

District planning and local government in Kenya

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SUMMARY

In many ways the autonomy of local government in Kenya has declined in the last twenty years. After reviewing the various tendencies towards centralization which can be observed and looking at some of the reforms which have occurred, the current district planning approach, known as the District Focus for Rural Development Strategy, is analysed in order to explore the roles played within it by local government. Policy documents and other official statements are discussed, as are the attitudes of political and administrative leaders. Whilst the new strategy is supposed to bring about greater decentralization, it has led to a continuing reduction of local government autonomy especially for the county councils. However, pessimistic conclusions can not be easily drawn. Local government is not likely to be abolished, the new approach may enable it to play a more effective planning role—even if a less autonomous one—and there are other forms of local participation (especially through community development) which partly compensate for the erosion of formal local government.

INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades, Kenya's experience of development administration at the local level has been both consistent and paradoxical. Two trends have been discernible. On the one hand, the central government has frequently affirmed its belief in the concept of decentralization, an affirmation which has become even more pronounced in recent years. However, during the same period, elected local government—generally regarded as a key component of any meaningful decentralization strategy—has in some ways become weaker. Two questions which arise from this apparent contradiction will be addressed in this article. First, what is the reality of decentralization in Kenya? Secondly, given the relatively marginal role being played by local government, what is implied for future strategy? These issues will be discussed with special reference to a policy of the Kenya government which is currently being implemented, the *District Focus for Rural Development Strategy* (DFRDS). By way of historical background, reference will also be made to previous approaches which have been adopted, the DFRDS being in a sense an outgrowth of earlier policies towards local institutions and planning. In this discussion, the county councils will be our principal concern, as they are the main type of local authority representing rural people. Urban local government will thus only be referred to in passing. Reference will also be made to the role played by local government

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in the wider political context. There is a network of political patronage in Kenya within which local government at all levels has played a key part for many years.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND DEVELOPMENT PLANNING: THE 1960S AND 1970S

The processes by which much of Kenya's local government system has experienced 'institutional decline' are quite complex, a number of factors having been involved at various points in time (Oyugi, 1983). A Commission of Inquiry into local government was set up in 1966 under the chairmanship of Mr W.S. Hardacre. This body was asked to look into the question of how to improve 'the capacity of local authorities to contribute towards the implementation of the National Development Plan' (Republic of Kenya, 1966, prefatory note). The Commission decided to go beyond its brief and also discussed the general role of local authorities in planning. The fate of its recommendations provided a foretaste of the trends towards centralized government which followed in the 1970s and 1980s.

By the time the Commission started work (mid 1966), a rudimentary district planning structure had been set up in the form of District Development Committees (DDCs) and District Development Advisory Committees (DDACs), complemented by provincial equivalents. These bodies were both strongly dominated by central government administrators, the leading figures being officers of the Provincial Administration under the office of the President, the District Commissioners. The DDACs were the bodies on which a district's local authorities were mainly to be represented, along with members of Parliament elected for constituencies within the district concerned, although Clerks of Councils were included in the DDCs. As implied by their name, the DDACs had quite limited functions. In a sense, they were redundant committees since even the DDCs were essentially also advisory in nature. DDACs were thus advisory to a further committee (the DDCs) which in turn could only make suggestions on development issues to higher levels in the hierarchy dominated by central government. In any case, DDACs had only small local authority memberships since only Council Chairmen and Clerks were to be included. This meant that a very limited role in planning could be played by the local authorities even though at that time they had important functions to perform (especially education, health and roads).

The Hardacre Report presented quite a different picture of how district planning might proceed. Expressing concern at the lack of any provision for local authority participation in plan preparation, the commission argued that 'the local authorities either individually or in suitable groups ought to be consulted at the drafting stage and also at the stage of implementation on any matters affecting local government' (Republic of Kenya, 1966, p. 59). To this end it proposed that all county councils should appoint development committees with wide ranging powers of co-optation 'to collect and examine schemes to be put forward to the appropriate Ministry and also give advice as to any relevant priority and control the implementation' (Republic of Kenya, 1966, p. 59). Hardacre also argued that these committees might replace the DDACs, on the grounds that the latter seemed to be making little progress.

In its response to these proposals, the government accepted in broad terms that local authorities ought to be involved in the planning process but rejected the idea

of DDACs being replaced by committees of the county councils. It was instead argued that the recently established machinery (i.e. the DDCs and DDACs) was more in keeping with the country's needs (Republic of Kenya, 1967, p. 26). By responding in this way, implicit recognition was given of a subordinate role for local government. The model being followed was one in which the structures of field administration were expected to be clearly dominant.

