



**Title >> The Challenges of Community Participation  
in Decentralization Processes in Uganda: A  
Case Study of Kibaale District.**

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## Contents

p 2	Biographical Details
p 2	Abstract
p 3	1. Introduction
p 4	2. Definition of terms
p 5	3. Theoretical Framework
p 6	4. Research Findings
p 11	Bibliography

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## Abstract

Assumptions have been made about many development concepts. This paper addresses the assumptions made about the community participation in decentralization processes using a case study of Kibaale District in Uganda. The main argument is that community participation in decentralization processes is often taken for granted. Practical evidence reveals that communities are not homogeneous in nature. They include people from all walks of life including peasants, businesspersons, property owners, marginalized among others. The majority of the communities in developing nations in general and Uganda in particular are comprised of the poor. These people lack the 'political tools' such as information, literacy, power and money, which are necessary to enable them to effectively participate in decentralization processes. The conclusion is that the poor in the communities remain excluded from participating in decentralization processes as long as they lack these necessary tools.



## 1. Introduction

Mainstream development theory and practice has been associated with 'buzz words' such as 'community', 'participation', 'empowerment', and recently terms such as 'good governance'. To some observers, 'decentralization' has become one of the fashions of our time (Manor, 1995). These are concepts which for some reason have attracted strong donor support from bilateral and international development agencies and have found their way into development policies. Some of these concepts are presented as a panacea for the problems facing the development field especially in developing countries. Evidence is not entirely consistent with the claims made about these 'fashionable' concepts. This paper addresses three concepts: community, participation and decentralisation.

I have based this paper on research that I carried out in Kibaale District in Uganda in 2003 to explore the challenges of decentralisation for development. It addresses the challenges of community participation in decentralization processes in Uganda. Community participation is often cited as a major benefit of decentralization and is often assumed to be an automatic benefit arising from decentralization processes. Practical evidence is that effective participation of the community is a rare outcome of decentralization processes. It is a luxury for the poor people who are faced with problems of illiteracy, poor health, hunger, economic emaciation and poor infrastructure, among others.

Decentralization processes hold a lot of challenges, which hinder effective participation. These start right from a misconception of the concept and a lack of adequate capacity to handle decentralization processes. This paper begins by defining the concepts of community, participation and decentralisation. A theoretical framework is then provided to address arguments for and against these. The paper then presents an account of what is happening in practice. The paper ends with the conclusion that meaningful participation in decentralization processes is a costly and time-consuming process that requires technical expertise. Yet the ordinary people, especially the poor whom decentralization is said to target, can hardly afford the costs. They generally end up being excluded from participating in decentralization processes and in governance. Efforts to empower and build capacities of the community should precede governments' decisions on decentralization.



## 2. Definition of terms

### 2.1 Community

While a community can be defined as a “collection of people in a geographical area” (Nelson, A. et al 1994, pp.75/6), it is important to note that “rural communities in the 3rd world are not homogeneous entities” (Burkey, 1993, p.40). They include people from all walks of life; women, minorities, small business people, artisans and the marginalized (Blair, 2000). The concern here relates to who in the community participates in decentralization processes.

### 2.2 Participation

Different authors have defined participation differently. In this paper, it is defined as “a process of communication among local people and development agencies during which local people take the leading role to analyse the current situation and to plan, implement and evaluate development activities” (FAO, 1998, p.8). This raises questions about the quality of the participation. It calls for concerns about who plays the leading role in development activities. Who makes decisions? Are local people able to influence the planning process? Are the priorities of the local people reflected in the development plans?

### 2.3 Decentralization

While there are many definitions of decentralization, in this paper it is defined as “the transfer of responsibility for planning, management and resource raising, and allocation from the central government and its agencies to field units of central government, semiautonomous public authorities, regional or functional authorities or non-governmental, private or voluntary organizations” (Rondinelli, 1984, p.9). The concern here relates to the capacity of the communities in the local governments to handle decentralized responsibilities and functions and whether or not local governments are empowered enough to handle these new responsibilities. Does the community possess “political tools” such as money, power and information, which are necessary for meaningful participation in decentralisation processes?



