THE ROLE OF LOCAL LEADERSHIP IN IMPROVING THE DELIVERY OF SERVICES AT COMMUNITY LEVEL: UGANDA’S EXPERIENCE WITH PRIMARY EDUCATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the role local leaders play in promoting the delivery of primary education, with Uganda as a case study. Many countries in sub-Saharan Africa have adopted decentralisation as the main vehicle for delivering social services on the conviction that this approach would make the difference in people’s lives that earlier centralised approaches had failed to make. The jury is still out with respect to the impact of this developmental shift, largely due to the steep learning curve through which most countries are still locked, but preliminary results look encouraging.

However, while the focus of analytical attention has been directly (and rightly so) at the extent to which this shift is delivering the expected results, we still do not have sufficient understanding of how local leaders are coping with the multitude of demands decentralised governance imposes on them. In order to broaden and deepen our understanding of how decentralised governance works in the African context, and therefore how best to enhance its strengths and mitigate its challenges, we need to take a closer look at how local leaders feature in this whole development enterprise. After all, isn’t it a central promise of current development thinking that services would be better delivered if beneficiary communities make decisions over the local development agenda while holding local officials accountable, either directly or through their elected readers?

This paper is not analysing of the performance of the primary education sector in Uganda. Rather, it is intended to provide some insights into how the local leadership features in the provision of primary education at local level, particularly in the management of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme that was started in 1997, in order to highlight the possibilities and challenges that decentralised governance generates in service delivery.

My overall argument is that the decentralised approach to service delivery is far superior to the centralised approach that Uganda and other African
countries pursued up to the mid-1980s because it increases transparency and accountability and, leads to more efficient allocation of resources and improved governance generally. For all this to be realised, however, local communities and leaders must have a good understanding of their roles and functions and also be capable of executing their mandate.

The paper is arranged in five sections. Following this introduction, section two provides an overview of Uganda’s local government system as a backdrop against which to understand the issues that are being discussed. Section three gives some highlights of the progress that has been made under the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme. Section four discusses the dynamics of local leadership in the management of UPE programme, after which section five provided some concluding remarks.

2. OVERVIEW OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM

From the outset Uganda’s decentralisation policy placed emphasis on devolution of powers, functions and responsibilities to popularly elected local governments in a five-tier local government system comprising elected councils at district and sub-county levels in rural areas, and municipal, division and town levels in urban settings. Local governments were given powers to make and implement their own development plans; to make, approve and execute their own budgets; to raise and use resources according to their own priorities; to appoint statutory Committees, Boards and Commissions; to make ordinances and bye-laws; to hire, manage and fire personnel; to manage their own payroll; and to implement a broad range of decentralised services previously handled by the centre.1

It was hoped that this devolution of power would improve service delivery by shifting responsibility for policy implementation to the local beneficiaries; promote good governance by placing emphasis on

1 For the list of decentralised services, see Schedule 2 of the Local governments Act, 1997.
transparency and accountability in public sector management; develop, broaden and deepen political and administrative competence in the management of public affairs; democratise society by promoting inclusive, representative and gender-sensitive decision-making; and alleviate poverty through collaborative efforts between Central and Local governments, donors, non-government organisations (NGOs), community based organisations (CBOs), the private sector and other stakeholders.\(^2\)

There is a clear demarcation of responsibilities between central and local governments. The main role of the central Government is to set national policy and standards; to inspect, supervise, monitor and co-ordinate activities of Local governments to ensure that they comply with national policies and standards; and to mentor and to give assistance and advice to Local governments. Local governments, on the other hand, are responsible for implementing a broad range of devolved services listed in parts 2-5 of the same Schedule, in addition to any lawful others they may wish to undertake for the development of their respective areas.

Local government councils, on the other hand, are charged with the responsibilities mentioned earlier. In addition to approving local development plans and budgets without reference to those above them (the ‘non-subordination’ principle)\(^3\), they also have powers to oversee the implementation of their development plans and those of central government, through several bodies they appoint themselves.

Membership to local government councils is deliberately engineered towards affirmative action to ensure representation of previously marginalized groups. Women must constitute at least 30% of every local


\(^3\) Unless, of course, those development plans imply recurrent costs for higher governments.
government council; each council must also have two representatives of the youth, one of whom must be female, and two representatives of the disabled, one of whom must also be female. Although the impact of this affirmative action is yet to be established, its progressive intent is self-evident.

