

DECENTRALISATION IN NAMIBIA: A CASE STUDY OF THE ERONGO REGION

Anne Larsen *

Abstract

This article gives a general understanding of decentralisation focusing on the context in which decentralisation is planned and implemented. A conceptualisation of the 'African state' is developed and analysed in order to understand the difficulties in applying a European concept in an African context. A case study of regional planning in the Erongo region is used to illustrate how the decentralisation process in Namibia is influenced by the African state in terms of the pace and direction of decentralisation.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is the result of my internship at the Erongo Regional Council¹ in Namibia, as part of the ninth semester of the Master's programme in International Development Studies – and involves a study of the decentralisation in Namibia.

The Namibian government launched a “Decentralisation Policy” in March 1998 designed to enhance and guarantee participatory democracy, improve rapid sustainable development as well as improve the capacity of the government to plan and administrate the development (MRLGH 1998:5). The overall theme of the “Decentralisation Policy” is democracy and development.

In the following year after the launch, new structures were established at the regional level down to the local level, in the shape of local committees involving the different parties, and not least the local community in the regional planning (MRLGH 1998:25-8). Initiatives were taken by the central government to transfer some of the planning functions and decision-making to

* Current master's student at the Research Centre on Development and International Relations (DIR), Aalborg University, Denmark.

¹ Namibia is divided into thirteen Regional Councils, recently established in 1992 with the purpose of co-ordinating the overall development within the region. The Erongo Regional Council Office is, if one should draw a parallel to the Danish system, basically the same as a Danish Amt with similar responsibilities such as health, education and environment within the region. The Regional Councils together with the Local Authorities respectively constitute the second and third tier of the government structure in Namibia.

the lower levels. The whole idea of decentralisation was to make the Regional Council the overall coordinating body regarding development within the region, which besides coordinating the input from the Local Authorities and the Line Ministries, also had to manage the input from the people living in the urban and rural areas (ARC 1997). This new decentralised structure would enable the people living in urban areas and particularly those living in rural areas to participate through various community committees in matters related to the future development of their communities.

This paper examines the *current* situation of the decentralisation process in Namibia, as decentralisation in Namibia is still an ongoing process. It is based on a case study of regional planning in Erongo with a focus on community participation in the rural areas. The study can be divided into three questions, namely:

1. What is the situation concerning the transfer of planning, decision-making and administrative authority from the central government to the regional government in Erongo?
2. How are the local communities in the rural areas incorporated in the decentralised structures?
3. How has the local community responded so far to the new “political role” as decision-makers on local matters?

In other words, what are the possibilities for participation, and is there a will to participate among the communities?

These questions are attached to the question of *how* the decentralisation process has proceeded so far. This leads to another important question, namely, *why* has the decentralisation process proceeded the way it has? Examining the latter question is maybe more important in order to achieve an understanding of the current situation regarding the decentralisation process in Namibia, which is why both questions will be studied in this paper.

The decentralisation process in Namibia is interesting to study, because a new relation between the state and civil society must be established. This way of doing politics is not seen earlier in the history of Namibia due to the German military colonial rule, which was followed by South Africa’s apartheid rule (Pisani 1986:23-35, 52-63). Furthermore, the general experience with African countries and decentralisation is that it is difficult to transfer functions from the central government to the regional and local governments, since decentralisation is about distribution of power (Mutizwa-Mangiza 1996:81). Regardless of the degree of decentralisation, mobilisation and participation of

the people is more difficult than imagined. Some authors would even claim that it has more to do with rhetoric than reality (Mutizwa-Mangiza 1996:81).

In the following part, the theoretical framework is presented which links the concept of decentralisation to the political setting in which it is planned and implemented. In this case, it is linked to a conceptualisation of the 'African state', which is deduced from the foremost common features of the African states. The case study of regional planning in Erongo is subsequently presented.

THE CONCEPT OF DECENTRALISATION

Decentralisation is just a policy, which depends on the degree and the form of decentralisation, and not least the political setting from which the decentralisation policy emerges. This is important in order to understand the constraints and opportunities for the implementing organisations to translate policies into actions (Rondinelli 1983:27).