By the start of the 1970s, the subordination of county councils had been taken considerably further. Two related measures, taken in 1969 and 1970, were of very considerable importance. In 1969 it was decided to transfer three major functions from all local authorities (with the exception of the seven largest municipalities) to central government: primary education, health and roads. Together with this measure it was decided to transfer to the centre the councils' major source of revenue, known as Graduated Personal Tax (GPT). As far as involvement in development activities was concerned, these two changes had extremely damaging effects on all county councils regardless of how well or badly they had been performing. The more efficient councils which had provided services whilst managing their finances fairly well suffered the same fate as those which had been rather more profligate. Thus, relatively well run authorities like Kipsigis County Council were treated no better than others which tended to be over ambitious, such as Kiambu and Gusii. The new policy was not well received in local government; councillors often felt that there was little left for them to do and resented what they saw as a financial redistribution to the benefit of the centre and to their own disadvantage. In this process, an important form of local participation become significantly weaker. The trend continued in 1970 when a British consultant's report on the future of the County Councils 'consequent on the transfer of primary education, public health and roads' was apparently filed away by the Ministry of Local Government rather than acting on the suggestions made to strengthen the councils (Marshall, 1970).

However, these changes did not remove the county councils from the development scene completely. For example, they continued to play a vital role in community development work throughout the country by employing Community Development Assistants (CDAs), whose task it was to help local groups organize themselves to run projects in fields such as agriculture, education and health. The late President Kenyatta's encouragement of what became known as the 'harambee' movement (Swahili, meaning 'pull together') was a most noticeable feature of Kenya's public life in the 1960s and 1970s and has been much documented (Mbithi and Rasmussen, 1977; Wallis, 1982). In support of this activity a county might employ, say, twenty CDAs who would be posted throughout the district (the boundaries of which coincide with those of the counties). In theory, they were expected to play a role as links between communities and the structures of government (both local and central). Such a role could clearly be of importance in view of the strong dependence these community groups have always had on central government financial support for the projects they choose to undertake. In the vast majority of cases, support for both capital and recurrent expenditure has been essential. The latter has been particularly important as a community might well embark on the construction of a health centre, for example, on the assumption that the government would subsequently supply it with drugs and equipment, and employ the required staff. In the 1960s this assumption and its financial implications had been directed at local government; after the transfer of functions, central government found itself confronting what

often developed into very pressing demands which it found it could not fully meet, as well as requiring the provincial administration to become still more involved in planning projects and collecting funds for which accounting procedures were found inadequate.

During the 1970s it became clear that the local initiatives which had sprung up throughout the country were both encouraging and worrying from the point of view of the centre. They were encouraging because it was evident that there was local enthusiasm available in abundance, but worrying because the arrangements for planning and control were inadequate, with the result that central government financial resources came under excessive pressure. In a sense, the Kenyan peasantry, spurred on by the political leadership, had become excessively mobilized, especially in the more developed parts of central Kenya where 'harambee' was stronger than elsewhere.

Within this picture, the role of the CDAs could in theory have been a significant one, guiding community groups in appropriate directions so that they would only take on projects which could be effectively managed with the resource limits available. What happened in practice departed very considerably from this ideal. Several factors were at work. First, they could not be paid regularly in many areas because of the severe financial problems faced by most county councils. The Gusii Council in western Kenya, for example, failed to pay its CDAs at all for a two year period in the early 1970s whilst a number of others could only pay salaries intermittently (*East African Standard*, 18 December 1973). It was remarkable in the circumstances that these workers made any contribution at all to local planning processes. However, it was questionable whether their contributions were of any great value, since many were untrained and tended to urge communities to embark on more and more projects without consideration of longer term factors such as likely recurrent costs. This tendency was shared with leading politicians, including councillors and influential local officials appointed to represent central government (notably the chiefs and assistant chiefs), many of whom were good 'mobilizers' but were less interested in control. The logic of this situation seemed to policy makers to be that the central government should exercise greater control, the result being that local authority involvement was further reduced. Employment of the CDAs was largely taken out of their hands, much to the understandable relief of many council officials who were mainly concerned with easing their financial problems. Nevertheless, this measure reduced still further the possibility of local authorities being seriously involved in local development planning.