While local councils have approval and supervisory functions, implementation of their decisions and those of the central government is assigned to civil servants headed by the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) in each District, or by the Town Clerk in each Municipality and Town Council (Kampala city is also headed by a Town Clerk). Most of the first civil servants in local governments at the onset of decentralisation were former employees of the central government who were automatically transferred to local governments, a development that generated morale and allegiance problems that took considerable time to effort to be eliminated.

Thus, the local government system comprises two sets of officials whose interface is problematic: a popularly elected council headed by a chairperson or mayor, which is responsible for approving developing policies, plans and budgets; and a team of technocrats who are responsible for implementing council and central government policies, and providing technical guidance to their respective councils. Relations between the two sets of officials are sometimes strained due to confusion of rules, civil servants’ arrogance, attempts by some councils to exceed their authority, interference in local politics by central government officials or refusal by civil servants to rubber stamp questionable council decisions. At times inter-council conflicts have also led to local government paralysis.

Overall, local governments in Uganda have impressively risen to their monumental task in spite of the substantial teething problems they have faced. Examples of these tensions include the following: Kabale and Pallisa Districts wrongfully interdicted their CAOs, and refused to reinstate them even after court ruling, and ended up with huge compensation bills. See: The New Vision (Kampala), September 3, 2000:13.
faced and the severe resource constraints that restricts their overall operational capacity. For example, according to the annual assessment of minimum conditions and performance measures for local governments for 2004:

Overall there has been remarkable improvement over the year. The weaknesses that have been identified, both for Minimum Conditions and Performance Measures, are concentrated in a few local governments. With improved mentoring, communication and orientation of all local governments on the standards by which they are assessed, more local governments will meet the MCs and PMs in the future.5

3. **PROGRESS MADE UNDER THE UPE PROGRAMME**

The main goal of the UPE programme is “to provide the minimum necessary facilities and resources to enable Ugandan children of school-going age to ENTER and REMAIN in school and successfully COMPLETE the primary cycle of education”\(^6\). Objectives of the UPE programme include transforming society in a fundamental way, making education accessible and relevant to the learner, eliminating disparities and inequalities in education, eradicating illiteracy, and equipping every individual with the basic skills and knowledge with which to exploit the environment for both self and national development.

Government’s overall expenditure on the education and sports sector is quite significant. Since 2001/2002 government has allocated at least 31% of the total discretionary recurrent budget to the education and sports sector, of which approximately 68% has been allocated to the primary education sub-sector. The focus has been on increasing access, and improving equity, quality and efficiency. The improvement this investment has generated can be seen from the following: pupil enrolment in government aided primary schools rose from 5,351,099 in 2000 to 6,687,574 in 2004 (provisional figures); teachers on the payroll increased from 82,148 in 2000 to 126,833 in 2004 (August); the number of classrooms increased from 50,370 in 2000 to 78,403 in 2004; the pupil-teacher ratio improved from 65:1 in 2000 to 54:1 in 2004; and the pupil–classroom ratio improved from 106:1 in 2000 to 85:1 in 2004. Currently, the pupil-textbook ratio stands at 3:1 in the subjects of mathematics, integrated science and social studies.\(^7\) The situation, though far from ideal, is immensely better than what it was at the start of the UPE programme in 1997.

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One of the thorny issues in increasing access and equity has been how best to eliminate gender and socio-economic and regional disparities. This has been tackled in a variety of ways. Among other things, separate latrine stances for boys and girls have been constructed, as have changing rooms and bathrooms for female pupils; female pupils in pilot districts are being taught on sexual maturation and reproductive health, and the subject has been included in the Guidance and Counselling Manual for primary schools; and a multi-media strategy is being implemented to accelerate gender parity.