### 3. Theoretical framework

Most advocates of decentralization argue for it not just as an end in itself but rather as a means to enhance development. Many arguments have been put forward in favour of decentralization. It has been argued that decentralization increases citizen/popular participation in political, economic and social activities (Blair 2000, Ribot 2002, Robertson 2002, Manor 1998, Sopchkhchai 2001, Kisakye 1994, Rondinelli 1984, Van der Walle 2002). The assumption is that as government comes closer to the people, more people will participate and will have a meaningful role in local government decisions that affect them (Blair, 2000, p.22/23).

Decentralization allows for the incorporation of women and minorities in policy decision-making (Rondinelli 1984, Robertson 2002, Sopchkhchai 2001 and Van der Walle 2002). For Parker (1995) and Ribot (2002), decentralization draws on local knowledge and preferences about development, hence it better addresses local needs than centralization, leading to improved rural development. It breeds a sense of ownership of local development, self-reliance, local empowerment and sub-national autonomy (Rondinelli 1984, Conyers 2000), which ultimately leads to sustainability (Robertson 2002, Sopchkhchai 2001, De Valk 1990 quoted in Ribot 2002, Kisakye 1994).

For others, decentralization improves efficiency and effectiveness in implementing development efforts (Manor 1998, Rondinelli 1994, Sopchkhchai 2001 and Van der Walle 2002) in contrast to centralization, which is accused of inefficiency and corruption (Conyers 2008 cited in Ribot, 2002, p.9). Efficiency and effectiveness are associated with enhanced mobilization of local resources, better co-ordination by decentralized bodies, reduced transaction costs and reduced delays arising from bureaucracy (Sopchkhchai 2001). It is seen to resolve implementation problems of rural development planning and it is based on the assumption that decisions that are more relevant to local needs and conditions are more likely to be effective (Ribot, 2002, p.9). Proponents of decentralization argue that effectiveness leads to improved quality and quantity of service provision (Rondinelli 1984, Robertson 2002, Ribot 2002, Omar 1999, Villadsen 1996).

Decentralization is also associated with transparency, responsiveness and accountability of local government officials (Blair 2000, Ribot 2002, Rondinelli 1984, Robertson 2002, Van der Walle 2002). Yet to others, it enables central government to shed fiscal and administrative burdens (Nsibambi 2000, Rondinelli 1984 and Ribot 2002). Other arguments hinge on decentralization's potential ability for equity-balanced regional development (Ribot 2002, Sopchkhchai 2001, Manor 1998, and Parker 1995), for reduction of poverty, and its ability to address environmental concerns and gender inequalities (Robertson, 2002, p.4, Van der Walle 2002).

For the World Bank (2000), Van der Walle (2002), Ribot (2002) and Conyers (2000) decentralization (in the form of devolution) enhances political stability and national unity. While the UNDP (2002), Rondinelli (1984), Ribot (2002) and Sopchkhchai (2001) emphasize the role of decentralization in enhancing democracy and good governance. The main argument in favor of political decentralization is that decision-making that is more appropriately left to the local or regional government is essential for promoting democracy and good governance (Sopchkhchai 2001).



While theorists ( Manor 1998, Sopchchai 2001, Kisakye 1994, Rondinelli 1984, Van der Walle 2002) state a number of benefits which decentralization promises for development, some authors have arrived at the conclusion that in practice, these benefits are rarely achieved. According to Gaventa (2001), poor people are excluded from participation in governance and state institutions are often neither responsive, nor accountable to the poor. Francis and James (2003) carried out a study in Uganda on “Balancing Rural Poverty Reduction and Citizen Participation under Uganda’s Decentralization Program”. The study revealed that “decentralization structures and processes did not constitute a genuinely participatory system of local governance” (2003, p.334).