In many ways the forerunner of the current district planning strategy was the Special Rural Development Programme (SRDP), which took place in various parts of the country in the 1970s. One important policy feature of the programme was stated by its planners to be local or community involvement. It was symptomatic of the status of local government at the time that it was not seriously considered as having any potential role within such a strategy, the main emphasis being on the various field offices of central government departments. This was so despite statements of principle which implied substantial local government participation (Sheffield, 1967; Oyugi, 1981). From the inception of the programme in 1971 until its termination in 1976 little contribution was made by local authorities, even though the elected councillors represented the local rural communities which SRDP was intended to assist. Failure to achieve effective local involvement has been a frequently

made criticism of the programme. Neglect of local authorities was an important feature of this strategic weakness.

RECENT TRENDS

The early 1980s saw a continuation of the trends towards marginalization and weakening of local government. Faced with growing financial pressures, central government has found it even harder to provide support for local authorities generally. Grants have virtually disappeared except under special circumstances when salvage operations are attempted to rescue councils which would otherwise collapse entirely. Given the plight of all authorities, grants of some sort are required everywhere, not just for the desperate cases, unless other measures can be taken to substantially increase the level of local resources.

Against this background, the continued existence of local government nevertheless seems to be guaranteed because of the functions it performs. There are two broad contributions it is likely to continue to make. First, it performs important political functions. A number of politicians have used local government as a rung on the step ladder to political careers at national level. For example, the current Minister of Local Government is an ex-county council chairman, whilst one of the leading figures in the successful plot to remove Vice President Karanja from office early in 1989, Mr D. Mwenje, began his political career as a Nairobi councillor (*Weekly Review*, 1989a).

Recent difficulties experienced by the Minister of Environment and Natural Resources, Mr Jeremiah Nyagah, seem to be linked with the electoral defeat of some of his allies on the Embu Municipal Council and their replacement by councillors linked to his main district rival, Mr K. Munyi, the Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (*Weekly Review*, 1989b). Local government thus forms a vital and legitimate part of Kenya's competitive political scene, closely linked to national political figures. Local government elections continue to be viewed with considerable interest, especially since they are now conducted simultaneously with national parliamentary ones.

Secondly, local government is still recognized as potentially an institution for the promotion of development. Although decline has meant that this contribution has been less than many local government actors would have wished, the government is still concerned that the various councils should be able to play a developmental role. It is searching for ways of promoting this aim within the District Focus Strategy. This role is potentially of increasing importance, since the adoption of policies in the last three to four years which emphasize the need to develop urban centres to better serve rural areas with less concentration on the major conurbations. Local authorities are now expected to play a major role in building up the required urban infrastructure in such centres.

There is some qualified evidence that reform is now under way. For instance, the system by which local authorities can tax agricultural produce (the 'cess') has, until recently, only affected a few commodities such as fish and coffee but has been an important source of revenue for many councils. It has been decided to allow other commodities (e.g. tea, pyrethrum) to be taxable in the same way. It remains, however, to be seen if collection will be adequately achieved. Over recent years,

there have been serious problems with the coffee cess because farmers have refused to pay (with the connivance of the parastatal Coffee Board which is supposed to collect it). As a result of this sort of delinquency, many local authorities have found themselves unable to collect much of the money due to them. Enforcement and collection, however, are difficult when—as in this case—influential individuals and parastatals are the prime defaulters. Thus, local authorities are financially squeezed from two directions. On the one hand, they are unable to obtain meaningful grants from central government whilst on the other they can only collect small portions of the revenue owed to them. The new system should, however, help some councils substantially. For example, Murang'a County Council estimated receiving 2.5 million Kenya shillings in tea cess alone for 1988–89, and it is not one of the largest tea growing districts by any means (Murang'a County Council, 1989).

In 1984 another significant change took place when the Public Service Commission took over the recruitment (but not the payment) of clerks of council. This measure had the advantage of protecting officers against local political victimization. It was a reform in that sense, but it also reduced further the autonomy of local government. A further query is that under the new system, much depends on the way the P.S.C. operates. It may, for example, find it hard to insulate itself from the demands of politicians and from the Ministry of Local Government.

