

Decentralized Governance in Multi-Party Systems in Uganda: Challenges to Service Delivery in Local Governments of Uganda.

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Abstract

Political parties are believed to play an essential role in the functioning of modern democracy. They are central actors in a democratic system that organize and articulate interests and ensure political participation and competition, a major feature of local governance and democracy. Political parties perform several roles critical to the functioning of a democracy as they are the central means to aggregate interests and thereby translate mass preferences into public policy. Uganda's case has been an ambitious decentralization policy with real power transfers from central government to local governments. The country has also transited from a non-party 'movement system' to a multiparty dispensation. In spite of this, the country is still grappling with the challenge of service delivery. This study was a cross sectional survey that adopted a case study design to examine the challenges of local governance in a multi-party dispensation on service delivery in Uganda. Findings indicate that the functioning of local governments in this new political discourse of multiparty dispensation is yet to have a positive impact on service delivery. The multi-party awareness does not tally with the practice. The study concluded that the policy disharmony, the multiparty operation awareness and the internal party democracies have had minimal contribution to service delivery in local governments in Uganda.

Key words: Multiparty, Local Governments, Challenges, Service delivery, Uganda

Background

Decentralization in developing countries has emerged as one of Governments' major administrative reform strategies for democratization, people empowerment and poverty reduction. With regard to governance, decentralization is often thought to bring government closer to the people (Kiwanuka, 2012). According to Meagher (1999), this is so because of the greater trust, generated capacity for collective action, and the subsequent legitimacy of decision making that comes with popular public participation in own governance.

Decentralization under the right circumstances (where government actions are transparent and civil society is permitted to operate freely), can promote accountability, facilitates the allocation of efficiency, support cost recovery and reduces corruption in service delivery. In this respect, decentralization is thought to

increase the likelihood that governments respond to the demand of the local population by promoting competition among sub-national governments (Tiebout, 1956). According to him, Competition among sub-national governments allows for a variety of bundles of local public goods where individuals are said to reveal their preferences for the same goods by moving to those jurisdictions that satisfy their tastes—"voting with their feet". Tiebout (1956) argues that this would exert pressure on sub-national governments to pay attention to the preferences of their constituents and tailor the service delivery accordingly.

Many countries are promoting decentralized governance as a measure for democratization, people empowerment and poverty reduction. As part of the efforts to structure governments to promote good governance and effective public administration with participation of the people in the decision-making processes as well as in development activities, decentralization in multiparty systems is increasingly adopted and applied in many African countries. Political parties are organizations whose prime objective is to mobilize its supporters to assume a leadership role (Sabiti Makara, 2010). According to him a political party of any significance is viewed or views itself in terms of providing alternative policy platforms, ideological direction, as well as redefining the agenda of government. In a liberal democracy, political parties perform the function of integrating individuals and groups in society into the political system. According to the political parties and Organizations' Act (2005), political parties are political organization, the objects of which include the influencing of the political process or sponsoring a political agenda. The act also seeks to sponsor or offer a platform to a candidate for election to a political office or to participate in the governance of Uganda at any level.

According to Sabiti Makara (2010), Political parties are important ingredients in building democracy and vehicles for strengthening the electoral systems and processes. This implies that Political parties are the means for strengthening accountability institutions (at all levels) and strengthening the partnership with civil society organizations. To this end political parties supplements the efforts of decentralization by mobilizing disadvantaged groups such as women, the people with disabilities, and the youth to actively participate and be involved in public decision making in local governments. Political parties have a continuous engagement with the government in all matters of public concern, including and most importantly, holding the government accountable for their policies and actions.

Effectively with the constitution amendments of 2005, multiparty politics was unleashed in the political system in Uganda. As MISR (2008) put it, this represented a high degree of unpreparedness on the side of the population since local structures and institutions on which to operationalize the multiparty system of

governance, and more so in the context of decentralization, were lacking

This study was guided by the public choice theory developed by James Buchanan and Gordon Tulloch to try to explain how public decisions are made. The theory is often used to explain how political decision-making results in outcomes that conflict with the preferences of the general public (political market failures). Public Choice Theory was largely developed in the context of democratic political systems seeking to analyze collective decision-making based on rules and institutions that characterize the Less Developed Countries (Malik, Muzaffer 2009). Public choice seeks to understand and predict the behavior of politicians and government officials in the polity, as mostly self-interested agents and their interactions in the social system, as such. The theory involves the interaction of the voting public, the politicians, the bureaucracy and political action committees. According to the theory, good government policies in a democracy are an underprovided public good, because of the rational ignorance of the voters (Tulloch, 1989). In which case, each voter is faced with a tiny probability that his/her vote will change the result of the elections, whereas gathering the relevant information necessary for a well-informed voting decision requires substantial time and effort. The rational decision for each voter is generally ignorant of politics and perhaps in some instances even abstains from voting. In the multi-party local governments, voters, political parties, bureaucrats, and politicians are assumed to seek their own self-interests as in the market place. Decisions made depend on the costs and benefits of an action taken, with each group attempting to maximize its own net benefits. Benefits in this respect can take the form of monetary or non-monetary rewards and can include ideologies, votes, policies and cultural values. According to Malik, Muzaffer (2009), the seeking of self-interest by bureaucrats and politicians and the collective action by the various interest groups in turn result in the adoption of a particular stance in the specification of the nature of social services. To this end the voices of vocal minorities with much to gain are heard over those of indifferent majorities with little to lose.