From his study on decentralization processes in Uganda, David Watson (undated) an independent consultant for the UK Department for International Development (DFID) says, “the poor are infrequently consulted on their priorities...the poor have useful things to say but unfortunately rarely is anyone listening”. He concludes, “the poor are still disadvantaged by the decentralization process”. In the next section, I present some of the findings of my research (Bagenda 2003) regarding the community’s participation in decentralisation processes in Kibaale District.

## 4. Research findings

### 4.1 How do communities participate in decentralization processes? A case study of Kibaale.

In order to establish how communities participate in decentralization processes, it was necessary to find out the community’s perception of decentralization. In my research I interviewed different categories of the community including the poor people, civil servants, local leaders, youth, politicians and district administrators. Findings of my research reveal that different people perceived it differently. The ‘elite class’<sup>1</sup> perceived decentralization as the “transfer of powers, resources and decision making from central to local governments.”<sup>2</sup> Civil servants perceived it in terms of “bringing services closer to the people”. Yet the poor understood “decentralization as bringing ‘development’<sup>3</sup> to the village”. In an interview, one woman said decentralization was about “allowing people freedom to choose their own leaders”.

The majority of Uganda’s population in general, and in Kibaale district in particular, is comprised of rural, poor people with little or no literacy. As mentioned above, based on the research findings, these people portrayed a limited understanding of this fashionable concept (decentralization) seeing it as “bringing development to an area”. This indicates that the so called ‘beneficiaries’ of the decentralization processes perceive the concept to mean a vehicle for eradicating the evils of poverty, illiteracy, poor health etc. Many are yet to appreciate decentralization as a break up of a concentration of government authority and its related functions in the main centre, to its more widespread and deeper distribution.

Therefore, many are yet to uphold the challenges of decentralization such as resource mobilization, planning, monitoring, accountability and partnership, because they do not conceive of their own responsibilities

1. In this study, the elite class refers to people with a minimum of secondary education, politicians, administrators and leaders.

2. Unreferenced quotation marks indicate direct quotations from interview respondents as part of research

for the unpublished MA thesis ‘The Challenges of Community participation in Decentralization Processes in Uganda: A case study of Kibaale District, Kampala, Uganda (Bagenda, 2003).

3. One interviewee explained generation and agriculture.



in decentralization processes. In addition, few understand their rights in these processes. For example, many of the people at the local level expressed their inability to hold the local leaders accountable for what was done or not done. It would be unrealistic to expect effective participation of the community in processes they are yet to comprehend. Therefore, local communities in developing nations in general and Kibaale in particular, are still far away from reaping the fruits which decentralization promises, particularly with regard to participation.

The findings of the study further revealed a narrow perception of the concept to mean “freedom to elect local leaders”. This could be arising from the fact that the two processes of decentralization and democratization were introduced around the same time. In fact, in Uganda, “good governance and democratization are being pursued in the context of decentralization” (MFPED<sup>4</sup>, 2002, p.174). This could be part of the confusion leading to or resulting from over-politicization of the decentralization process to the extent that for some people, the notion of decentralization does not go beyond the election of local leaders. The elections are periodic in nature, conducted after four years. This means that the majority of the population remains inactive and less concerned until the next elections.

## 4.2 Mechanisms to facilitate community participation in decentralization processes

In Uganda, mechanisms are in place to facilitate community participation in decentralization processes. These include, for example, the National Agricultural and Advisory Services (NAADS) and the Local Government Development Programme (LGDP). These programmes have conditions attached to them to the effect that to fund any initiatives in the district, they have to be “participatory”. The NAADS programme requires that people organize themselves into ‘agricultural enterprise groups’ and present a ‘farmer development plan’. This process, which draws heavily on Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques, is presumed to be a participatory exercise and is facilitated by the ‘sub-county farmer forum’ assisted by the district technical staff.

