

Challenges for democracy in rural communities

After the failure of development models based on central-state structures, many developing and transition countries are now undertaking comprehensive reform processes. They aim to strengthen sub-national governments and administrations and empower people to participate in politics so that democratic structures and processes can be shaped at local level.



Photo: Horneber

Over the past decades, international cooperation has pursued a variety of strategies to improve conditions for people living in rural regions. Most of these strategies have now been abandoned. The basic needs strategy popular in the 1970s, for example, did not deliver the progress hoped for, and even the national Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), which raised high expectations, have failed to yield any real progress from a local perspective. In Bolivia, for example, local concerns and the interests of the rural population were integrated so little into the national PRSP, that small-scale farmers laid siege to the seat of government and blockaded the country's major highways in protest. In light of the knowledge gained over recent decades and experience with the PRSP process, there is a growing recognition that many obstacles to socio-economic development are political in nature. Hence attention is increasingly shifting towards the political framework conditions which are a prerequisite for development. The promising «Good Governance» concept is currently the key

In Malawi, 85 percent of the population live in rural regions. A democratic decentralization process is gradually gaining pace.

focus of international development cooperation.

No Good Governance without democracy

There has long been a clear conviction at international level that Good Governance in developing countries can make an important and lasting contribution to successful development. Good Governance means organizing politics and society in such a way that citizens' rights, interests and aspirations can be asserted, protected and promoted as effectively as possible. The five criteria governing German development cooperation (see box on page 25) show how the concept of Good Governance can be transformed into action-oriented guidelines.

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The role of German development agencies in Malawi's democratization process

In the south-east African country of Malawi, where 85 percent of the population live in rural regions, the German development agencies GTZ, KfW and the German Development Service (DED) have coordinated their contributions to the democratic decentralization process. Drawing on the particular strengths of the various implementing agencies, local capacities are being strengthened by means of advisory services for central government and for local authorities. At local level in particular, efforts are being made to foster cooperation between the administrations and the elected district assemblies. Support for the local authorities' association is aimed at reinforcing networking with other local authorities and the vertical communication of local interests to the central bodies.

In particular, criteria 1-3 demonstrate that the development and consolidation of democratic structures and processes are central to Good Governance.

The legitimacy of political office-holders based on the declared will of the people is a key issue in the democratization process. In many developing and transition countries, the majority of citizens live in rural communities. Only in democratically constituted states are politicians compelled to address the urgent problems facing rural regions, such as unclear land titles, rural poverty and growing demographic pressure.

What does democratization mean for rural development?

The key concern for the general public, i.e. the «governees», is to improve their social and economic conditions and prospects. The chief priority of those who hold government authority, on the other hand, is to maintain and expand their own power. In countries with authoritarian governments, this often means that the strategies and objectives of the governees are at odds with those of the government, with the latter only addressing the interests of those social groups which form its power base. These may be the military or economic elite such as large-scale landowners. The developments in Zimbabwe since the mid-1990s demonstrate that such systems are no longer viable in the medium to long term.

In democratic systems, the government relies on the endorsement of at least the majority of the population, and making citizens' interests and objectives the focus of policy is the most rational course of action for governments. The needs of the rural population can thus be taken into account in decision-making processes at governmental level – especially if the democratization process goes hand in hand with the decentralization of decision- and policy-making. At regional and especially at local level, the problems themselves are very close to those responsible for resolving them. This heightens the need for office-holders to work together with citizens to identify solutions to the basic problems facing rural communities.

The many prerequisites for democracy

Democracy is a highly demanding social and political system. It depends on the participation of as many citizens as possible and is based on numerous other prerequisites:

- There must be a binding legal framework which defines the powers and responsibilities of all public actors and makes the government's actions predictable for the general public.
- The public must have a level of knowledge which is sufficient to empower them to assume their responsible role in a democracy, based on an informed electoral choice and other forms of participation.
- Public and especially government affairs must be managed as transparently as possible. This allows citizens to monitor the fulfilment of political pledges.
- Social organizations (e.g. political parties, interest groups, the media) must function as independent brokers between the political sphere and citizens.