Surfacing Problem

Decentralization and multiparty democracy are both believed to promote good governance and consequently improve service delivery through strengthening local/plural participation, accountability and involvement in governance (John Okidi & Madina Guloba; 2006). Developing countries the world over, have been required by their nationals and the developed world to embrace democracy by adopting decentralization and multiparty in order to improve the quality and quantity of public services.

Political parties are believed to play an essential role in the functioning of every modern democracy. Democracy is indivisibly linked to the concept of multipartyism, in which effective participation and competition should be guaranteed. Political parties are central actors in a democratic system, as they organize and articulate interests and ensure political participation and competition, which constitute major features of local governance and so, democracy (Yusuf and Mathias, 2010). They perform several roles critical to the functioning of a democracy as they are the central means to aggregate interests and thereby translate mass preferences into public policy (Yusuf & Mathias, 2010).

Twelve years after adopting the present decentralization policy, Uganda transited from a non-party 'movement system' to a multiparty dispensation effective 2005. All these were intended for effective service delivery (Mushemereza, 2007). 6 years along the course, the country is still grappling with the challenge of effective service under this new multiparty dispensation. While the country's experience with devolved powers was long hailed as an African success story, the advent of a multiparty system in Uganda is threatening the gains so far achieved through decentralization. Not only has the nature and style of decision making been affected, but multiparty politics has undercut the foundation of local government independence (Wasswa & Terrell, 2011). The functioning of local governments in a multi-party dispensation has not yet had a positive impact on service delivery. There is a disharmony between decentralization policy and the multiparty framework, the multiparty operational awareness in local governments is fragmented and there is evidence of lack of internal party democracies.

These are casting doubt on the social service implications of multiparty systems on young democracies, its functionalities at local levels, its ability to mitigate the negative effects of the conflicts that arise from multiparty competition and denting co-existence within and outside parties in the country. The examined the challenges of decentralization governance in a multiparty dispensation on service delivery in local governments in Uganda.

Study Questions:

1. How does policy disharmony affect service delivery in local governments in Uganda?
2. What is the effect of multiparty operational awareness on service delivery in local governments in Uganda?
3. How does internal party democracy affect service delivery in local governments in Uganda?

Methodology

The study was cross sectional survey that adopted a Case study design that supported an in-depth study of four districts purposively selected from the four major geographical regions of the country (Northern, Eastern, Western and Central). The descriptive case study was used to collect data from 110 respondents using surveys and elite interview. Open ended questionnaires were administered to selected district officials and members of the private sector, to enlist and encourage full and meaningful responses using the respondents' own knowledge and/or feelings. 62 out of the 82 Open ended questionnaires administered were returned valid giving a response rate of 75.6%. Out of the targeted 28 elite interviews, 19 were conducted suggesting a response rate of 67.8%. The average response rate was 71.7 % was high enough to validate the study findings (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003).

Findings and Discussion

Demographic Findings indicated that a biggest number of respondents (57%) had worked in the respective districts for over 7 years. On top of having the required experience to appreciate the operations and dynamics of local governments, they also had hands on experience as pioneers of the multi-party dispensation in Uganda from 2005. In terms of gender characteristic, both the female and males were fairly represented with 33% and 67% respectively, given the gender employment levels in local governments in Uganda that favors males.

Although there was a general consensus by the majority of respondents that basically the local governments Act (1997), the constitution (1995), the political parties Act CAP and the District Council rules of procedures were the policy documents guiding the day today local governance, there was contradictions on the policy guidelines supporting multiparty local governance in the country. Findings indicate that although the local government Act provides for multiparty local governance, on ground there is still a lot of disharmony in the procedures, roles, representations and operations of district councils in the multiparty dispensation. This finding is supported by Wasswa & Terrell (2011) who established that the legal framework of the decentralization policy and the individual political parties' constitution are inconsistent with the intention of the decentralization policy. The ruling party has made it practically not easy for any District chairperson coming outside the ruling party, to constitute a government. According to Wasswa & Terrell (2011), the NRM party which has overwhelming majority of councilors in all District councils has at times used its constitution to bar its members from serving on an executive committee of any District chairperson coming from outside the party. At times the same councilors may just move out or boycott council sessions denying

council meetings the required quorums to deliberate and pass any decisions that may not be in their interest, as a ruling party. The same finding was echoed by Mushemereza (2007) that local governments were still operating as they did under the Movement system. He attributed this to a number of failures both at the national and local levels to put in place mechanisms and procedures to facilitate the functioning of the multiparty system. Whereas the councils' rules of procedure are not consistent with the multiparty system and in some instances undermining the role of political parties, the Local Government Act still reflects the spirit of the Movement system (Mushemereza2007).

