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**INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION
AND
WEST AFRICAN MUNICIPALITIES**

SUMMARY

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by François Paul Yatta

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Summary

The second half of the 20th century has seen West Africa move from being an essentially rural society to a mainly urban one. This process has occurred at varying speeds in different countries, often depending on economic growth, but in every case national resources have fallen far short of what is needed to build the towns this challenge requires.

Development cooperation for towns and municipalities

In general Africa has fewer urban programs than other developing regions. Development cooperation for the urban sector is only a small part of aid to West Africa, and particularly the Sahel, where between 1975 and 1990 projects with "urban development" in their titles accounted for 0.5% of total aid flows; if projects for investment in urban areas are added, the figure is 2.5%. The financing of urbanization in Africa has suffered more than elsewhere from the "urban bias" effect which spread throughout most aid agencies at a time when African towns were subject to the greatest migratory pressure and had the greatest need for investment.

Development cooperation for towns

---> It was poverty reduction that led most agencies to discover towns in the Third World in the early 1970s. Towns were growing at great speed without a similar degree of industrialization. Living conditions and employment opportunities were adverse, the capacity for absorption was soon overwhelmed and shanty-towns began to appear. The aim of improving living conditions and primarily developing social housing was a logical choice. But the lessons learned during the first decade of action were varied: urban projects generally turned out to be non-replicable, and projects for advance provision of utilities and social housing for the poorest groups were usually used for other purposes. Nor were answers found to the problems of managing and maintaining the structures left behind by the projects. This first period illustrated the limitations of urban development cooperation in sectoral terms, although it did provide a modest contribution to the construction of towns.

---> By the end of the 1970s there was a growing awareness of the many failings of urban institutions: few financial resources or technical skills. The international community, led by the World Bank, turned to the development of the institutional capacities of these new municipalities; the agenda now included financial management, administrative reform, capacity-building, etc. The 1980s also saw new players in the urban sector, NGOs and local authorities from the North, but for African towns the final balance-sheet was negative. The collapse of commodity income came on top of lower urban investment by the international community. As economic crisis slowed urban growth, the average level of equipment perversely fell compared with the earlier period. An opportunity was missed.

---> In the early 1990s the idea of the town as a source of economic growth made a timid appearance. However, even when it was accepted within the agencies, they were unable to translate it into action. How can growth potential be identified? What would help this potential become real; what investment, what resources, what sectoral policy, what trade-offs? What would be the political and administrative framework? There was a lack of tools for assessing the local economy and for organizing effective subsidiarity.

Development cooperation for municipalities

Apart from the "physical" treatment of urbanization, another theme of equal importance was added in the early 1990s: decentralization.

The influence of the international community in the definition and implementation of decentralization policies is a strong one. Whether in producing the regulations, studying the implementation of decentralization, financing local elections or giving grants to the structures in charge of introducing decentralization, the international community is very active. But development cooperation instruments suited to this new purpose have not yet been fully developed. West African municipalities have trouble finding direct access to external financing, despite the results of the Habitat II conference.

At present there appears to be a combination of "philosophical" approval and practical reluctance at the size and complexity of the task. The development cooperation agencies support decentralization because it is politically unassailable, but do not seem yet to have the right resources to act.

Development cooperation between local authorities in the North and South is probably one of these resources. It has only begun in recent years, and is now expanding rapidly throughout the world via effective national and international networks. With its long-term commitment, it appears to be the best way to build the institutional capacities of new municipalities. But there is as yet insufficient action in West Africa, and the major donors are not showing enough interest.

Prospects and risks of development cooperation for West African municipalities

It is certain that mayors and other local officials will soon become major partners for the international community, which will not be able to ignore them. This desirable change does however involve some risk, particularly that development cooperation for municipalities will make the same mistakes as it has for States.

---> Like other ideas in their time, decentralization is threatened by the "**slogan syndrome**". Indeed the words "decentralization" and "decentralized cooperation" are bandied about in development cooperation agencies and NGOs with respect to such a wide range of programs and action that it is hard to grasp what decentralization actually is. This use of the same words for more than one concept or issue leads to a loss of purpose and unhealthy competition between players in the South to tap aid resources.