Similarly, the LGDP is a participatory planning process managed by Local Councils (LC). Views gathered from the community are supposed to be channeled through the councilors at lower local councils to higher local councils from where they are then sent to be incorporated into the district plan.<sup>5</sup> This whole process is supposed to be participatory. The Local Government Act also dictates and presupposes participation of the people in decentralization processes. In general, there is a clear framework of the LC structure, to facilitate the participation of the community members in decentralization processes. However, it is one thing to have systems in place yet it is another to have them function effectively.

Evidence from my research reveals that community meetings where participatory planning is supposed to take place and where most decisions are made are rarely held. On the few occasions when the meetings are held, politicians, elites and the business community, dominate them. Women, the poor, members of minority groups and people with disabilities hardly attend and when they do, they hardly speak at such meetings. This was further confirmed in the discussion meetings which I held with the research respondents. Every time I

4. MFPED stands for Ministry of Finance Planning and Economic Development

5. The planning process is supposed to be that views are gathered from the local people at village level, which is the LC1. The views from different villages are then sent to the Parish, which is the next level, LC2. The councilors at the LC2 level send these views to the sub county level, which is the LC3. At the sub county level, the views received from the various parishes are prioritized and then sent to the district level, which is LC5. At the district level the views from different sub counties are consolidated into a district development plan.





called for a meeting, it was dominated by politicians, elites and the businessmen. The few women who attended hardly volunteered to give their opinions and when asked to speak they said the men were in a better position to represent their views.

In these meetings, the rather fashionable method of addressing development constraints i.e., 'the participatory approach', highly cherished by most donors and adopted by the Government of Uganda, is perceived as a channel of acquiring or exhibiting status in the society. 'Who is who' is seen through the vent of the 'participatory approach'. Consequently, these meetings more often than not, fail to achieve their purpose because the analytical technique of PRA<sup>6</sup> is not being appreciated by those who should be applying it for project appraisal, monitoring and evaluation. One administrator confessed that the participatory process, where views are supposed to be collected from communities at the lowest level and channeled through local councils to be incorporated into the district plan, is often "short circuited". This is often done in order to meet deadlines determined by central government, which have been dictated by international development agencies or donors.

Sometimes efforts to foster participation are implemented in a 'top down' manner. One member of the community mentioned that in his village, a local council official collected money from them. He (LC Official) claimed that the money was their contribution towards the construction of a community well for clean drinking water. The community had not been in any way involved in the process except at the time of collecting money. They were not even aware that a well was their 'priority' at that time. Perhaps they would have given a different priority had they been asked. The member of the community felt that their participation would have made the process more meaningful to them.

A focus group discussion with members of the local community revealed that the community had a narrow understanding of the concept of participation. The women said they actually participated in development activities in their area. They cited an incident where they had to bring bricks and stones during the construction of a community bore hole. In their opinion, this was what participation was all about. In my opinion, this is only participation 'as a means' to get certain activities accomplished using cheap labour and materials from the community members. Effective participation aims at 'participation as an end' to empower the community members to take charge of their own development.

6. PRA is Participatory Rural Appraisal, a planning method used in the development field where the local people are involved in identifying their own needs and in the planning and implementation of programmes aimed at satisfying their needs.



### 4.3 The capacity of the community to meaningfully engage in decentralization processes

While participation is a useful concept in theory, it has associated costs, for example transport and feeding costs. The experience of decentralization, as outlined in my research, is that many of the disadvantaged members of the community (the poor, peasants, women and people with disabilities) cannot afford these costs. An interview with one administrator revealed that in the village meetings, the majority of the attendants were women. However at the sub county level, where most decisions are made, fewer women attended such meetings. His opinion was that most of the women could not afford the associated costs of transport, feeding and time at the sub county level. The 'well off' ones (politicians, businesspersons, property owners and other elites) can afford them. In that situation, only these people can benefit from participating in the planning processes. Consequently, so-called participatory processes, more often than not, fail to meaningfully engage the poor in decentralization processes.