The general definition of decentralisation is:

“... a transfer of planning, decision-making, or administrative authority from the central government to its field organisation, local government, or NGO's”

(Rondinelli 1983:18)

The definition is very broad, however most refer to the four major forms of decentralisation, namely: *devolution*, *deconcentration*, *delegation* and *privatisation*. **Devolution** is considered to be the most extensive form of decentralisation, and involves a transfer of functions and authority to local units of government which are *autonomous*, meaning their activities are substantially outside the direct control of the central government and only bounded by the broad national policy guidelines (The Norwegian Institute of Urban and Regional Research 1997:19). This form of decentralised structure invites a greater amount of participation, and is referred to by some authors as *democratic decentralisation* due to the more open political forum (Mawhood 1983:3). **Deconcentration**, contrary to devolution, is about a redistribution of selected functions and authority to lower levels within the central government, which are situated outside headquarters (Rondinelli 1983:18). The decision-making is settled internally within the administration, where the delegated authority can be altered or withdrawn (Mawhood 1983a:1). **Delegation** is a transfer of selected administrative functions to organisations that are not under the direct control of the central government ministries (Huda 1996:113). Deconcentration and delegation are more associated with *bureaucratic* or

administrative decentralisation than political decentralisation (Mawhood 1983:3). The motive for choosing these two forms of decentralisation is effectiveness and efficiency rather than democracy (Hyden 1983:86). Finally, ***privatisation*** is a form of decentralisation where the central government transfers some of its planning and administrative responsibilities to volunteers or NGO's (Rondinelli 1983:24).

These forms of decentralisation are all associated with some kind of a transfer of functions from the central government to either lower units of the government, NGO's or other organisations. However, the degree of decentralisation varies, which in turn has different impacts on the government structure, the political structure, the amount of community participation and the preconditions for successful implementation (Rondinelli 1983:25).

The four forms of decentralisation do not exist in their pure form, which makes the use of the above definitions complicated and stereotypical when studying decentralisation. This is why Conyers (1986:89), a recognised author within this field, suggests that instead of focussing on the different forms of decentralisation, one should start examining:

1. the functional activities over which authority is transferred;
2. the type of authority or powers which are transferred with respect to each functional activity;
3. the level(s) or area(s) to which such authority or power is transferred;
4. the individual, organisation or agency to which authority or power is transferred at each level and;
5. the legal or administrative means by which authority or power is transferred.

This approach gives a better understanding of the concept of decentralisation, as well as a more meaningful way of studying and measuring the different degrees of decentralisation, than just comparing the different policies to the four major forms of decentralisation. Conyers also focuses on the distribution of *power: policy-making power, financial power and power of personnel matters* (Conyers 1986:94). It is important to identify all three types of power when studying decentralisation, as the three types of power are interrelated. For example, it is often seen in less developed countries that both regional and local governments have planning authority, but because of the lack of control or access over financial powers or personnel powers, the planning authority becomes ineffectual (Conyers 1986:94).

ASSUMPTIONS SURROUNDING DECENTRALISATION AND PARTICIPATION

Participation is often mentioned in connection with decentralisation and vice versa. It is a well known assumption that decentralisation enhances popular participation, since decentralised structures create a more open political forum for planning and decision-making (Conyers 1986:92). Participation is therefore one of many objectives associated with decentralisation, but participation is also considered an important means to achieve both administrative and political objectives (Marsden 1991:29). The latter is important to note. Participation is often a precondition for administrative and political objectives to succeed. For instance, it is believed that community participation² in terms of participation in the appraisal, implementation and evaluation of a development project is beneficial for the effectiveness and efficiency of the project (Marsden 1991:30). In connection with decentralisation, participation can be described as both a means to an end, and an end in itself (Marsden 1991:29), which makes participation an important part of decentralisation.

LIMITATIONS TO DECENTRALISATION AND PARTICIPATION

The extent and thriving of community participation depends on the transfer of the different powers and how the local community is incorporated in the decentralised structure. This is because community participation is mostly an idea generated from decentralisation policies, which are initiated entirely at the national level, and not requested by the lower units of the government or the people themselves (Conyers 1986:92).

