



Successfully Promoting Decentralisation: The Potential of the Multi-Stakeholder Approach

Summary

Sustainable Development Goal 17 assigns an important role to multi-stakeholder approaches in achieving the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs). What are the advantages and impacts of a multi-stakeholder approach in decentralisation programmes?

The multi-stakeholder approach aims to involve all stakeholders from politics, civil society and the private sector that are relevant for a reform process. In the context of decentralisation programmes, this approach usually allows for simultaneous cooperation with political actors (supply side) and civil society (demand side) and applies to all state levels (i.e. national, regional and local).

There have been few studies until now on how a multi-stakeholder approach can contribute to the success of decentralisation and how it can develop its full potential. This paper argues that the multi-stakeholder approach supports the effectiveness as well as the sustainability of decentralisation. Important is the horizontal as well as vertical cooperation in the multi-level system when promoting decentralisation:

- Simultaneously strengthening the supply and demand side increases the effectiveness of decentralisation reforms. The example of citizen participation shows that support to local authorities makes it easier for civil society to gain access, while support to civil society enables it to participate more effectively. By strengthening citizen participation in this way,

citizen participation is more likely to lead to the improvement of municipal services.

- If cooperation takes place in a multi-level system, decentralisation can be promoted in a more sustainable manner: for example, international actors – together with civil society – can bring experiences from the local level into legislation and subsequently support its implementation at the local level.

To fully exploit the potential of the multi-stakeholder approach, the following is important:

- International actors should find a balance in supporting state and non-state actors in decentralisation processes. The (non-governmental) demand side often receives less attention. Supporting different actors is not about an 'either-or' situation but rather an 'as well as'.
- Citizen participation should lead to visible results so that the willingness to participate in civil society is established in the long term. This is why the follow-up of citizen participation on both the supply and demand side is important.
- Continuity and intensity of support are important for the sustainable success of the reforms.

The results stem from a research project of the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) on the impact assessment of governance programmes.

Decentralisation challenges

One aim of decentralisation is to delegate certain political decision to municipal institutions at the local level and orient the provision of public services to the needs of the local population. Decentralisation should thus contribute to the progress of a society's development and strengthen democratic structures at the local level. However, decentralisation processes are complex, in part because they involve a large number of actors and affect the multi-level system in a state (national, regional and local) (Oluwu & Wunsch, 2004). This presents a number of challenges for successfully supporting decentralisation.

On the one hand, political decentralisation changes the balance of power between national, regional and local levels, disturbing an existing system of (carefully) balanced – often patronage-based – relations between political parties as well as between political parties and their voters. These changes in vertical and horizontal power relations are often accompanied by conflict. At the same time, the success of decentralisation depends on the cooperation of all actors in the political system: the different interests of stakeholders at the national, regional and local level need to be renegotiated, laws and guidelines readopted, expertise redistributed and new regulations implemented. In Benin, the multi-stakeholder approach had a mediating effect, as international actors cooperated with all parties and thus knew about the different perspectives of all actors involved.

On the other hand, decentralisation also tends to change the balance of power between politics, civil society and citizens at the local level because it creates new spaces for the participation of civil society and citizens in local politics. However, the role that citizen participation can play in local politics is often not clear on either the state or non-state side: many opportunities for participation are not legally binding and there is little knowledge about the possibilities for citizen participation at the local level. As such, the potential of citizen participation for the development of the community often remains untapped.

The conclusions are based on a study carried out by the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) on the impact of the GIZ decentralisation project in Benin on local citizen participation. The project has been cooperating with ministries at the national level, prefectures at the department level and 25 partner communities throughout Benin since 2003. Four GIZ partner communities and two non-partner communities were compared. The study is based on 72 interviews and 460 completed questionnaires with representatives from communities, administration and local civil society. It is, however, an open question how the results from Benin can be transferred to other contexts. Benin is relatively advanced in its decentralisation process and has a stable multi-party system, making the country different from autocratic contexts.

