

16. Decentralisation

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Decentralisation is the transfer of authority, powers, resources, and responsibilities from the central state to lower-level actors (Wunsch 2014). Usually, three forms of decentralisation are distinguished (Faguet 2023: 24–25). Deconcentration is the mere transfer of staff, equipment, and offices from the capital to field offices; political, fiscal, and accountability arrangements are not fundamentally altered. Delegation refers to the transfer of managerial and delivery responsibilities, mainly regarding projects or public services, to entities such as parastatal agencies or companies that are distinct from the central government but remain accountable to it. Finally, devolution shifts power, responsibilities, and resources from the central government to locally elected officials who are, therefore, independent from the centre. For example, in the education sector, a school, instead of being directly managed by the Ministry of Education (MoE) (centralisation), a MoE regional office (deconcentration), and an autonomous or private education agency (delegation), will be under the authority of the elected local government (devolution).

Decentralisation is complex to analyse. First, it is never homogenous and can markedly vary across sectors (health, education, agriculture, etc.). Second, the transfer of power can be a fragmentary process (Ndegwa 2002). For this reason, a commonly used analytical framework to explore decentralisation is to distinguish between the administrative, financial, and political dimensions of power transfer (Rondinelli et al. 1989). Finally, *de jure* decentralisation hardly ever corresponds to *de facto* arrangements, as informal rules and practices may undermine legal provisions.

After a quick historical outlook of decentralisation in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), the entry explores the effects of decentralisation on development, politics, and conflict (decentralisation as an independent variable). It then discusses the different explanations behind the heterogeneity of decentralisation patterns across the continent (decentralisation as a dependent variable) before concluding by pointing to future avenues for research.

Popularity for decentralisation reforms has varied over time in postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), a variation mirrored

by the fluctuating importance of the topic in the Africanist academic literature (Eyoh and Stren 2007: 3–7). On the eve of independence, the departing colonial powers in agreement with the emerging nationalist movements often engaged in devolution with the creation of locally elected councils. Yet, this trend did not survive the immediate postcolonial period as the newly independent governments considered power concentration as a condition of state-building and modernisation. In the 1970s and 1980s, decentralisation regained interest, mainly under the form of deconcentration given some obvious limits of centralised state action. However, it was in the late 1980s that a boom in decentralisation reforms, and especially the promotion of devolution, occurred across SSA. The trend was supported by the discredit of central state planning, the pressure imposed by Western countries for multi-party politics in Africa, and, in the following decade, the good governance agenda. As a result, it is estimated that decentralisation has probably “been undertaken (at least in name) in more countries in Africa than anywhere else in the world” (Wunsch 2014: 1).

The literature on decentralisation in Africa can be divided into two broad categories. A first body of works has sought to determine the effects of decentralisation reforms (decentralisation as an independent variable). The debates have mainly been framed around testing the underlying developmental and peace-building promises of decentralisation in its democratic form (i.e., devolution). By transferring power to lower levels of government elected by the people, decentralisation theoretically shifts the incentives of local officials. Their accountability is not directed upward to the centre but downward to the citizens who elect them. Bringing decision-making closer to the people, decentralisation also presumably allows for politicians to better grasp local needs and realities, thus improving resource allocation and efficiency, and deepening democracy (Faguet 2023). Overall, the literature testing these assumptions has generally been inconclusive. Qualitative studies on the African continent have generally found that decentralisation does not necessarily lead to democratic deepening (Devas and Grant 2003; Be-ere 2023), better responsiveness of local governments, reduction of poverty, or improvement in service delivery (Crook and Manor 1998; Crook 2003; Olowu and Wunsch 2003; Crawford and Hartmann

2008; Dickovick and Wunsch 2014). They echo quantitative, global-level studies that have generally found an ambiguous relationship between decentralisation and developmental outcomes (Shah et al. 2004; Treisman 2007). Citizens' lack of information, local governments' lack of capacity, incomplete decentralisation, and the local reproduction of clientelistic networks and corruption are regularly identified as obstacles to a positive impact of decentralisation on development.

Works have also explored the effects of decentralisation on conflicts. By empowering minorities concentrated on a given territory and improving the capacity of the state to be responsive to local grievances or post-war recovery needs, decentralisation has been expected to support peace-building (Bardhan 2005; Jackson 2016). However, decentralisation can also be a centrifugal force, encouraging the growth of ethnic political parties challenging the centre (Brancati 2006). It may also simply shift the nature of existing conflicts. For example, decentralisation in Uganda reduced national-level violence but replaced it with local-level conflicts (Green 2008).

Overall, a consensus has emerged that decentralisation is neither good nor bad *per se*. The relevant question to ask is under what conditions decentralisation can support development, inclusiveness, and stability. To conclude on decentralisation effects, this assessment calls for recognising the heterogeneity of decentralisation processes and, most importantly, considering the wider political economy environment in which decentralisation takes place.

Recognising that decentralisation varies greatly in its form and effects, some Africanist scholars have instead focused on explaining the different patterns of decentralisation (i.e., taking decentralisation as a dependent variable). An underlying objective of this literature is to understand the paradox of why ruling elites commit to decentralisation, although this, in theory, amounts to decreasing their power. One of its main findings is that decentralisation can be usefully designed to entrench central rulers' power. Decentralisation can be useful to cement lower-level political support through the co-optation of the local elite (Boone 2003), including the empowerment of traditional chiefs to expand electoral support beyond co-ethnic groups (Baldwin 2014), the placement

of loyal individuals in local political roles (Riedl and Dickovick 2014), or the reproduction at the local level of existing clientelistic networks (Cornell and D'Arcy 2014). In addition, decentralisation can, paradoxically, strengthen the role of the centre by extending the central government's reach through tight control of financial resources and administrative systems of local governments (Chemouni 2014) or by lowering the capacity and bargaining power of the local level through the multiplication of administrative units (Lewis 2014). Commitment to decentralisation reforms can also be used as an extraversion strategy by central governments to garner funding from international donors (Romeo 2003). Some authors have also shown how governments use decentralisation to address ethnic groups' challenges and secessionist risks. This can take the form of distributing patronage locally through district creations, as in Uganda (Green 2010), appeasing ethnic groups by providing them with a degree of autonomy, or splintering political opposition, as in Ethiopia (Green 2011).

The increasing understanding of the political economy of decentralisation has led scholars to question the political effects of homogeneity of decentralisation across space and time. Focusing on how national politics and local elite incentives intersect, works have demonstrated that the central government can enact decentralisation differently depending on the bargaining power of the local elite, as shown by Boone (2003) in the case of West Africa. The political alignment of elected officials can also have differing effects on the strength of the centre over space and time, depending on elections and shifting political alliances, as in Kenya (Waddilove 2019).

Overall, debates in the literature have progressively departed from a normative and utilitarian frame seeking to determine the democratic and developmental impact of decentralisation to considering decentralisation as a useful window on political economy processes in Africa. While the literature has been especially rich since the 1990s, both theoretically and empirically, some avenues for further research can be suggested. First, it is still not clear how decentralisation may impact the legitimacy of government and bureaucratic norms locally (Faguet and Pal 2023: 14). Second, the mutual influence between decentralisation and political parties remains relatively under-researched,

with notable exceptions (Green 2011; Resnick 2023). Third, the impact of decentralisation on the private sector is still little analysed. How local rents are reallocated and what effects this has on local capital accumulation is understudied, although the transfer of planning and procurement power to local entities can potentially have profound effects on the local economy.

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