There are several barriers for successful implementation of decentralisation. One of the main barriers is lack of political commitment from the central government to transfer sufficient power to the local and regional governments, since doing so would reduce their own power. This generally limits the impact of decentralisation including community participation (Huda 1996:115). Decentralisation is, like many other development concepts, a European concept³ based on the experience, norms, and value systems of European countries (Brown 1995:2-4). Throughout the history of development, European concepts and norms have been imposed and applied to solve the “underdevelopment” of Africa without any noticeable improvement (Leys 1996:188-196). Lately, it has become a well-known fact that African countries

² Community participation has been defined as a process by which the different groups in the community are involved with the appraisal, implementation and evaluation of a development project with the view of enhancing their well being in terms of income, personal growth, self-reliance or other values.

³ Decentralisation was used in the 1950's and 1960's in Europe to deal with the rapid growth of the welfare state, which left the central government unable to satisfy the expectation of increased responsibilities (Hyde 1983:84).

have a unique history, and that they differ from European countries in various ways such as culturally and in terms of social structure. This makes it difficult to apply European concepts to an African context (Brown 1995:3).

THE AFRICAN STATE

After studying the development of Africa for some time, Goran Hyden has made a general conceptualisation of a typical African state, in which he describes the main features and their influence on how the state functions (Hyden 1983). It is within this context decentralisation should be seen.

THE STATE STRUCTURE

The African state is, first of all, known for being a ‘socialist state’ associated with a central planning bureaucracy (Hyden 1983:51-2). After independence, African leaders/governments were in favour of socialism, because capitalism was associated with the colonial powers and their economic system which was imposed on African countries ((Hyden 1983:1). During the 1980s, there were some attempts to minimise the state’s influence on the economy and depoliticise other sectors (Hyden 1983:3). However, the African state has been about central planning and decision-making up until now, that is, until the recent introduction of decentralisation policies.

THE POLITICAL CULTURE

There are distinct differences between the political culture of African and European countries. Most African countries are ruled by a single party, often with a charismatic leader in front and usually without any opposition (Hyden 1983:33). In this one party system, there is a large concentration of power. Political affiliation to the party is demographic, meaning that certain tribes or clans located in a part or parts of the country belong to the party (Hyden 1983:37). The different clans have great influence in society, since there is no ruling class. A clan can be described as:

“[...] a political faction, operating within the institutions of the state and the government party: it exists above all to promote the interests of its members through political competition, and its first unifying principle is the prospect of the material rewards of political success. Political office and the spoils of office are the very definition of success: loot is the clanic totem.”

(O’Brien 1975:149)

This cultural phenomenon exists in various degrees throughout Africa, and the general aim for clan leaders in Africa is to benefit from political office and allocate resources and income to their own members. African politics is therefore not about allocation of public goods as we know it, but about getting the most public goods as possible (Hyden 1983:39).

The strong existence of clans in African society has made it necessary for African leaders to incorporate clan leaders in the government, which limits room for popular participation (Hyden 1983:48). However, the need for organisation and mobilisation of civil society in political matters is at the same time little, because the clans attend to their interests (Hyden 1983:35). The unions and other interest groups are therefore more or less invisible in the political arena where clans and individuals set the agenda. It is therefore not a surprise that in most of these African states participation by civil society has not yet been institutionalised (Hyden 1983:35).

The above description of the political culture differs distinctly from that in Europe, due to some existing cultural and social relations in African societies, which are reinforced by a peculiar type of economy, namely, ‘economics of affection’. This has affected the economic and social organisation in Africa, including the African state (Hyden 1983:37). This type of economy is especially prevalent in the rural communities, though it is an integrated part of society and political life more generally (Hyden 1983:9). An economy of affection is characterised by a person’s or household unit’s exchange of goods to another person in order to secure the physical and social maintenance of the person or household, whereby a patron-client relation occurs. An economy of affection can be defined as:

“[...] a network of support groups, communications and interactions among structurally defined groups connected by blood, kin, community or other affinities for example religion. It links together in a systematic fashion a variety of discrete economic and social units which in other regards may be autonomous.”