In addition, the Ministry is implementing, in partnership with other stakeholders, various alternative education delivery mechanisms to reach disadvantaged communities. These include the Alternative Basic Education for Karamoja (ABEK) targeting 6 – 18 year old children, being implemented in 196 centres (in Kotido, Moroto and Nakapiripirit districts); the Complementary Opportunities for Primary Education (COPE) for 10 – 16 year old children who dropped out of school or have never been to school at all, currently being administered in 161 centres (in the districts of Arua, Bushenyi, Kamuli, Kisoro, Masaka, Mbarara, Mubende, Nebbi, Sembabule and Kalangala); the Basic Education for Urban Poverty Areas (BEUPA) programme currently being implemented in 72 in Kampala for children who dropped out of school or have never attended school; the Child-Centred Alternative Non-Formal Community Based Education (CHANCE) which targets children in the nomadic pastoral communities of Nakasongola district who cannot access UPE, currently administered in 64 centres; and the Empowering Lifelong Skills Education (ELSE) for children in Masindi district who cannot access formal education, currently being administered in 24 centres.  

Initiatives have also been made to include children with special needs into the normal school system. So far 530 teachers have been trained to manage inclusive education, 250 to help the deaf and blind, 200 to teach

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8 Ibid, pp.28 – 29
sign language, 200 to teach Braille reading and writing, and 450 to take care of children with autism.

All this constitutes significant investment that local governments have been entrusted with. How local governments have attempted to handle this task can be gauged from the challenges faced by the local leadership in general and School Management Committees in particular, to which I now turn.

4. LEADERSHIP ISSUES IN THE MANAGEMENT OF UPE

It is often asked what constitutes the best way of enhancing efficiency and effectiveness in service provision at the local level. While power may be transferred to lower levels of authority this does not necessarily mean that operations will be more efficient, transparent or accountable, or that people at the local level will have more say in matters that affect them. In fact if decentralization is not properly handled chaos, frustration and wastage of resources may result.

Development goals cannot be realised unless effective mechanisms are in place to prevent corruption, abuse of office and other malpractices, and unless citizens are genuinely involved in making decisions over their local development agenda. But citizens cannot participate in public affairs, even over matters that affect them directly, unless they are ‘empowered’, that is unless their freedom of choice and action is expanded to enable them to have more control over resources and decisions that affect them. The perennial problem facing people at the grassroots is that their lack of organization almost always exposes their agenda to risk of elite capture, and this weakness often extends to some of their representatives as well. The problem is compounded if local leaders have minimal understanding of their roles and functions, or if they deliberately distort the development process to their advantage. All these factors make promoting transparency and accountability in the management of public affairs, and facilitating popular participation in

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decision-making and implementation, a subject of major interest in contemporary development discourse. How do these issues play out in Uganda’s case?

**a) Local Government Leadership**

The primacy of local councils in directing local development in Uganda is well articulated in the Constitution (Chapter 11) and in the Local Governments Act, 1997 (as amended), the two most authoritative documents on the country’s governance. Local governments are democratically elected and have provisions for incorporating marginalised groups (i.e. women, youth, elderly and the disabled) into their structures. They are charged with implementing a very broad range of decentralised services (described in Schedule 2 of the Act) in addition to locally determined ones that are consistent with the Constitution and other existing laws. The novelty and revolutionary concept of local determination of the local development agenda electrified the country right from the beginning in 1992 when the decentralisation programme was first launched. To this day these powers are guarded jealously by local governments and communities.

Ironically, these powers are coming under threat from, the principal promoter of decentralisation – the central government itself. The problem originates from widespread irregularities that have been documented in the tendering and procurement processes at the local level and the uneasy relationship between political and technical leaders that has continually undermined effective local development. Some detailed discussion is required to make this clear.

A major argument running the rounds in development circles is whether decentralisation reduces corruption (defined as the use of public office and resources for personal gain) by exposing more officials to public scrutiny, or whether it actually increases corruption by increasing the number of officials that could be corrupted. Whichever way the argument runs the
critical issue is the effectiveness of the institutional framework that is put in place to keep corruption in check.

The institutional framework for enhancing transparency, accountability and integrity in local government management in Uganda is quite extensive. The Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, the Ministry of Local Government, the Ministry of Public Service, line ministries and statutory bodies (e.g. the Public Service Commission, the Health Service Commission, the Education Service Commission and Public Procurement and Disposal of Assets Authority) all issue regulations and guidelines to be followed by local governments in managing public affairs at their various levels. In addition, the Ministry of Local Government and line ministries monitor and supervise local governments to ensure that they comply with government policies, laws, and regulations. The offices of the Auditor General and Accountant General follow up on how local governments use the financial resources at their disposal. Parliament, through its public Accounts Committee and other sectoral committees, also scrutinise the operations of local governments to ensure that they conform to the constitution and other laws.