The contribution of the multi-stakeholder approach to the success of decentralisation

Decentralisation programmes can benefit from a multi-stakeholder approach with respect to both the *effectiveness* and the *sustainability* of decentralisation reforms. To respond to the challenges of decentralisation, the multi-stakeholder approach requires simultaneous cooperation with politics (supply side) and civil society (demand side) – at all levels of the political system. This means that international actors cooperate with government, local politicians and local authorities on the supply side, and with national and local civil society groups and the population on the demand side. The aim is to strengthen the capacity of all relevant stakeholders so each of them may contribute to the success of the decentralisation process. By collaborating with various stakeholders, international actors can also play an important role as mediators and provide less powerful actors with access and the ability to be heard (e.g. access of communities to the central government or of civil society to the municipal administrations).

The multi-stakeholder approach can make several direct positive contributions to the decentralisation process.

More professionalism through cooperation with communities

The study in Benin corroborates that GIZ partner communities are more professional and inclusive with respect to citizen participation, are more likely to follow legal requirements, and involve representatives of civil society at an earlier stage and in a more substantial manner. In addition, international actors encouraged their partner communities to organise citizen participation in a results-oriented way and also keep promises to solve problems. International actors can thus make two important contributions when cooperating with the supply side, i.e. the communities: Firstly, by cooperating with local authorities, they can contribute to a better understanding of the role of citizen participation in local politics, thus enabling civil society to voice their concerns more effectively. Secondly, close monitoring of the supply side can lead to greater professionalism of the respective community when it comes to participation of civil society in planning and decision-making processes.

More expertise through cooperation with civil society

Cooperation with the demand side, i.e. civil society, can increase the expertise of civil society for effective civil participation. In Benin, many local civil society actors know little about the legal foundations of decentralisation and its influence on local policies. In addition, they often have only limited financial resources for their own work, which also affects the quality of civil society's contributions to participation processes. External actors can support civil society actors with advice and financial assistance to competently assume their role as mediators for the interests of the population and in monitoring local

authorities. In partner communities in which external actors have provided long-term and intensive support to civil society, civil society acts in a more capable manner and local authorities value the work of civil society more highly. This in turn leads communities to be more open towards the participation of citizens.

Self-reinforcing mechanism of the multi-stakeholder approach

Through the multi-stakeholder approach, local authorities tend to be more professional and results-orientated, making it easier for civil society to participate. Civil society participates in a more able manner, which in turn makes it easier for communities to incorporate suggestions from civil society. The interplay of these effects leads to a self-reinforcing mechanism that has a direct impact on the *effectiveness of citizen participation* and an indirect impact on the *willingness to participate in civil society*. The study in Benin shows that citizen participation in partner communities is more likely to result in successful actions, e.g. in measures to improve local governance structures or in municipal services such as waste disposal. The multi-stakeholder approach thus contributes to a greater effectiveness of citizen participation.

The greater effectiveness of citizen participation can have a positive long-term impact on the *willingness to participate in civil society*: in the case of Benin, the proportion of civil society actors who describe their influence on the public affairs of the community as “very high” is 61.5% in partner communities and only 45.2% in non-partner communities.

These results can be explained against the background of the greater effectiveness of citizen participation in partner communities: civil society gauges its influence to be greater because its involvement is more successful.

