

Does decentralization lead to school improvement? Findings and lessons from research in West-Africa

A. De Grauwe¹, C. Lugaz, D. Baldé, C. Diakhaté, D. Dougnon, M. Moustapha, and D. Odushina²

Citation:

De Grauwe, A., Lugaz, C., Baldé, D., Diakhaté, C., Dougnon, D., Moustapha, M., & Odushina, D. (2005). Does decentralization lead to school improvement? Findings and lessons from research in West-Africa. *Journal of Education for International Development*, 1(1). Retrieved Month Date, Year, from <http://www.equip123.net/JEID/articles/1/1-1.pdf>

Abstract

Decentralization is a fashionable reform, adopted by many countries with different characteristics. There are doubts, though, about its objectives and impact. Did inspiration come from a desire to improve quality or from a need to share the financial burden? Does it not increase disparities and the workload for local officials and headteachers? Against this background, the International Institute for Educational Planning, in collaboration with ministries of education, a national institute and the NGO Plan, co-ordinated research on the challenges that local offices and schools encounter. Results are partly disheartening, as they indicate the limits to the implementation of decentralization but they also show that successful innovations are taking place. They help to identify principles of good practice: complementarity between actors; equilibrium between their mandate and resources; reform of school supervision; and the need to counterbalance autonomy by an effective accountability framework. One principle stands central: decentralization does not imply that the State is abandoning control, but rather a change in its role.

¹ Corresponding Author: [International Institute of Educational Planning \(IIEP\)](http://www.iiep.unesco.org); a.de-grauwe@iiep.unesco.org

² The research on which much of this article is based, was undertaken by four teams, led by Moussiliou Moustapha and David Odushina (Benin), Djénabou Baldé (Guinea), Denis Dougnon (Mali) and Cheikh Diakhaté (Senegal). It was co-ordinated by Anton De Grauwe (IIEP) and Candy Lugaz (IIEP).

The preoccupations concerning decentralization in developing countries

Decentralization is a buzzword in current discussions on public management, including education. In countries as diverse as Mali or Mexico, Sri Lanka or Senegal, the central authorities are giving more responsibilities to the regional or district offices, to the municipalities or to the schools. Discussions on decentralization have increased in complexity in recent years because of the realization that the ‘school’ as an institutional unit is a core actor in ensuring educational quality. A growing number of studies demonstrate that the management of a school, the relationships between the different actors (the headteacher, the teachers and the community) and the school’s own involvement in defining and evaluating its improvement have a profound impact on the quality of education (see, on developing countries, Dalin et al, 1994; Carron & Chaû, 1996 and Heneveld & Craig, 1996). This ‘autonomization’ of the school, in combination with the more traditional forms of decentralization, has led to greater diversity in the policies implemented in different countries. They carry many names: deconcentration, delegation, school-based management, school self-governance, privatization, charter schools, and so on.

The debate on decentralization has always been a contentious one. It has been argued that in many of the least developed countries the decentralization of public services, including education, has not been the result of an internal debate, even if there was a conviction that such a policy would lead to higher quality services. Pressure from the local authorities or communities, who demand a more participatory decision-making process, has generally been absent. Rather, in many countries two forces combine to push for decentralization: first, external pressure by international development agencies and experts; and second, internal political expediency in national contexts, where the public authorities are unable to organize or finance basic public services. In quite a few cases, specific political objectives play a major role, such as weakening the power base of the teachers’ union or preventing secessionist demands.

This leads to three concerns:

Firstly, advocates of decentralization, and the governments which have heeded their advice, do not sufficiently take into account a country’s specific context. Countries vary considerably: In some, the State is strong and efficient; in others, it is weak and inefficient, especially in the more remote areas. Some countries are homogeneous; others are characterized by several cleavages – ethnic, regional or religious. Policies need to be adapted to each country’s context, its strengths and its weaknesses.

Secondly, several countries have adopted this policy without paying sufficient attention to the strategies needed for its successful implementation. In many countries legislation reflects the willingness to share authority and resources, but this has not always translated into efforts to reform existing structures, to strengthen an appropriate information system, to review career profiles, or – the greatest challenge – to change the institutional culture.

Thirdly, in developing countries relatively little is known about the impact of decentralization on the ways in which schools and districts function (an exception is

Davies et al, 2003). Anecdotal evidence indicates that presently not all district offices are able to exercise to the fullest the responsibilities that they have been assigned. This lack of capacities within some district offices helps to explain that disparities in quality and access between districts and schools might have worsened. There has, however, been little systematic research on the implementation of decentralization at the local level. Field research to identify in some depth the ways in which districts and schools manage the process of decentralization, the challenges they encounter and the strategies they introduce to overcome these could be very useful for further implementation of such a policy.