Other structures have been added at local government levels to ensure transparency and accountability in local development management. These include Resident District Commissioners, District Tender Boards, District Service Commissions, Local Government Public Accounts Committees and, of course, the local government councils themselves and their sectoral committees.

Despite all this, there is a general perception that corruption in local governments seems to have increased. It is not clear whether this perception is due to increased exposure of corrupt practices by the press, or to increase in the number of persons in positions that are vulnerable to corrupt practices. Whatever the explanation, the trend has generated considerable alarm and led to a number of radical proposals.
First, a draft legislation has been prepared for consideration by Parliament under which District Tender Boards will be replaced by District contracts committees managed by local government technical personnel, as specified under the Public Procurement and Disposal of Assets Act, 2003. This would bring local governments in line with other public bodies and remove, once and for all, a major point of corruption in the local government system. District Tender Boards, hitherto composed of politicians or political appointees have long been accused of conflict of interest through award of tenders to their members.

Secondly, it has been proposed to transfer appointment of local government accounting officers to the centre to shield them from pressure from local politicians. This, of course, would mean recentralisation of power, as it would strengthen the centre’s grip on local governments. The counter is argument from the centre is that local government accounting officers are currently in a precarious position as they are under constant pressure from local councils, their employers, to allow them access to local government resources, contrary to existing laws and regulations and guidelines.

Third, increasing emphasis is being placed on enforcing the leadership code across the public service which, it is hoped, will impact positively on the local government system. In tandem with this, the Uganda Local Governments’ Authority (ULGA), the umbrella body of all local governments in Uganda, has developed a Charter on Accountability and Ethical Code of Conduct to which all local governments have subscribed. It is hoped that both of these interventions will make some difference in the way local government officials operate.

There are other interventions that have been proposed, or are being implemented, which collectively should improve governance across the public service, and especially at local government level. These include
revision and updating of Uganda Government Standing Orders, strengthening professional associations, strengthening relevant institutions in training public servants on issues relating to ethics and integrity, developing linkage between the various codes of conduct, publicising data on local government performance (and non performance), amending the Secrecy Act to allow the public to access information and data in government hands, and opening ‘suggestion boxes’ in all local governments to allow ordinary citizens to report to local government management and council. Other proposals include developing mechanisms for protecting ‘whistle blowers’, reviewing the roles of elected leaders to minimise their intervention in implementation of programmes and activities so that they can concentrate on policy formulation and monitoring, and empowering civil society to effectively monitor the operations of local governments. It is hoped that these measures will lead to improvement in the delivery of local services in general, including primary education.

b) School Management Committees

A key governance structure in the management of the UPE Programme in Uganda is the School Management Committee (SMC). Each School is required to have one. School Management Committees are charged with providing overall direction to the operation of the school, ensuring that the school has a development plan for ensuring quality education within and outside the classroom, approving the school’s annual budget, monitoring the school’s finances to ensure that they are properly used, linking the school to the community, promoting harmony among the head teacher and members of the staff, ensuring that teachers and parents do not cause undue psychological stress on pupils or cause them to withdraw from

school, and liaising with school foundation bodies on the best way of utilising foundation resources for promoting school objectives and goals.

School Management Committees are also required to carry out public fundraising functions, report regularly to parents and community leaders on the financial and of operational status of the school programme, take leadership in improving and developing school facilities and compound by, among other things, mobilising the community, and follow up on requests made by the head teacher to the District Education Officer.  

The general consensus is that although SMCs have made some contribution to the management of UPE programme, they are not functioning as well as they should be. The problem is at several levels. First, SMCs are required to do too much as can be seen from the list enumerated above. In all fairness all those mandates would require to be attended to on a full-time basis. Secondly, the competence of SMCs varies considerably from school to school, and among the various members of each committee due to the unclear guidelines regarding their recruitment. In some instances their recruitment is influenced by head teachers who they are supposed to supervise. As a result, some SMCs have been ‘captured’ by head teachers. In the majority of instances it is the chairpersons of SMCs who are active, which makes it easy for head teachers to dominate them. At times heat teachers withhold crucial information on school finances from chairperson of SMCs causing them to approve dubious expenditures. In all this, inadequate understanding of their roles by SMC Committee members often plays a big part, as does low community understand of the roles of School Management Committees.


