

**Political and institutional factors  
influencing decentralisation in Burkina Faso**  
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February 2006

As an input into the fourth Danida Human Rights and Good Governance seminar, 27-28 February 2006, this small note seeks to provide some answers to the question below based on experience with the decentralisation reform in Burkina Faso:

How do political and institutional factors impact on the implementation of governance reforms in your particular context? What are the challenges, what are the opportunities and how do we move on from here?

Decentralisation was written into the Constitution from 1991 as a major organising principle for political life in Burkina Faso. The first 33 urban municipalities were created in 1995 and 16 others were added in 2000. However, the creation of local governments in the countryside was still awaiting a political decision.

Since the late 1990s the following political and institutional factors have had a profound impact on the decentralisation reform, its speed and its orientation:

- The death of the very popular, critical and influential journalist, Norbert Zongo, on December 13<sup>th</sup> 1998 created a politically volatile situation in which institutional reform undertakings were unsustainable for the political regime. The regime was heavily criticised for its role in the murder and had to undertake several initiatives to appease the public. The first couple of years after the murder all major political decisions had to do with the regime's attempt to stay in power. This put the decentralisation process to a halt from 1999 to 2002/2003.
- During the 1990s the responsibility for conducting the decentralisation process was confined to an independent commission (*Commission Nationale de la Décentralisation*) linked to the Prime Minister's office. However, it was increasingly recognized that this commission was incapable of transforming its ideas about the decentralisation process into concrete action. It was necessary to integrate the responsibility for the process into the state administration. The Ministry of Interior was given this responsibility in 2000, but it was not until 2002 that the national commission was linked to the ministry. This diffuse institutional anchorage of the responsibility for the decentralisation process constituted an important obstacle from 2000 to 2003.
- Intermediate political leaders, e.g. in Parliament and in the ruling party, have for a long time been nervous about the decentralisation process. They fear the creation of multiple new powerful actors whom they cannot control. The same goes for the

ruling party who fears pockets of opposition in different parts of the country. This is probably one reason why the process, in general, has been very gradual and why a very modest law extending decentralisation only to certain villages in the countryside was adopted in 2003.

- Most ministries have for long been reluctant to embark on the devolution of authority to local governments. Thus, the transfer of authority to the urban municipalities foreseen by a law in 1998 to be finalised before 2003 did only begin to be planned in 2004. This delay is evidently also related to the above factors, but the widespread scepticism in the state administration with respect to the whole process of decentralisation and deconcentration plays no doubt its part as well.
- In 2004 a new and more ambitious law creating 302 rural municipalities and 13 regional councils in addition to the existing 49 urban municipalities was adopted by Parliament possibly due to the following features:
  - The Constitutional Committee decided late 2003 that the various laws on the decentralisation from 1998 to 2003 were not in accordance with the Constitution on one particular point. This required a rewriting of either the Constitution or the decentralisation laws.
  - Decentralisation had come further in the neighbouring countries, a feature which may have troubled the political regime.
  - It became clear to many intermediate political leaders that with the existing legislation large parts of the country including the constituency of these politicians were to be excluded from the decentralisation process. A large number of villages demanded to be included in the rural municipalities even though the legislation did not allow this.
  - The Ministry of Finance was placed in an important position regarding the devolution of authority to the local governments. This created a broader, though not uniform, support for the process within the state.

Certain of these political and institutional factors are impossible to influence for a bilateral donor. The murder of Zongo, the public reaction, and the consequences for the political regime were impossible to foresee or to influence. However, a major obstacle for the process seems to have been the lack of knowledge even among central political leaders about the different possibilities for organising local governments. This obstacle could have been influenced through various initiatives.

It is also important to notice the opportunities that arise. The decision by the Constitutional Committee clearly provided an opportunity to rewrite and ameliorate the existing laws.

It is evidently a challenge to try to get an overview of the most important factors and to understand when and where a bilateral donor can make a difference. It is important to identify the key actors, to get to know their concerns and to start a dialogue with them. Much progress depends on the initiatives of a rather limited number of individuals with whom it is important to dialogue if one wants to further a specific reform process. However, one should always be aware that relations with a donor could be a disadvantage as well as an advantage in national political processes.