Against this background, it is not surprising that local authority functions have been modest in scope since 1970 when the transfer of major functions to central government occurred. While the legislation does allocate county councils numerous permissive functions, their financial problems make it rather unlikely that they will be able to do any more than maintain a reasonable network of rural markets. Other functions are of low priority (e.g. facilities for boating, public monuments); or have been found to be financially prohibitive for many councils (e.g. childcare centres, establishing woodlands); or are carried out on an agency basis for central government (e.g. minor roads maintenance). The law thus does not exclude the local authorities from undertaking fairly significant rural development functions. However, the opportunities given by law will only be realized if genuine measures are taken to provide them with an adequate resource base, and this means above all that the Minister of Local Government's support is needed. While the government has continued to make policy statements affirming the importance of local authorities and has maintained a legal framework which seems substantial, the evidence of the past twenty years does suggest a measure of reluctance to bring about more autonomy and a real strengthening of the system (Murumba, 1987; Laws of Kenya, 1986). This picture applies to both rural and urban authorities, and it is noteworthy that since 1984 Nairobi has been run by an appointed city commission, the elected council having been suspended—a measure which has occasionally been taken in the past against county councils, the bodies which are our main concern here.

THE DISTRICT FOCUS STRATEGY

As matters stand, the principal responsibility for local development rests with the field agencies of central government departments and ministries (e.g. agriculture, education, health) and a variety of public enterprises (e.g. the Kenya Tea Development Authority, the Tana River Authority). The District Focus Strategy reflects this emphasis on the centre. Against this background of central control and a gradual

weakening of local government's contribution to rural development, it is not surprising that the planning strategy of the 1980s implied an approach which highlighted deconcentration of administrative roles rather than bringing about devolution through locally representative councils.

The idea of the DFRDS can be traced back to the late 1970s when it came to be recognized that the districts could play a more substantial role in the national planning process through the District Development Committees, with the support and direction of District Commissioners and District Development Officers representing the powerful office of the president (Cohen and Hook, 1987, p. 84). However, in the formal sense the DFRDS began in 1983, apparently with strong support from President arap Moi who came to power in 1978. The new strategy constituted a significant departure because it shifted substantial new planning responsibilities to the field administration, especially the District Commissioners who were expected to play more important roles both in policy formulation and implementation.

A review of government expenditure in 1982 provided much of the rationale for the new strategy. The recommendations contained in this review included several which concerned more effective district planning and management. These subsequently formed the basic ideas incorporated within the DFRDS. In a speech on 21 September 1982, President arap Moi declared that the districts were to 'become centres for development in the rural areas', and that he had 'instructed all ministries to ensure that this new approach is put into full operation by July 1983' (Moi, 1986, p. 61). After a considerable amount of consultation which primarily involved the bureaucracy, but not exclusively so, a paper was issued to outline what was to be entailed in the District Focus Strategy. This 'blue book', as it became known, has subsequently been revised three times whilst circulars have been issued to clarify various features of the strategy. An American aid team from the Harvard Institute for International Development also made a significant contribution and assisted in the production of the numerous key documents which have emerged. Funding for this team's work in Kenya came from USAID, an indication of the continuing interest in district planning taken by this agency; it had previously funded one of the areas chosen for the SRDP exercise twelve years previously.

The essential features of the strategy can be stated briefly. According to the president, three central principles are involved. One is the involvement of 'wananchi' (the people) in identifying, designing, implementing and managing projects and programmes in the districts. The second feature is the idea that decision-making should be centred on the districts themselves to overcome the difficulties associated with overcentralization, whilst the third emphasizes the desirability of directing resources to areas of most need (Cohen and Hook, 1986, p. 43). So far the main thrust has been the second of these principles and has involved, for example, improving the planning capacity of districts and providing for a measure of financial delegation. The DDCs and DCs have been seen as the main instruments for achieving this part of the District Focus Strategy. However, within the DDC much of the business is to be conducted by an executive committee which has a membership largely made up of central government field officer membership but does include clerks of council. The wider committee includes the chairmen of local authorities in the districts to represent local government along with their clerks of council. This emphasis on central bureaucracy has further marginalized the position of local government within the development planning system.

However, other opportunities for local involvement were still available to 'wananchi', notably through three channels.

1. The network of sub-committees of the DDCs which provided for participation by elected councillors in proposing projects for their areas.
2. Self-help projects, often sponsored by local politicians.
3. Specialized local associations and committees (e.g. co-operatives, tea committees linked to the Kenya Tea Development Authority).

How far these channels represent a genuine alternative to effective local government is a question to which we will return.

Although there has been no detailed review of how best to link local authorities with the District Focus, it is possible to discern from a number of sources a central government perspective, if not an explicit strategy. Three documents, in particular, contain useful information: President arap Moi's recent book, much of which consists of reproduction of key policy speeches; the District Focus 'blue books' as revised since the first one in 1984; and a sessional paper prepared in 1986 (Moi, 1986; Republic of Kenya, 1986, 1987).