According Oloka Onyango (2007), the policy disharmony has been even more convoluted by the more contradictory actions of the national executive which exerts tighter control over affairs at local governments, while at the same time appearing to be giving more autonomy. He argue that the executive power, whether directly from the president, through ministers, through Resident District Commissioners (RDCs) or through other central government organs, is increasingly very dominant in local government processes. The office of RDC has transited from being a link between the local and central governments, to being a mechanism for central government control and an agent for the ruling party at the local level (Oloka Onyango, 2007). There is also considerable overlap between party and government. This is because the RDC, who influences many local governance issues in the new multiparty dispensation, is appointed in a political arena. Oloka Onyango (2007) contends further that even the divorce between the movement and the party has not yet been completed. This in effect implies that government institutions like the local governments, which were previously under the movement, are still paying primary allegiance to the governing party. The movement party therefore, still exerts a lot of influence in local government elections and their subsequent operations. This is already being manifested in the treatment of oppositions' motions in councils and in service deliveries. There is already in the country substantial divergences between Government intentions for decentralization, including the intentions as stated in the Constitution and the actual practices in the country. These are happening at the expense of service delivery.

Concerning multiparty operational awareness in service delivery, majority of the respondents were aware and supported the new dispensation. However the study also established that the said awareness did not tally with practice. Very few respondents had actually interfaced with a multi-party council. Even with those that had councilors coming from more than one political party, the majority of respondents (technical officers) would not accurately remember the number of opposition councilors in their District councils. And again although most respondents indicated

that there was political space for participation in the council deliberations, the said space was very limited, if any for some contentious issues. According to one counselor:

I detests the tendency to suffocate us under the “party position” because it deprives us of our individual, independent and most considered contributions. Most of the party positions are determined at Kampala (the center), thereby denying us an opportunity to determine our local priorities.

Such feelings are not any different from by Boyne, George (1996) who submitted that the traditional intra and interparty competition is often ineffective at the local level because:

- Local parties enjoy large majorities and thus have no reason to compete.
- Local parties lack incentive to compete because they are controlled by national political issues.
- Local politicians lack the freedom to compete in their parties

Even among technical officers who are ideally protected by the constitution (1995) and the Local government Act (1997), in reality they exercise a lot of reservations when handling any issue driven by the opposition. Indecisiveness and at times total lack of direction has been observed among technical officers with regard to “controversial issues”. These negative consequences of multi-party democracy in local governments are not only eroding the independence of both the technical and political officials, but are also slowing down service delivery in local governments in the country

As for internal party democracies and service delivery, findings indicate that all parties lack the internal democracy which substantially affects their performance in councils. Political parties at the sub-national level in Uganda lack both institutional mechanisms and internal democracy to inspire and influence service delivery. All parties including the ruling NRM-O party have a number of issues of internal consistence, honesty and transparency especially in determining party flag bearers, financing and other support decisions for party candidates. Likewise, Mushemereza (2007) submitted that Political parties at all levels lack the institutional mechanisms and the internal democracy to inspire the lower branches which would be the actors in local governments. He maintains that Political parties lack or have weak secretariats, their offices at the district and Sub-counties are non-functional, the organs of the

political parties rarely hold meetings and parties lack financial resources to run party activities. Consequently, cases of in-fighting between party members and at times defections have been on the increase especially among the opposition parties. In the country today, the ruling party, NRM-O is in reality the only party on the ground that could manage to field candidates at virtually all levels. Out of over 33 registered political parties in the country, only four were represented (had councilors) in the study and out of which NRM-O constituted 96%. This is supported by Oloka Onyango, (2007) who confirms that the NRM is largest and financially best endowed party, by virtue of her having structures linked to the state. A further analysis of internal parties system from Sabiti Makara (2010), supplements that it is not only funding that undermines the efficacy of political party operations, but there are some other influential factors. Factors like ethnic cleavages, religious affinities, and class-based dominance have crippled the work of political parties as drivers for democratic governance and service delivery in local governments. All these have so far been observed with varying effects on service delivery in Uganda's local governments. These are not only subverting building of strong social bases, but also and unfortunately, promoting clientelist politics and extensive patronage in local governments. To the already numerically disadvantaged opposition parties, this is making them invisible in District councils. The opposition parties and their members are too busy fighting themselves to fulfill their oversight role in determining the nature of services delivered in local governments.

Conclusion

This paper has submitted that disharmony between the decentralization policy and the multi-party system has negatively affected service delivery in Uganda. The particular provisions in the respective laws which are inconsistent with the constitution and the multi-party system of governance are being exploited by some players for self-interests and in the process delaying and derailing service delivery.

The mismatch between the multiparty operational awareness and practice in local governments does not support effective service delivery. The delay to grasp, appreciate and respect the ground rules by all players in local governments (including national government officials) is weakening local government institutions and slowing the quality and quantity of the social services delivered.

Finally the apparent lack of internal party democracy is not only weakening the political parties, but also failing the opposition parties in their oversight role of holding the ruling party on principles of good governance in local governments. All political parties in Uganda are still too weak democratically and structurally to effectively mobilize citizens to play a more active role in their own governance and

cannot effectively hold local governments accountable for their policies and actions.

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