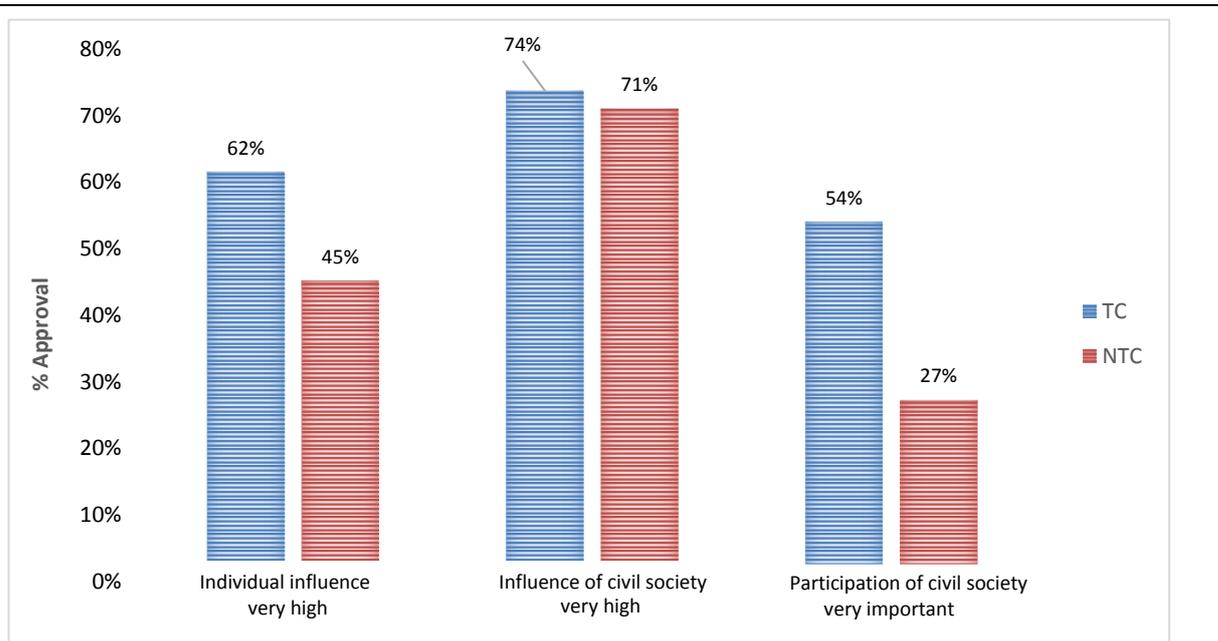
In the context of the multi-stakeholder approach, the simultaneous cooperation with the national and local levels can also strengthen the sustainability of decentralisation reforms: international actors can promote the institutional reforms at the national level (laws, decrees, guidelines) and the local level (by monitoring implementation). When advising the national level on citizen participation, the programme in Benin was able to draw on the experiences gained in the practical implementation at the local level. This made it possible, together with civil society, to integrate the practices that had proven to be particularly effective into legislation at the national level. Codification at the national level in turn led to a greater willingness on the part of the communities to implement the reforms.

Recommendations

Decentralisation programmes can therefore benefit from a multi-stakeholder approach with respect to both the *effectiveness* and the *sustainability* of decentralisation reforms. In addition, international actors can play an important role as mediators in balancing the opposing interests between the central government, communities, as well as national and local civil society.

To exploit the potential of the multi-stakeholder approach, the following should be taking into account when implementing decentralisation programmes.

Fig. 1: Self-assessment of civil society actors on the effectiveness of citizen participation in partner communities (TC/treatment community) and non-partner communities (NTC/non-treatment community) in Benin (GIZ decentralisation project)



Source: Based on 246 questionnaires. Survey on civil society in four partner communities and two non-partner communities in Benin.

First, there should be a balance between supporting the demand and supply sides. In Benin, cooperation was continuously maintained with the administrative bodies of the partner communications; contact with civil society groups was only possible on specific occasions, which meant that the potential of local civil society was not always exploited. To enable effective representation of the interests of civil society, civil society should be supported in the long term, which includes assistance in networking and coordination, but also financial resources.

Second, to establish the willingness to participate in civil society in the long term, it is important that citizen participation leads to visible results. For this reason, international actors should grant appropriate scope to the follow-up of citizen participation measures on the supply and demand sides.

Third, continuity and intensity of international commitment are important factors for the sustainable success of decentralisation reforms. In Benin, the format of public accountability hearings, which has been continuously and intensively monitored for the past five years, has often been integrated into the work of communities and civil society. In contrast, other citizen participation formats that were only promoted in a piecemeal manner were not continued.

How the results from Benin can be transferred to other contexts is an open question. Benin is relatively advanced in its decentralisation process and has a stable multi-party system. Interest in reforms on the part of the national and local elites remains an important prerequisite for the success of decentralisation as a whole. In autocratic contexts, there are limits to this approach and its self-reinforcing effect.

References

- Oluwu, D., & Wunsch, J. (2004). *Local governance in Africa: The challenges of democratic decentralization*. Boulder/London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Groß, L. (2017). *Assessing the impact of governance programs: GIZ support to citizen participation in local governance in Benin*. Unpublished report.



Dr Lisa Groß

Researcher

Research Programme „Political Order, Values and Peace“

German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)

DOI:10.23661/bp2.2018