The concerns of the President are several as far as local government is concerned, but a fundamental one is that any change or development which takes place must be in line with the 'nyayo' philosophy as presented in his book. This philosophy, which essentially represents a commitment to national unity 'following in the footsteps' of both Moi himself and the government of his predecessor, Jomo Kenyatta, requires that there be a close linkage between local government and national policy, as the latter is determined by the political leadership. Several points are seen to flow from this, one of the main ones being the need to improve the performance of many councillors who are described as 'corrupt and corruptible' (Moi, 1986, p. 130). This improvement is seen as requiring close central government control, which means, above all, using the services of the provincial administration (DCs, etc.). Above all, it is argued that local authorities have to be seen within a framework of national unity:

'The Central Government, the Provincial Administration and Local Authorities are all administrations at different levels of the society—the one Kenya society. They are closely related so as to give the most efficient service to the people and provide the most constructive development efforts. That is to say, all three levels of administration exist for the enhancement of peace and the improvement of the welfare of the people. All three levels of administration must be conducted in the active "Nyayoist" environment.' (Moi, 1986, p. 151)

Two motives seem to be at work here. The first is political, the desire to ensure that local government does not provide scope for effective opposition to the government; while the second is a concern with the effective planning and administration of District Focus.

The latter issue is given concrete expression in the various blue books. As far as local government is concerned, the main points are:

'Local authorities (county councils, municipal, town and urban councils)

have a special relationship with the DDCs. They are to vet their development projects through the DDC before forwarding them to the Ministry of Local Government for funding. This process enables the DDC to coordinate these projects with other development activities in the district. DDC endorsement of a project assures the Ministry of Local Government that the proposal has been reviewed and is in accordance with district development priorities. The methods which a local authority intends to use for raising revenue from within the district should have the concurrence of the DDC since such methods may have a significant effect on the development process in the district.' (Republic of Kenya, 1987, p. 3.)

The councils within each district are represented in the hierarchy of development committees which have been created by the central government for more effective planning. At the apex there are the DDCs with their executive committees, while within districts there are divisions and locations each with their subordinate committees on which the local councillors are represented. The identification of projects is supposed to begin within the area which is expected to benefit (often this will be a location) and then to move upwards before review by the DDC. Local authority projects are included in this process. From the DDC, projects then go to the relevant ministry in Nairobi, this being the Ministry of Local Government (MLG) in the case of local government projects. Potentially the DDC's role is extremely important because it provides scope for departmental heads and parastatal representatives to scrutinize local authority projects to see where, for example, duplication can be avoided or where improvement in the technical quality of proposals can be made.

During the 1984–1988 National Plan period several local authority plans were included in the district plans approved by the DDCs for transmission to the centre. In Murang'a, for example, the plan proposed about 250 projects for all sectors in the district, not just for local government; 26 of these were initiated by the two local authorities—the Murang'a Municipal Council and the Murang'a County Council (Murang'a District, 1984), whilst in Kakamega local government initiated 33 projects out of a total of 105 for all sectors (Kakamega District, 1984). Examples of such projects were sewers, market roads, housing, bus parks, street lighting and the preservation of historical sites. However, many projects were not costed (or costed very roughly indeed) for the 1984–88 plans, rendering it impossible to give figures comparing local government projected expenditure with central government and other forms. What can be concluded is that the more successful councils managed to carry out about half of the projects they were proposing. For example, Murang'a's carried out 13 of the 26 projects it had listed in the 1984–88 plan (Murang'a District, 1989, pp. 135–137). Figures are not provided for Kakamega. However, Kericho serves as a fairly typical example of a district which performed less well. The Kipsigis County Council in that district only managed to implement just over two per cent of the projects it was proposing (Kericho District, 1989, p. 140). The average rate of implementation for the country as a whole seems to be about 20 per cent, based on analysis of a selection of plan documents.

A feature of the 1989–94 District Plans is that they appear to contain more local authority initiated proposals than ever before, a sign perhaps of greater confidence and capacity within some councils. However, a contributory factor may have been

a failure of DDCs to adequately play a 'gatekeeping' role. Several projects may have been screened inadequately at district level. As a result, they are unlikely to receive funding when reviewed at the centre.