12 See: Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, Deepening the Understanding of Poverty: Second Participatory Assessment Report (December 2002), P.150; International Development Consultants, Draft Final Report on Tracking the Flow and Accountability for UPE Funds (January 2000), P.58 and 72; and Business Synergies, Consultancy to Review Stakeholders’ Perception and Progress of the
This has resulted in general weakness in the monitoring and supervision of the implementation of the UPE Programme by School Management Committees and local leaders. The value for money study done by the office of the Auditor General in 2003 discovered many irregularities arising from this, including contract work being started before tenders were awarded or before contracts were signed; payments being made without full certification of the work done; selection of incompetent contractors; inequitable appropriation of funds for monitoring; poor appraisal prior to completion of school structures; influence peddling; and conflict of interest arising from award of tenders to firms in which SMC members and local leaders have interests.\textsuperscript{13}

Effective intervention to enhance the performance of School Management Committees must, of course, start with sensitising their members on their roles and functions in the entire UPE management structure. Some work has been done along those lines but the task is monumental, not least because of the limited resources available to the Ministry of Education and Sports to cover all schools across the Country. But even if all SMCs could be covered, it would still be necessary to reduce their functions and responsibilities to more manageable proportions by, for example, creating school contracts committees and transferring responsibility for contracting to them. This would bring all Schools in line with the Public Procurement and Disposal of Assets Act, 2003 and eliminate manipulation of chairpersons of SMCs by head teachers.

In addition, some mechanism should be created to link School Management Committees with the Education Standards Agency (ESA) to ensure quality education. The limited resources available to ESA cannot allow it to extend its tentacles throughout the country, but it could get the

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{13} [Office of the Auditor General, Value For Money Audit on the Universal Primary Education Programme (July 2003), pp. 8 – 24]}

job done on a more sustainable basis if the technical capacity of SMCs could be built to enable oversee the implementation of the UPE more effectively. This would require the Ministry to provide clear guidelines on the selection of members of SMCs and on the profiles of eligible persons.

Another intervention would be to extend the annual assessment of local government implementation of minimum conditions and performance measures to include assessment of the performance of local leaders and school management committees in the implementation of local development programmes. This would help to enhance the leadership because current assessments target the technocratic side only.

5. CONCLUSION
That local leaders play a critical role in service delivery at the local level is now widely acknowledged in development discourse. But how they go about this and the challenges they face in the process is yet to be well understood, largely because most of the analysis tends to be directed at how the decentralised system as a whole rises to the service delivery challenge. Further attention should be paid to the dynamics of local leadership in service delivery in order to broaden and deepen our understanding of how development plays out in a decentralised context. This, of course, should be done fully knowing that development contexts differ significantly and, therefore, generalisations have limitations that have to be taken cognizant of.

Uganda’s specific example indicates that local leadership is crucial in improving service delivery and local development generally, particularly, when local governments are given genuine powers and responsibilities to implement programmes that are consistent with local priorities. The challenge however, is how to get local governments, and local leaders especially, to execute their mandate to the required degree of competence and satisfaction. This requires a high level of central guidance and
support, on the one hand, and effective ‘push’ from beneficiary communities from below. Both of these elements are not always in adequate supply given severe resource constraints and the very low levels of beneficiaries understanding of their rights and obligations.

It would appear that the impact of local leadership on service provision, in this case in primary education, could be substantially enhanced if the local leaders and School Management Committees were given greater exposure to management basics and their roles were more precisely delineated, School Management Committee, in particular, appear to be spread too widely in their scope, while could lead them to interfere in daily school management, at one extreme, or to be easily captured by head teachers, on the other- as has actually happened.

It is all about social engineering, about calibrating the system as the development process moves along. The adjustments that have to be made must be context specific but, ultimately, they must be related to enhancing the capacity of all organs to execute their mandate.