(Hyden 1983:82)

This network is often *ad hoc* and informal rather than regular and formalised. This type of economy, or network, complements the operation of the clan and vice versa. The tradition in African politics is to make use of public resources in order to “cut a deal”, which is a result of the earlier mentioned patronage

politics.⁴ The African state bureaucracy is used to accommodating competing clan interests, and is often portrayed as a 'soft state', due to its sensitivity towards clan pressures that occur from the use of an economy of affection (Hyden 1983:69).

Politics in the African state therefore are much more based on personal networks and power than institutionalised processes, in which the different stakeholders including civil society are represented. The African state is known for having a little but powerful political elite, with strong reference to their clans, who conduct the decision-making. The African state, therefore differs from a western understanding of a state. When applying political or administrative concepts to the African state one must be aware of these differences.

THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING OF REGIONAL PLANNING IN ERONGO

The theoretical understanding of the current situation of regional planning in Erongo with respect to community participation is that the political setting, i.e. the political structure and culture in Namibia, has influenced the decentralisation process, and the reasons for this are found in the political setting. The African state, often a new democracy, is based on a single party rule with strong references to the clans, which makes the structure of the state so different from the European model. It is in this political setting that decentralisation is planned and implemented. The context in which decentralisation occurs is illustrated in Figure 1.

As illustrated, the African state is influenced by the historical setting as well as the surrounding African society, which also indirectly influences the decentralisation process.

⁴ The purpose of patronage politics is to secure, insure and protect certain interests, for instance, a clan's.