Turning to the 1986 Sessional Paper, which makes a bold attempt to take a long term view of the country's developmental strategy, a related concern with strengthening local authorities' roles within the planning process can be observed. In particular, the rural development role of councils is discussed in some detail. Acknowledging the weaknesses that have existed, the paper states:

'Government will strengthen local authorities to enable them to provide competent administration and management of growing rural centres and will provide them with sufficient resources to develop, operate and maintain these centres'. (Republic of Kenya, 1986, p. 42)

The centres referred to here are supposed to be selected as growth areas by the DDCs. Careful selection of them is required so that those designated have high potential to support development within their regional environments. In planning the development of the centres, local authorities are to be helped to prepare Local Authority Development Plans (LADPs) which require submission to the DDCs. Several such plans have now been approved and are being implemented.

Other relevant points made in the sessional paper about local government are the need to review prices of utilities and services to better reflect costs and to bring local authority budgets in line with central government policy. It is also stressed that the informal sector and privatization should be encouraged where possible. The DDCs and the MLG are seen as the key agencies for bringing about these changes—mostly through District Focus procedures, in the case of the DDCs.

In support of this new agenda a great deal of stress has been placed on training, using the various central government institutions which exist, there being no separate local government training institute in Kenya. This training work is expected to embrace both officers and councillors (especially mayors and chairmen).

While the policy may be referred to as a cautiously positive one, there is a tendency within the bureaucracy to criticize local government quite strongly. It is not uncommon to hear senior officials suggest that local government's role has been largely negative for development and might usefully be abolished. Those who argue in this way tend to make the following points:

1. It is asserted that basic principle of administration is that *the chain of command in organizations should be as straightforward and clearly understood as possible*. Confusion must be minimized. In this view, local authorities merely create confusion because they represent a separate form of authority with an unclear relationship to the provincial administration. Thus, not only is a good deal of uncertainty created in the minds of officers; 'wananchi' also find it difficult to comprehend how the system operates. Given the considerable strengths of the Kenyan bureaucracy, so the argument goes, it is surely better to build on that basis with a clearly specified chain of command running down from the centre to the locality with the district playing a pivotal or linking role within this robust managerial framework.
2. A related argument is that *local authorities have tended to confuse the planning*

process unduly by duplicating the work of central government (e.g. water development programmes) and by making co-ordination harder to achieve. On the latter point, the 1982 Working Party on Government Expenditure had this to say:

‘Perhaps more important, however, even when functions are clearly demarcated, they are not well co-ordinated among the different administrations. Hence, for example, the planning and implementation of rural access roads, primary schools and market places, all the responsibility of the county council may not blend into the pattern of schools, health centres, minor roads, training centres and rural electrification planned by the Central Government through the district development committee.’ (Republic of Kenya, 1982, p. 52.)

An aim of the District Focus has been to prevent such difficulties from occurring by bringing local government planning under greater control by the DDCs.

3. Critics also point to the financial mismanagement experienced by many local authorities. For example, severe difficulties have been encountered in the collection of revenue. Although the reasons for some of these problems tend to be beyond local authority control, critics argue that many councils are so badly in debt that little can be done to strengthen them and that the only solutions possible are either to abolish them altogether or bring their activities under still stricter control.
4. General management weaknesses also tend to receive comment from those unsympathetic to the local government cause in Kenya. For example, gaps in staffing are often so severe that mismanagement becomes virtually inevitable. There are councils with six or seven vacancies at senior levels (clerk, treasurer, surveyor, etc.). Thus, one officer may find himself expected to do the jobs of six or seven over an extended period. Councillors also come under criticism here because of their tendency to see managers as servants on behalf of their political interests, not as agents of development. Further, many officers in local government tend to be underqualified for their jobs; in some cases, their appointments owe more to political than merit criteria.
5. It is also argued that local government is irrelevant to ‘wananchi’ because of the better alternative avenues of participation which are available to them. In this context, reference is often made to ‘harambee’ projects with their elected ‘self-help’ committees which have clearly established relationships with the agencies of central government at district level. This is seen as clearly superior to trying to manage within the framework of central government—local authority relationships which are inevitably very awkward in nature.

Despite the apparently widespread advocacy of these views, the policy of the government remains one of commitment to local government in more or less its present form but with rather greater integration into the bureaucratic machinery at district level. District commissioners, interestingly, tend not to see the case against local government as one which points to its abolition, unlike the position typically adopted by bureaucrats representing sectoral ministries. The DCs apparently see the maintenance of local government as being of importance for their political ‘law and order’ role because it enables them to keep in touch with the views and activities

of local leaders. In this respect they resemble their colonial predecessors, unlike most officers representing other ministries who do not have such a direct political role as the DCs and are therefore less likely to see the need for local government from this perspective.

