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Negotiating on a Seesaw

The Decentralisation of Education and Health Services in Uganda and Tanzania
from a Local Perspective and in a Historical Context

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, development policies have favoured the decentralisation of education and health services in Africa. Between 1997 and 2001, central governments of Uganda and Tanzania overhauled the formal frameworks and expanded the managerial and financial responsibilities of the local management committees of schools and dispensaries. This thesis examines how these changes affect the way in which these management committees engage with central government and with the local polity in which they operate.

Field research in 2004 with 64 management committees in Uganda and Tanzania suggests that while central governments may appear to initiate decentralisation policies, they are essentially responding to developments in local polities. Similarly, central government may set regulations for management committees, but the diversity in local practices suggests that local circumstances and local agency are more likely determinants of how schools or dispensaries are actually managed.

An analysis of the personal profiles of committee members reveals they mostly belong to the same segment of the population in the local polity; government’s (s)election criteria or sector-specific factors play no role. Committee members do not ‘capture’ committees as their personal fiefdom, but within a local polity it is likely that most functions in boards or committees are occupied on a rotational basis by a small group of individuals because more than half of the committee members simultaneously hold three or four positions.

When taking a historical perspective, dominance in the institutional framework between local management committees and central government seesaws over periods of 15-30 years. If the wider institutional framework between local polities and central government since the late 19th century is studied, it becomes clear that the local resources flowing to government have varied in time – ivory, coffee, votes – but typically had limited local value, while commanding high prices on the international market. This secured cash income for central government, but also a negotiating lever for local polities. Throughout time, local polities have thus actively negotiated – from engagement to evasion – their institutional framework with central governments. The contemporary dynamic around school and dispensary committees is exemplary of that historical seesaw.
For Gerry and the places we take each other.

The places where
the earth undresses,
the time lies down,
and the gods come to pray.

Mia Couto
Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements are not a formal requirement when presenting a doctoral thesis. And yet, virtually all students acknowledge the contribution that particular persons have made to the realisation of a thesis. Arguably, these informal personal networks make a critical contribution in developing a thesis that meets the formal requirements. One important aspect of this thesis is exploring the relationship between society’s formal frameworks and people’s direct and indirect personal networks – and I would like to use these acknowledgements as a first illustration of that aspect.

My thesis would never have materialised without the personal assistance of quite a number of people. I would like to begin by thanking Patrick Chabal at King’s College in London. Patrick wrote *Africa Works. Disorder as Political Instrument*, which I picked up in 2000 when I was working in Mozambique as director for SNV Netherlands Development Organisation. I almost did not buy Patrick’s book, because it opened by saying it was the outcome of “a particularly auspicious collaboration between two scholars”. At the time, I thought that did not augur well for me as a practitioner. However, headings like “the informalisation of politics” seemed to address some of the questions I was struggling with when working with programmes for capacity building for local government. Patrick’s book opened new windows for me. I contacted him. Three years later I had quit my job and started the journey that produced this thesis and led me from being a practitioner to a scholar, with Patrick as one of my supervisors. Patrick – from his side – eventually signed up to be a member of SNV’s International Advisory Board, alongside Angélique Kidjo, John Kufuor, Jeffrey Sachs, Amartya Sen and Muhammad Yunus. This Board assists SNV, “to achieve poverty reduction through local capacity building and the promotion of good governance”. Personal networks must help too. And in this respect SNV and school committees in Tanzania have something in common – as I will show.

I would also like to thank a number of people living in various district capitals in Uganda and Tanzania who assisted me as translators and co-facilitators during my field research: Catherine Lwanga, Josephine Chandiru, Jane Mania, Boniface Mariki and Suzan Boon. Each of them made an important contribution to the research. The resulting thesis is my responsibility, but part of the credit should go to each of them for trusting me and
introducing me to 64 local management committees for schools and dispensaries in such a way that most of the members of these committees – in turn – trusted me.

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After the field research, I returned to New Zealand and soon found myself teaching Development Studies on a part-time basis at Massey and Victoria Universities. I thank my colleagues for being flexible when classes needed to be swapped to accommodate my research, occasional other jobs, or my political activities. I thank my students for bearing with me when I was using the classes to try out ideas emanating from my research. If you read these words of thanks you may have picked up this thesis because you think it might address some of the questions you face as scholars or practitioners. Let’s talk some more and expand the personal networks that connect formal institutions and communities of people across the globe.

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