One further prerequisite for the development of a vibrant democratic process at the local level is the existence of sufficient competencies and policy-making options at that level. In other words, a well-



Photo: Viter

Maintaining roads and pathways is often the responsibility of local authorities, but they often lack the necessary financial resources.



Photo: Hahn

In some Central and South-East European countries, decentralization only exists on paper as a means of gaining easier access to European funding.

exists solely on paper in order to qualify for European funding. It is apparent that at the level of rural municipalities and villages in particular, the real potential to develop a sustainable and well-functioning democracy only exists in a handful of cases.

Local capacities are key

advanced process of decentralization. This often breaks down because the central state views the sub-national territorial units, i.e. the local authorities, as rivals, not partners in the development process. Yet unless decision-making powers are decentralized, the local level will continue to be irrelevant and will not be taken seriously by decision-makers and stakeholders.

The local level: the prerequisites for democracy are absent

In developing countries – and especially in rural communities – the prerequisites for democracy have only been partly fulfilled. The legal systems established by the state are often too weak to define a binding framework for action. This reinforces the informal rules in place at local or regional level. Women's rights in Africa are a particularly good example. Traditional local law often confers a lower legal status on women and girls, and this discrimination especially applies to their property rights (inheritance rights, access to land) and also their fundamental rights such as the

right to education or work. The local population is rarely informed about government structures or political processes. Rural communities in particular are often screened off from the flow of information from the cities. Due to the lack of access to the media and information, there is virtually no politicization of citizens. After decades of colonial rule and/or authoritarian government, the general public in many countries has to become accustomed to the fact that political activity does not entail risk, but can actually help to improve their own circumstances.

Political elites undermine democratic processes

In many developing and transition countries, the political elites' understanding of the concept of democracy is often highly diffuse. Authoritarian practices and decisions that circumvent due processes and undermine transparency are routine. These scenarios are more aptly described as «façade democracies».

Often, there is a shortage of organizations and groups which are capable of drawing together the public's interests and concerns and communicating them to decision-makers and political institutions. This is due both to a lack of professional skills among individuals and to weaknesses in organizational culture. As a result, local administrations, local legislatures and even NGOs are unable to contribute adequately to social cohesion at the local level. Yet it is important to forge a shared identity as a basis for setting priorities which citizens can endorse.

Many countries have not yet embarked on decentralization in any serious way. In some Central and South-East European countries, for example, the regional level

Nonetheless, democratic reform processes, which improve the framework conditions for local development, can emerge even under difficult conditions, provided that there is sufficient interest among local actors. The measures and efforts outlined here are primarily being undertaken by the developing countries themselves, especially at the regional and local level. International cooperation can support these endeavours and provide advice wherever required.

For the community to become a tangible social and political reality for the local population, its performance must be enhanced. This applies especially to the delivery of basic services for citizens (i.e. water supply, waste management, road-building and electricity). In order to deliver these services, the municipalities must have their own, if small, revenue base, especially since the subsidies from national governments are often unreliable. This revenue base mainly consists of local taxes and charges. But it should also be linked to local economic development and job creation. The rural communities' finances can only be sustainably improved by tapping the local potential. The local authority's task is to safeguard the delivery of these services, not necessarily to operate them. Public-private

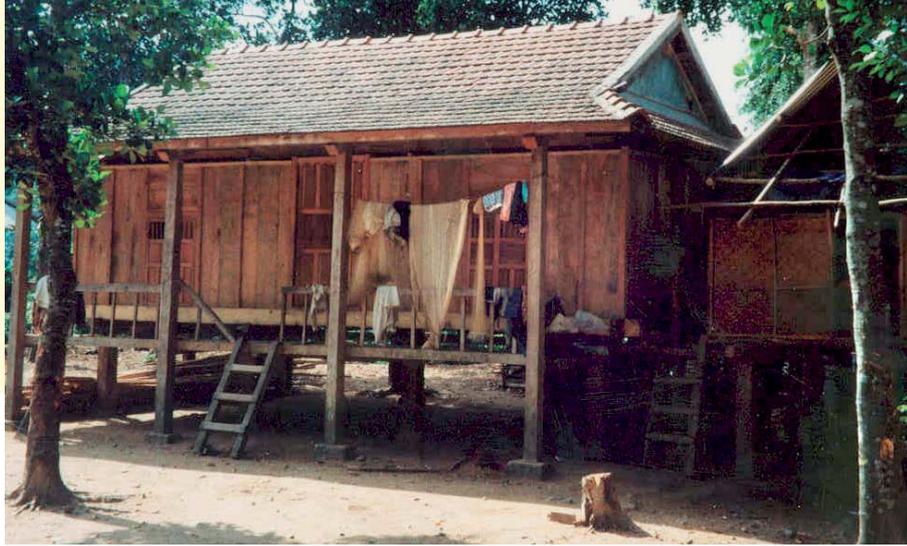
«Good Governance is perhaps the single most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development.»