Who is legitimate and recognized as such? Is election by universal suffrage enough to create a climate of cooperation and dialogue between citizens and local authorities? In what way is the "voice of the people" more legitimate than any other; who is speaking for whom? The decentralization process is often seen as an extra complication. The lack of any clear, active support for municipal officials from the development cooperation agencies creates a widening gap between virtual decentralization (laws, regulations, elections, etc.) and the reality. There is also the disappointingly restricted view of decentralization by central States, who see it only as a way of "achieving citizen solidarity" for State projects.

---> **The aid rush.** How can aid's arrival on the scene be managed in hundreds of towns (to take only those over 100,000 population)? Although competition between towns for economic development is natural, it involves major risks when it occurs on the "aid market". It can lead to the destruction or withering of partnership; one partner who is too rigorous can be "replaced" by another. It may mean a "reward" for those towns and aid suppliers not concerned with developing responsible partnership. This can lead to **aid with no local contribution**, where demand is ignored in the definition of projects. Or to perverse incentives that hamper the development of local taxation: **aid versus local resources**. It may ignore the local authorities with the weakest institutions, even if the local economy possesses the potential for development.

---> **Who is the customer?** This question reveals *the conflict between ownership by the recipients and control by the donors*. In their development cooperation with States, the donors have always been the real customers. The creation of local development units or agencies in some towns in the South at the suggestion of external partners seems to be going in the same direction. Although these agencies do meet a real need for places where projects can be designed and implemented in a way that reassures the donors, they are still duplicates for existing structures and operate more as *ad hoc* instruments of donor control.

The likelihood that international aid will make the same mistakes with municipalities that it has made with States is therefore not a slight one. But the consequences could be more serious, since towns have even fewer institutional capacities and resources than States. The catastrophic scenario, in the medium or long-term, would be bankrupt West African cities and towns, smothered by overstaffed parallel administrations left behind by successive waves of projects. Ultimately, there is also a risk that local democracy will be weakened if civil society does not connect with a form of management that is directed exclusively towards aid suppliers or if it ignores local demand.

Suggestions for discussion

See municipal autonomy as a day-to-day reality

Municipal autonomy is becoming, and in some countries has already become, part of the day-to-day reality of West Africans. The problems of town management and the supply of services are regularly featured on the front pages of newspapers, problems of schooling, traffic, healthcare, taxes, etc. The prerequisite therefore for any discussion of aid in emerging municipal structures is simply to become aware of this reality, even if it is more complex, unstable and harder to grasp than the reality of the past that is the basis for current aid instruments.

In particular, mayors and other local elected officials should no longer be seen as "more partners to add to the many". They are special: they have been democratically elected and are legally responsible for equipping their towns and developing the local economy. Recognizing them does not mean ignoring the current shortcomings of local governance.

Clarify concepts

There is a confusion between decentralized cooperation as the supply of aid to anything outside the "center" and decentralized cooperation as any partnership between local authorities in the North and South who commit themselves to an exchange program intended to improve the social and economic environment of the southern partner.

This confusion distorts the message and prevents the observer from identifying who (agencies, local authorities, NGOs) is actually supplying aid for territorial entities, and who it is going to (towns, NGOs, etc.). For greater clarity it would be useful for associations of African local elected officials to ask the development cooperation agencies, if this fits with their ideas, to set up a specific budget heading entitled International Municipal Cooperation.

This redefinition of concepts in which support for grassroots collective initiatives and international municipal cooperation are distinct will stop the competition there is now between local authorities and NGOs/associations. This proposal can be argued for in the negotiations for the future definitions of Europe-ACP cooperation "after Lomé". But this means finding a credible local, municipal African voice, one that is aware of its challenges and well organized.

Create long-term partnerships with local elected officials

At present the municipal African voice is barely perceptible in the main national and international forums. One example was the Sahel 21 discussion of change and prospects for the Sahel, where in each CILSS country, farmers, entrepreneurs, women, young people, etc. spoke up in many national and regional meetings, with not a word from locally elected officials. The same is true of the European Commission green book on proposed guidelines for the new generation of aid from the EU to the ACP countries, which does not even mention municipal structures or local officials.

