local governance seem very far off, particularly in the weakly democratic settings which characterise most of our study sites. Due to historical legacies and local micro-politics, competing and conflictual relations at the local level are almost inevitable, for instance between new local government players and more 'traditional'



authorities. In this highly politicised setting, there are plenty of opportunities for capture of processes and resources by local elites, government officials and private players, with very limited forms of effective accountability operating, either horizontal or vertical.

Decentralisation is obviously not a development panacea: undertaking processes of devolving power and increasing the competitive political environment at a local level can create structures and alliances that block or otherwise divert development initiatives. An example is the tensions between newly-installed local councillors in South Africa and local 'traditional' forms of authority in gatekeeping and capture of local development initiatives. Negotiated political compromises – say between local councillors and headmen or chiefs – must form part of any strategy. These must take into account the long histories of contested legitimacy that are played out in local politics and through development projects. Wishing such issues away, or hoping that 'in time' troublesome traditional leaders will find their place in the new democratic order, may be naïve and inappropriate.

Appreciating social differentiation

Decentralisation projects have to deal with local social and economic complexity. They not only potentially increase complexity, bringing new forms of power, authority and accountability to local settings already replete with 'traditional' forms, but they also exist within complex environments of contestation among social groups, perhaps between and across wealth, age, gender and ethnic cleavages.

Who gains access to resources, as the case studies have shown, depends on who you are and who is in your networks. People will draw on a variety of identities and associations in making claims on new (as well as old) institutions. Thus elections to councillor positions at village level will not be 'free and fair' in the classic liberal sense, but the outcome of a variety of local social and political processes. Mobilising networks of affiliation is also important in gaining access to new organisations – certain people may be included or excluded, depending on their background. Particular groups marginalised in such processes of claiming resources may be those on the periphery of local societies – recent in-migrants, those with chronic ill-health, those from the 'wrong' political party, for example. Such people may suffer extreme



forms of exclusion because of their status and new forms of supposedly inclusive and participatory governance may simply act to further reinforce such exclusion.

Elites may certainly be the first to benefit from new decentralised authorities, whether in the form of local government or new user committees. Throughout the case studies, it is local elites – mostly men – who are the dominant players in these new structures. Such individuals may, however, have both local legitimacy and, perhaps through education and resources, an ability to press claims and influence new institutions in favour of the local community. An example is the early influence of commercial farmers on the new catchment councils, based on their prior knowledge of the development issues, but also their key position as major bulk users, though this is now subject to major change. In other cases, however, such elites may use new forms of authority and control to extract resources for private gain. This is aptly illustrated by the case in Sangwe communal area, where a local member of the elite appropriated a community borehole upon election as a member of Parliament.

The dynamics of this process clearly vary from place to place, but an assessment of how patterns of social differentiation feeds into the politics of inclusion and exclusion in decentralisation is an important step on the way to ensuring that decentralisation efforts do indeed benefit a wide group, and particularly the poor and marginalised.

Offering real power and real resources

As the case studies have shown, a cautious or bankrupt central government – for fiscal, administrative and political reasons – may resist substantial devolution of powers over budgets and decisions. The result is often competition for resources and control between central line ministries (still holding onto their resources) and newly-formed local governments (desperately trying to assert their legitimacy in uncertain and sometimes hostile terrain, without the ability to deliver). In contexts where donor or NGO funding is so dominant – as in much of rural Mozambique – further competition over resources results.

If decentralisation is to be effective, real powers and real resources need to be handed over to new local administrations. The consequence of not doing so is that their ability to operate is severely hampered. There are limited tax-raising opportunities in most rural areas in southern



Africa. New local authorities are often loath to go down this route, save for a few taxes on beer halls, shops and the like, as taxation is uniformly unpopular in poor rural areas. In Zimbabwe, with land reform, the tax base – largely land and other taxes on large (white) commercial farms – has been removed, and the scope for water revenues to fund future development and the new institutional structure has been severely challenged with the virtual removal of the major fee-paying community in the country. Questions now remain over the political (as well as administrative) possibilities of raising taxes from the newly resettled farmers (and water fees for 'newly-emerging' water users). Not wanting to be construed as the reincarnation of hut-taxing colonial predecessors, many local government authorities, without donor funds or subventions from the central treasury, fail to function in any meaningful way. After some time, people legitimately ask: why bother with the local councillor if he/she cannot deliver anything?

While handing over power and resources is certainly seen as a 'good thing' in support of effective decentralisation, there remains a tension between increasing the capacity of the state to enforce, regulate, tax and control in rural areas, and the flexibilities required for rural livelihoods. If extending government means more laws, more regulations, more bribes to pay and generally less room to manoeuvre, this may not always be to the benefit of poor people trying to eke out a livelihood in rural southern Africa.

Improving capacity beyond the council

There has been much investment in southern Africa in 'building capacity' of new decentralised government authorities. Much of this has been in the mould of applying new public management approaches to often inefficient, overly bureaucratic and sometimes corrupt organisations. While such capacity building has its place, to be 'responsive' rather than simply implementing unwanted development projects on an unsuspecting and unreceptive public, reformed local government structures need to interact with an organised and vocal constituency. But very often capacity building for local government stops at the council compound, and does not reach out to the wider requirements of effective, demand-led, responsive government, which requires transformation in the ways citizens interact with government. As the case studies have shown, in many rural areas of southern Africa people are not organised, they do not



have access to information and they are unable to exercise their voice and demands on the state. Indeed quite the opposite, they may fear to speak out and must rely on covert and hidden tactics of resistance. Clearly, where multi-party politics is based on a fragile democratic foundation, the prospects for such a combination of responsive government and citizen voice are limited.