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan

The five criteria governing German development cooperation

- 1 Respect for human rights
 - 2 Participation by the people in the political process
 - 3 Rule of law and legal stability
 - 4 Creation of a social market economy
 - 5 State action geared to development
- (See BMZ [2002]: «Good Governance» [position paper], Bonn)

Photo: Väter



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partnerships or individual initiatives are promising options as long as the local authority ensures that disadvantaged groups also have access to services. A number of social and political risks arise if local services are privatized outright. The privatization of the drinking water supply in inner-city slums in Latin America, for example, has led to soaring costs and an increase in social segregation.

External advisors can only support local initiatives

Development agencies can contribute their international experience to support these processes and offer tried and tested instruments and procedures which aim to strengthen the local authorities' capacity to resolve local problems. This especially includes establishing effective administrations and improving local financial control. One of the challenges often facing advisors is how to deal with structures which are prone to corruption. Thanks to the public's stronger sense of belonging, which results from the improvements in performance at commu-

nity level, citizens are becoming more empowered to participate actively in the local political process. Besides elections and ballots, this is reflected primarily through their involvement in local development planning. Such participation gives stakeholders a comprehensive insight into the community's development and welfare, thereby overcoming behavioural patterns which are mainly motivated by vested interests.

At the same time, the greater involvement of the local community leads to better control over public office-holders, which in turn reinforces the system of checks and balances, an essential part of Good Governance. Greater political involvement by citizens can be encouraged by providing information and supporting public debate. Especially before elections, it also requires the mobilization of rural population groups. As many developing countries lack the necessary experience and resources, multilateral and bilateral development organizations are key partners in strengthening local democracy. The same applies to promoting and advising on decentralization processes, which aim to bring decision-

making powers closer to the people and the challenges they face. German development cooperation in particular has considerable experience in this area. Local authorities' organizations are key structures in promoting an exchange of experience between local communities and their representation towards the central state. The reciprocal learning process offers chances for increased independence from international advice.

Local democracy as an opportunity for peace and development

Democratic processes cannot offer an instant solution to the numerous challenges facing rural communities in many developing countries. Nonetheless, democracy offers peaceful and rule-oriented procedures for conflict management. It can also promote the emergence of a local identity and trigger development dynamics. This could offer a major impetus to villages such as Phu Quang in Vietnam (see box) in progressing towards sustainable socio-economic development.

A typical example: Phu Quang – a rural community in Vietnam

Phu Quang is a small village in a mountainous rural region of Vietnam. During the rainy season, it is virtually inaccessible across the unsecured mountain slope. Phu Quang is located in Ha Tinh, one of the country's poorest provinces. Electricity is only available for a few hours a day, and the high levels of unemployment mean that very few households are able to afford power at all. The community suffers from poor infrastructure. The river, which is the village's main source of drinking water, is contaminated by large quantities of waste. Disease and infection are rife, especially among the children, and the nearest doctor is half a day's walk away. Most of the village population are malnourished. Agriculture, which employs 70 percent of the village residents, is impeded by a shortage of land and frequent typhoons. Those who have the opportunity invariably attempt to migrate to one of the major cities.

The situation in Phu Quang is by no means unique. On the contrary, it is typical of many rural communities in the developing world.

Photo: Väter