If the image of local government among civil servants responsible for District Focus is a lukewarm one on the whole, the attitudes of local authorities towards the new strategy are rather mixed. Several senior local government officers feel that it offers a change for the better while others see it as another nail in the coffin of local government autonomy. Even those favourable towards the District Focus tend to argue that it has not made much impact upon them so far because there is still a large gap between what is supposed to be happening and what is actually being achieved on the ground. To many, the new strategy exists on paper but without real implementation. They do, however, see potential benefits arising because effective DDC scrutiny of local authority project proposals may ensure that they do not duplicate the activities of central government. Given the critically underresourced circumstances facing local government throughout Kenya, it is understandable that the District Focus is perceived as beneficial because of the possibility of avoiding wasteful expenditure. It is also observed that since 1983 slightly more account has been taken of local realities in preparing plans, and it is hoped that a sharpening of the procedures for decentralized planning will reinforce this advantage in the future. There is some evidence that local authorities with some political weight do stand a good chance of pushing through their proposals at DDC level, but the picture is a mixed one, much depending on the emphasis individual DDCs place on the screening of projects.

At the same time, certain weaknesses are perceived quite sharply in local government circles. One of the main ones concerns legislation because the Local Government Act excludes reference to the District Focus and its various implications. There is seen to be an incompatibility between the legal status of local authorities, governed by statute, and the District Focus which is largely governed by administrative direction in the form of circulars, booklets, etc. It is argued that this ambiguity needs to be sorted out to establish more clearly how local government fits into the new arrangements.

Many local authorities also feel that they need stronger support from the Ministry of Local Government to enable them to properly exploit the opportunities presented by the new approach. Thus, they see improved performance by MLG as a necessary condition for successful implementation of the District Focus. For example, the ministry is required to scrutinize local authority annual estimates, and little objection is made to this even though it reduces autonomy. What is a source of concern is the way expenditure proposals tend to be examined, the process being extremely slow and too often involving rejection as a result of misunderstanding on the part of MLG officials. Part of the problem is lack of training and on the job experience on the part of the officials concerned. Slowness of procedure can often mean that estimates are only approved once the financial year in question has ended. All of this means that it is virtually impossible to link local authority budgets with District Focus procedures. Ironically, the MLG sometimes seems to be more out of touch with government policy than are the local authorities. A good example concerns market fees, an issue on which recent policy is to encourage councils to make increases as expressed in the 1986 sessional paper, a measure which the Ministry still often

prevents them from adopting. In the circumstances, it is not at all surprising that a rather demoralized atmosphere pervades many of the local authorities.

A further difficulty concerns the staffing and finance of councils. The serious levels of understaffing currently being experienced mean that the drawing up of worthwhile proposals for projects to be submitted to the DDC is almost impossible. This is seen as a major constraint, militating against successful pursuit of the District Focus strategy. On the financial side, council indebtedness is generally so severe that there can be little expectation of obtaining loans. There is a Local Government Loans Authority but its impact so far has been minor. Grants are most seen as 'a thing of the past', and most of the funds which have been made available to the DDCs are not for allocation to local government (e.g. the Rural Development Fund over which DDCs have a limited discretion).

In sum, then, from the point of view of local government the District Focus is seen as having some potential, even though it represents a further diminution of local autonomy. This acceptance of the reality of Kenya's centralizing tendencies does not, however, diminish local authority concern over their present limited abilities to play a major role in the District Focus strategy. A number of reform measures are thus seen as being required in order to achieve a real strengthening of local government.

THE PROSPECTS FOR REFORM

There is a sense in which central government policy towards local authorities has been a consistent one over the past twenty five years. Two key points stand out: one is the incremental emphasis on centralized power, requiring increasing integration of local government into the general machinery of the state; the other has been the clear desire to ensure that the councils survive. Thus, the approach has combined gradual erosion of powers, functions and resources with occasional radical change (as in the late 1960s and early 1970s). Greater central government power has also been exerted through the District Focus approach which has brought about the integration of local government into the District Development Committee machinery in a way which, in effect, subordinates councils to the field administrators, notably the district commissioners. The position of the latter has become an even more important one over recent years; President arap Moi's strategy being to reinforce the emphasis which his predecessor President Kenyatta placed upon the role of the provincial administration (within which the DCs have always been key figures). This strategy seems to have generally succeeded, despite some local difficulties as, for example, in West Pokot where the DC has been in conflict with leading churchmen who have questioned his authority (*Weekly Review*, 1989c).