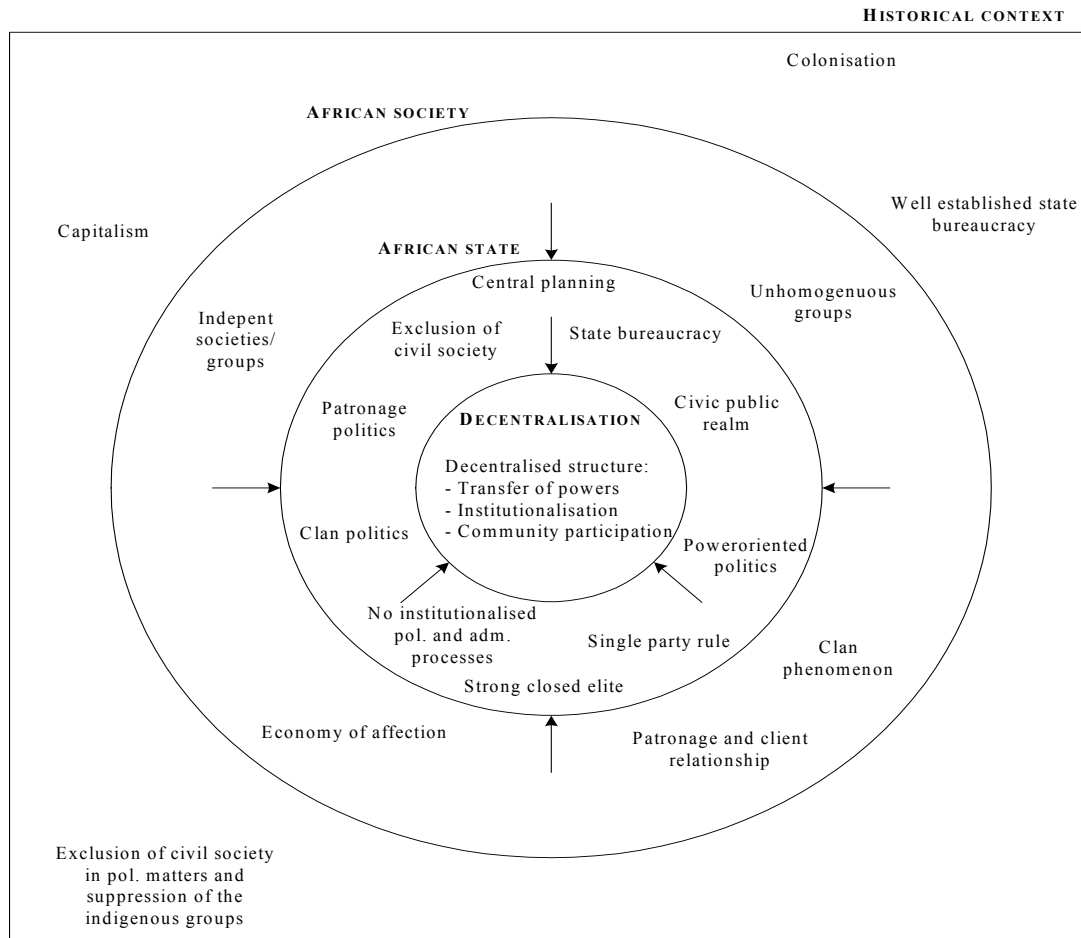


Figure 1

It is quite obvious that the implementation of decentralisation in the African state requires a new way of doing politics in terms of intergovernmental relations, institutionalisation of the state and new political actors. It is therefore presumable that those holding power and benefiting from it will meet the changes, like others, with suspicion and maybe an unwillingness to support these new political changes. The institutionalisation of the African state regarding administrative and political processes will likewise become a challenge, considering the often informal and ad hoc structures that dominate the African state due to the economy of affection. Furthermore, the historical background of African countries, the single rule party and other prevailing features of the African state have more or less excluded civil society from political matters, which makes it difficult to mobilise community participation. In other words, it is rather difficult to implement decentralisation in this political setting, because at some point decentralisation will undermine the prevailing political structure and culture in which the elite has gained their power. Decentralisation is therefore not a blueprint that guarantees democracy

and development regardless of where in the world it is implemented:

“In the end every country has to find a form of decentralisation which is adapted to its own political culture and circumstances, and there is no standard model to imitate”.

(Mawhood 1991:53)

The concept of decentralisation is a European concept in an African context and, due to a different set of circumstances, decentralisation cannot be expected to proceed as it did in Europe.

CASE STUDY OF REGIONAL PLANNING IN ERONGO

THE CURRENT SITUATION OF REGIONAL PLANNING IN ERONGO

The regional planning process starts with the Settlement Committee (SC), the lowest political level in Namibia, which identifies and evaluates local needs/problems and monitors the different development projects. The SC reports to the Constituency Development Committee (CDC), whose tasks do not differ from the SC's. It just operates at the constituency level and reports to the Regional Council. However, it is the Regional Development Coordinating Committee (RDCC) which coordinates the overall development in the region (MRLGH 1998a:47). The regional planning is approved by the Regional Council and the Governor, who submits the plan to the National Planning Commission (NPC), which in the end determines the priorities and direction of Namibia's development.

However, regional planning has not taken form as hoped. The lower level of the decentralised structure is rather weak, and not nearly as established as desired (Larsen 2002:41). The CDC's are on the other hand quite well established, but cooperation between the different members, e.g. government agencies, sector ministries, Local Authorities and NGO's in the area, is lacking, which hinders them in coming up with serious suggestions for a development plan for the constituency (Ibid.:42). The RDCC has the same problem. Most of the general planning is, at some point, still conducted by the Line Ministries and the Local Authorities, which makes it difficult to integrate any development proposals coming from the SCs, CDCs, and Regional Council (Ibid.:43). The new decentralised structure is more used to implement national policies and is more a top-down than bottom-up planning. The possibilities for community participation in the regional planning are rather limited, given that most SCs are not established yet. Together with the fact that the RDCC in Erongo is not functioning leaves the communities without any influence on

regional planning. Many people living in the settlements are still not aware of the decentralisation policies and the new structure which enables them to participate (Larsen 2002:44).

DECENTRALISATION IN NAMIBIA

In order for regional planning to function, a transfer of political, administrative, legislative, planning and not least financial authority from the central to the regional level is necessary. The government preferred devolution as the decentralisation model in Namibia, though admitting that decentralisation is a long-term process starting with delegation and then devolution (MRLGH 1997:13).