This "deafening silence" is probably due to insufficient organization in the community of municipal and local officials, who are as yet unaware of the magnitude of the challenges they will have to face. Their poorly supported national associations do not have the technical advice that would enable them to sit down at a negotiating table with well argued proposals, and they are not informed of the international aspects, let alone the strategies of the donor community. These services need to be provided by their associations.

The regional associations are also weakened by internal competition and the French/English language division, rather than bound by a desire for union. Altogether they have little motivation to organize and do the active lobbying so ably illustrated by farmers and entrepreneurs. This process must be initiated the ground by using these associations to provide practical services for local elected officials in terms of training, information and expertise. Encouraging technical assistance from northern associations of elected officials would be a good start.

Develop international municipal cooperation for Africa

Although cooperation between local authorities is no panacea, it goes down very well with African local officials. The handful of successful examples show what sustainable support for African towns could mean freed of the "project" timetables inherent in development cooperation agency action. Furthermore, this is "citizen" cooperation between elected officials and has the great advantage of rehabilitating the image of development cooperation in the North and South.

At present this type of cooperation in Africa does not receive the same attention from agencies as it has done in other parts of the world. There are some initiatives, but no large-scale programs. The European Commission (DG 1) has been financing since 1992 a 12.8-m-ecu program called Med-Urbs for developing cooperation between local authorities in the Mediterranean Basin. Two hundred forty European and Mediterranean towns have been involved. Apparently a Latina-Urbs program is about to be launched for Latin America. A similar program for African countries would be worth considering, using both the experience of Med-Urbs and particular examples in the region.

Act on the local urban-rural economy

After thirty years of urban projects aimed mainly at physical construction and then institutional support, a new generation of cooperation for urban local authorities seems likely to emerge, with the main objective of promoting the local economy.

The nature and objectives of this local approach to economic and social development would appear in theory to be clearly defined: the condition for successful decentralization is economic development, i.e. the generation of activities, income and taxes that make best use of the local economy within the national and regional economies, and in some cases, the world economy.

However, the information needed to identify and assess what action to undertake is often insufficient or even non-existent. Neither States nor donors, let alone local officials, can at present provide accurate enough answers to basic questions concerning the local economy and its management.

The first question is the physical size of the local economy. This never corresponds to administrative boundaries. A town's area of influence in production, trade and services is thus never considered in local management or the planning of investment.

The second is the actual understanding of the local economy. What is the relative weight and position of the local economy in the national economy? What would be the direct, indirect and fiscal effects of public investment in a given sector of the local economy? And so on. Any answers given to these questions now are only intuitive.

Return to regional land-use planning

Decentralization policy is at present being implemented "blindly". Political and technical officials are unable to measure the effects of decentralization on the reduction or otherwise of regional disparities in development, mechanisms for financial transfers, the effectiveness of national policies, and ultimately the consistency of planning across the nation-state. These issues are increasingly relevant as more external development partners make their appearance and an aid rush develops (see above).

The definition of guidelines for regional land-use planning and the organization of tripartite consultations between donors, governments and local authorities can and must be a way of preventing a sudden deterioration in the State's operations and the emergence of excessive disparities within a country.

Revise development cooperation agency working methods

In their cooperation with local authorities, donors will need to accept that they are players external to current processes, and that their function is more to support and accompany these processes than to intervene directly. The reform of international development cooperation methods and instruments to adapt them to the new players in local authorities might be based on the following points:

---> Current development aid methods and instruments are likely to compromise decentralization processes because of the excessive centralization they involve. The North-South relationship based on paternalism or power games that characterizes development cooperation must give way to partnership. Development cooperation for municipalities requires a greater personal involvement from agency officials.

---> The agencies must escape as far as possible from the mindset of delivering timely aid, and see institutional support as an important criterion in evaluating their action.

---> Since institutional reform gives local authorities, particularly towns, major responsibilities, such as healthcare facilities, education, transport, and the environment, the agencies will probably have to adapt the organization of their services.