The survival of local government under these conditions indicates that the Kenya government still sees local government as worth preserving. Evidence of this is provided not just by the bare fact of survival but also by recent attempts to implement some of the ideas contained in the 1986 sessional paper on economic renewal and the attempts made to strengthen rural revenues by extending the range of cessable commodities. Thus, the drawing of strongly negative conclusions about the immediate prospects for local government seems to be inappropriate.

Under what sort of conditions will local government survive? It is difficult to

see major shifts occurring. To argue for the classical model of local government in Kenya's present circumstances is quite unrealistic. All the indications point to less autonomy, not more, whilst the resource base is very unlikely to improve other than marginally. Recent changes should result in survival, but cannot be expected to do more than that. The patient will survive but with severe disabilities. It can be anticipated, then, that the morale of many councillors and staff will continue to be low, rendering problematic—to say the least—the emergence of management styles which are pro-active and strongly geared to development needs. What seems more likely is a continuing emphasis on a defensive style—which may also be called reactive or manipulative—in order to allow local authorities to muddle through without too much difficulty.

How bleak is the total picture? For the advocates of greater autonomy and dynamic management there may be very little point in continuing the discussion since their prescriptions appear likely to fall on stony ground. There are other considerations to be borne in mind, however. First, Kenya continues to represent a case of a country which has achieved much through local participation. The 'harambee' movement, originating both from colonial community development and nationalist politics, is still a major contributor to development and is based on local organizations, albeit largely outside the framework of formal local government. In this context it is significant that a recent article in which local resource management in Kenya came under discussion referred at some length to 'harambee' but made no mention of local government (Thomas, 1987). While there is undoubtedly much about 'harambee' which is unsatisfactory and its legal status clearly puts it into a separate category from local government, it is, nevertheless, a most significant way in which rural people participate in development within their localities. As such, its contribution can hardly be ignored.

Secondly, there is a network of committees relating to rural development issues which make considerable provision for local representation. In addition to the specifically District Focus committees running downwards from district level, there are committees dealing with particular matters such as the Kenya Tea Development Authority's machinery of 'tea committees' to consult growers' representatives. Like 'harambee' this is not local government in a formal sense, but it is not mere tokenism either, as much genuine consultation takes place (Thomas, 1987; Lamb and Muller, 1983; Paul, 1982).

Thirdly, the integration of local authorities into the development planning process, even if it reduces autonomy and may not yet be working well, could still lead to real improvement. The introduction of local authority development plans is apparently receiving a measure of donor support (from the USA and West Germany in particular) whilst the process of submission of proposals for DDC approval may eventually facilitate a more thorough preparation of plans than has hitherto prevailed.

Fourthly, the survival of local government has to be understood within the context of Kenya's wider political system. Notwithstanding the references to decentralization which have provided much of the accompaniment to the District Focus strategy, the general trend has been one of centralization in order to consolidate central power as a way of managing and responding to the various centrifugal tendencies in Kenya's polity. The primary instrument for this purpose has, for many years, been the provincial administration, particularly the district commissioners in harness with their staffs and with committee structures which are under their control (for an early account

see Gertzel, 1966). DCs have generally been successful in achieving this purpose, even though they may sometimes find their position undermined by local politicians of influence.

That local government has not been swept aside suggests that it performs three functions for the political leadership. One is that it continues to provide a useful safety valve for the burning up of local political energies, a strategy which may admittedly be a risky one since councillors have become frustrated at the perceived inadequacy of their roles. The second is that councils provide a mechanism by which DCs and other politically important administrators may keep in touch with local political trends. Thirdly, the preservation of local government enables a more favourable public image, both within the country and outside, to be presented than would otherwise be the case. The Kenya Government still has a desire to be seen as reasonably democratic in the eyes of the world, and the survival of elected local government throughout the rural and most of the urban areas helps it to make this kind of presentation of itself.

Decentralization in Kenya has to be assessed in ways which do justice to the various complexities involved, tempting though it might be to argue that what has happened over the past two decades simply represents a growing deviation from the inherited English model of local government with its connotations of autonomy and a viable resource base. To say this contains substantial truth, is not the whole story by any means. Alternative local structures, for example, do exist and to some extent may compensate for the processes of institutional decline which have been observed. The DFRDS, though primarily a device for more effective deconcentration directed at the planning and management of development, may ultimately prove beneficial for local government, at the very least by making possible its survival. On a more positive note it may also strengthen its capacity to make a worthwhile contribution to decentralized planning.

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