Starting with the transfer of functions, only few functions were transferred, which made it difficult for the Regional Council to successfully plan and coordinate development in the region, when most of the various functions were still the responsibility of the Line Ministries. The personnel decentralisation or powers of personnel has partly taken place in the shape of adequate numbers of staff, but personnel with skilled expertise and experienced have not been transferred (Larsen 2002:47-8). They are still positioned in the central government and its Line Ministries, which has made regional planning more challenging than necessary. Regarding financial powers, it is evident that funding of the decentralisation process has not taken place. The Erongo Regional Council is still dependent on the central government to fund the different project (Drake 2000:iv). This naturally affects the development planning in the region at all levels, hence the Regional Council lacks financial means to realise their development plans. Furthermore, the little political power that has been transferred to the Regional Council has, due to the lack of both personnel and financial decentralisation, had a limited effect (Larsen 2002:50). The Erongo Regional Council may prioritise and make a development strategy at its monthly meeting, but in order to realise this, the Council depends on the central government. As a result, most of the decentralised policy-making in Erongo tends to be advisory at all levels.

After having identified the different functions, powers, levels of authority and legal means regarding decentralisation in Namibia, exemplified by the Erongo region, it is obvious that the form of decentralisation taking place is delegation. This does not come as a surprise, since the Ministry of Regional, Local Government Housing (MRLGH) declared that the first phase of the decentralisation process would begin with a delegation of functions. What is surprising is the low degree of delegation. It is evident that Regional Councils are under the control of the central government.

The pace and direction of the first phase of the decentralisation process, which one day might become devolution, has not proceeded as planned. This leads us to the question: why has the decentralisation process proceeded the way it has?

THE POLITICAL SETTING IN NAMIBIA

The “Decentralisation Policy” was planned and implemented in a centralised state structure. The central government and the Line Ministries carried out all the policy-making and the implementation with the help of some well-established Local Authorities. The Regional Councils were added to the government structure in 1992 and, compared to the Local Authorities, were not nearly as economically resourceful, experienced nor educated. The establishment of the Regional Councils, therefore, demanded an exceptional effort and support by those who were involved in the decentralisation process.

THE POLITICAL SITUATION AFTER INDEPENDENCE

After independence in 1990, the South West Africa Peoples Organisation (SWAPO), a liberation movement transformed into a political party which most of the population supported, ruled Namibia (Töttemeyer 2000:105). Like many other single rule parties, SWAPO had a tendency to keep the power within the members, and at the time of independence, members of SWAPO were in favour of promoting their own interests in terms of political power and material rewards (Töttemeyer 2000:100). In fact members of SWAPO did not approve of the plans for decentralisation, even though it seems so in the different official government publications (Ibid.:100). The regions and Regional Councils were a compromise between SWAPO and the opposition during the drafting of the Constitution (Ibid.:95) - the opposition at that time was more powerful than today (Pisani 1996:34). One of the main reasons for not supporting these Regional Councils was the fear of becoming a federation.

THE TENDENCY TO PATRONAGE POLITICS

The members of SWAPO still believed in the all-power party after independence, where government power had to be based on party patronage and ruled untouchable by any constitutional arrangement, which should make the party superior to the national Constitution (Töttemeyer 2000:100). Because of this attitude, the rationales for doing politics in Namibia were inevitably associated with some kind of clan or patronage politics, since many of the politicians and officials were members of SWAPO. Namibia was therefore at some point too exposed to the patronage politics, which reinforced the “economy of affection” in the civil service in Namibia (Pisani 1996:30).

Though the clan phenomenon existed in Namibia, it had not advanced to the stage of a corrupt, unrepresentative and kleptocratic state. However, some public incidents regarding mismanagement have occurred, which can be linked to the national level (Pisani 1996:33). The image of the state as being an obstacle to distributive democracy and development is therefore prevalent in Namibia (Töttemeyer 2000:108). Hence, the demand for economic satisfaction in terms of self-enrichment exists side by side with the desire for democracy (Töttemeyer 2000:105).