The view of one administrator was that "the community lacks the competence to appreciate and engage in full participation and unless this competence is built among the people, participation remains rhetoric". His opinion was that "the level of participation, especially in meetings, heavily depends on the competence and expertise of the local leaders to facilitate the process". For example, community meetings that were held with the help of the district technical staff and where local leaders were willing to co-operate, were participatory.

However, it was also pointed out that many local leaders alone did not have sufficient capability to facilitate a participatory meeting. One male respondent pointed out that "during elections, leaders are elected based on their party affiliation, region of origin and family background; but the level of education, technical expertise and leadership competence are not considered". He went on to say, "if you are educated, people will not elect you. They argue that this one will be too powerful for us, we shall not manage him/her". A similar view was expressed by one civil society activist, i.e., that, "people don't mind about the level of education of the people they elect and the staff they employ, as long as they are 'sons and daughters of the soil' ". In that same forum, the majority of the members shared this same view. One youth felt that the problem arose from the fact that there was no legislation for minimum education qualifications for local leaders.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The above discussion reveals that development concepts in general and decentralisation processes in particular are not 'quick fix' solutions. These are processes that need a thorough understanding before they can be introduced to the people whom they are intended to benefit. There is a need for effective sensitisation of community members about what these fashionable development concepts can mean. There seems to be a rush in the way development discourses and policies are implemented. New concepts are introduced at a much faster rate than the community can comprehend. Creation of awareness about these development concepts, if it happens at all, is given little attention.

In order to facilitate meaningful decentralisation and effective participation by the people, especially the poor, there is a need to build the capacity of



the people at all levels, especially the poor. This means that decentralisation efforts in general, and capacity building in particular, should focus on the lower levels of local governments (villages), where the majority of the poor, marginalised and illiterate are located, rather than on the higher levels (district) where decentralization efforts have tended to concentrate. More often than not, the higher levels fail to effectively incorporate the poor in decentralization processes.

Attention should be paid to local authorities at lower levels because they take on the primary responsibility for co-ordinating and integrating local level plans. There is a need to equip the local leaders with the necessary knowledge and skills to enable them to facilitate participatory processes in the community. It is also important that deliberate efforts be put into empowering and building the capacity of the local people at village level. There is also a need to work out new forms of participation, not simply by representation, but forms aimed at empowerment of the people. That involves the ways in which poor people can exercise their voice through new forms of inclusion, and consultation/mobilization designed to inform and influence larger institutions and policies. In accordance with Gaventa (2001), this means redefining the relationships between local government institutions and the local people, and recognising people as 'makers and shapers' rather than 'users and choosers' of their own development. It means that local people do not only adapt to but also actually shape their own development. There is a need to strengthen empowerment strategies through promotion of literacy, economic livelihoods, social mobilization, and advocacy as necessary pre-conditions for making participation in decentralisation processes a reality.

While decentralization holds potential benefits for the poor, it is unlikely that the poor will have any influence as long as they lack "political tools" such as money, power, information and literacy. While empowerment is usually cited as an outcome of decentralization efforts, I think deliberate efforts to empower communities should precede any government's efforts to decentralize. In this way the poor will be able to participate in the decentralized processes. Participation will cease to be a mere question of 'who speaks' but a genuine involvement of people in deciding and effecting their own development. Otherwise, particularly where capacity is weak, decentralization becomes a risky venture.



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- MFPED stands for Ministry of Finance Planning and Economic Development



The planning process is supposed to be that views are gathered from the local people at village level, which is the LC1. The views from different villages are then sent to the Parish, which is the next level, LC2. The councilors at the LC2 level send these views to the sub county level, which is the LC3. At the sub county level, the views received from the various parishes are prioritized and then sent to the district level, which is LC5. At the district level the views from different sub counties are consolidated into a district development plan.

PRA is Participatory Rural Appraisal, a planning method used in the development field where the local people are involved in identifying their own needs and in the planning and implementation of programmes aimed at satisfying their needs.



