THE LACK OF POLITICAL COMMITMENT

Up until the launch of the “Decentralisation Policy”, there was a wish in SWAPO to keep power within the party or the clan, which wanted to profit from the political office and promote the interests of its members and do politics in the traditional way. SWAPO was far from ready to distribute powers to the lower governments or any other organisation. In fact SWAPO never approved of the idea of Regional Councils and decentralisation. After having fought so long for independence SWAPO was not about to lose the power once gained, and the last thing SWAPO wished to promote were separate political and administrative areas which were created during the apartheid era. Furthermore, if decentralisation was to be implemented, it would undermine SWAPO’s way of doing politics.

The MRLGH and the NPC were the leading national agencies in Namibia and had the responsibility of promoting, strengthening and facilitating sustainable regional planning (NPC 1997:19); but it has not been an easy task, given that the political commitment and support have been lacking, especially from the other Line Ministries.

The lack of political support is one of the main reasons for the slow pace of the decentralisation process in Namibia. For instance, the Act that entails a clear division of responsibilities and procedures between the government units and enables financial transfer to take place, has been in motion for a long time but not passed yet despite pressure from many stakeholders both inside and outside the government (Töttemeyer 2000:97). This delay of constitutional and legal provisions of decentralisation has affected the regional planning in every possible way. As for the direction of decentralisation in Namibia, it was outlined as devolution starting with delegation, but the extent of delegation along with the capacity building of the Regional Councils have been relatively low compared to the original plan, and the lack of political commitment is obvious through the failed attempt to delegate.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN NAMIBIA

The slow pace and the low degree of decentralisation in Namibia have made it more difficult to mobilise community participation. Civil society has never been strong in Namibia, given the country's history of colonisation. Namibia became South Africa's protectorate in 1919, and the government extended its laws to Namibia, including the racial laws (Tötemeyer 1987). Today, the centralised structure, along with the strong political elite with reference to the clan, leaves little room for civil society to participate. Up until now, there have been few initiatives to include the ordinary people in the matters. The spin off effect of community participation has therefore been rather limited. For one, the political, financial and personnel powers which should have supported the work of the different committees, including mobilisation of the people to participate in different projects, have not been transferred to the regional level. Secondly, the people living in the settlement areas are not fully aware of the decentralisation policy and the work of the SCs. This makes it difficult to mobilise participation with respect to implementation and evaluation of the development projects.

The general conclusion of the case study is that the lack of political commitment has stalled the decentralisation process, which has affected the work of the Regional Councils and made it rather impossible for the regional planning, including community participation, to function.

CONCLUSION

Decentralisation has become the new development concept which most African countries, due to the last decades of democratisation, have encountered with the hope of obtaining sustainable democratic development. Namibia, which is a relatively new democracy, wanted to improve the participatory democracy and development of the country, and saw decentralisation as an instrument to achieve these objectives. However, most governments tend to forget that:

"[...] greater decentralisation does not necessarily imply greater democracy let alone "power to the people". It all depends on the circumstances under which decentralisation occurs".

(Rondinelli 1983:17)

Decentralisation is therefore far from a guarantee for participatory democracy or development, which the Erongo case illustrates very well.

The study of the decentralisation process in Namibia has shown that the Namibian state is based on different values and norms, i.e. the clan phenomenon, patronage politics and economy of affection, which makes the Namibian state function somewhat differently from what we know. It is therefore unrealistic to expect that decentralisation in Namibia would have the same outcome as in Europe at this time. The decentralisation process in Namibia has so far illustrated very well that decentralisation is a European concept in an African context. Most African states are not nearly as established as western states, and are non-institutionalised, which makes it even more complicated to apply the decentralisation concept to the African state.

However, considering that decentralisation is a relatively new concept in a relatively new democracy the regional planning and community participation is functioning as well as can be expected. The decentralisation process in Namibia is still an ongoing process, and there is still a long way to go for the Namibian government, if devolution is the final aim. The Deputy Minister of the Regional Local Government Housing predicts that it will be implemented in 2030 (Tötemeyer 2000:101).

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Interview with the Executive Regional Officer Mr. Gonteb.

Interview with the Councillor in the Constituency of Arandis, National Council member and elected President of the ARC, Mr. A. Kapere.