The research programme

The International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) decided, therefore, to launch a research programme on the functioning of local offices and schools in a context of decentralization. In a first phase, on which this article comments, the focus was on West-Africa, where four countries were selected: Benin, Mali, Guinea and Senegal. The research itself consisted of two stages: one focussing on the functioning of district offices and a second on the management of schools.

Each country set up a national team consisting of one or two members of staff from the ministry of education, a senior researcher from a national institute, and the education programme officer of the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Plan. The choice of these three partners was a conscious one. The reason for including the ministry was to increase the chances that the programme would influence ministerial structures and policy-making. In this regard, it is interesting to learn that in Guinea the research conclusions were discussed during a one-day seminar with all the regional and provincial directors at the beginning of the 2004 school year. The field research was undertaken by a national institute and was under the charge of a senior researcher. Collaborating with these national research and training institutions had as objective to build their capacities, as they will have a crucial role to play in the implementation of decentralization through for instance the organization of training programmes. The involvement of the NGO Plan (previously Plan International) was justified by the fact that it is increasingly interested in reaching out to national policy makers. It is therefore working not only with schools, but also with district offices and municipalities. Plan's experience in working at the local level and its support to innovations taking place in different schools offered enriching insights.

The programme went through different phases, which are briefly summarized hereafter.

- Each national team prepared a diagnosis on decentralization in the area of education. It examined the structures, the responsibilities of various actors in some core decisions, and the evaluation mechanisms.
- A first technical workshop (in Bamako, Mali) brought together the four teams to discuss the state of decentralization in the region and to prepare the field work on the functioning of local offices.

- Through a pilot exercise, the four core researchers and IIEP staff prepared a case-study on the functioning of a local district office in Benin and its relationship with the municipalities and the schools.
- Each team prepared a similar detailed case-study on three education offices. These were chosen to reflect as far as possible the country's variety: one concerned an urban area; a second was based in a rural poorly developed environment and a third was equally in a rural area, but received support from the NGO Plan.
- A second technical workshop (in Dakar, Senegal) discussed the findings on the local offices and prepared the field work on the management of schools.
- A pilot exercise on two schools in Guinea was undertaken. The senior researcher from Senegal later accompanied the Benin team in their field work, as the researcher from Benin had been unable to participate in the pilot exercise.
- Each team prepared case-studies on six schools chosen within two of the three examined districts. Three were in the urban area, three in the area where Plan operates. The six schools were again chosen to reflect the variety of circumstances which schools face, with differences in the available resources, the types of teachers they work with and the support they receive from the local authorities and NGOs.
- Each country team prepared a brief synthesis of the main findings and completed the case-studies. The teams undertook in total 36 case-studies: nine per country, namely of three local education offices and of six schools. IIEP drafted a synthesis report.
- During a policy seminar (Cotonou, Benin), the teams presented the complete research results to senior decision-makers in the West-Africa region, and to representatives of the NGO Plan and of international agencies.

Some core findings

The insights offered by the field research are rich and plentiful. We will attempt to summarize some key findings around four themes. Beforehand though, we briefly recall the nature of the decentralization process implemented in the four countries.

In all four countries, decentralization is a combination of four quite different, at times complementary, trends. We use here to some extent the terminology developed by, among others, Rondinelli (1981) and McGinn & Welsh (1999), though the actual translation of these terms in the reality of West-Africa is somewhat different from what the literature describes. Firstly, there is an aspect of devolution: elected local authorities (generally municipalities or village councils) are given a number of responsibilities in the field of basic education. In Senegal, the central level transfers some funds to these local authorities to allow them to take care of nine competencies, including construction, equipment and maintenance of pre-primary and primary schools, the recruitment of support staff, and several tasks related to literacy eradication. In Benin, where municipalities have only recently been installed, they are responsible for the construction, equipment and maintenance of primary schools. In Mali, these municipalities have existed for more than a decade, their function being to take charge of education in their area. It is the intention of policy-makers that in the future they will manage those teachers, who are currently recruited by communities. The corps of community teachers

should therefore disappear as it is integrated into that of municipal teachers. This trend of devolution is least visible in Guinea, partly because it has not passed through the same democratization movement as the other three countries.

A second trend is that of widening the role of regional and district education offices and offering them a greater say in certain decisions, e.g. concerning the use of their budget or the nomination of principals. This deconcentration is most evident in Mali, where there has been a major reform of the district structure. The previous inspectorates have been transformed into *Centres d'Animation Pédagogique* (CAP) – the Pedagogical Animation Centres. They have a new mandate: to offer support. They are rather well staffed and work in new, fairly well equipped offices. The official texts offer heads of the CAP a much bigger say than their predecessors (the district inspectors) in the nomination of school principals. In the other countries, the reform has not been so profound. Efforts have been made, however, to improve the efficiency of district offices, either by ensuring that more resources are available or through the creation of a professional corps of pedagogical advisors, as is the case in Benin.

A third trend, less prevalent in the legislation than the two previous ones, consists in allowing schools somewhat more autonomy in resource management. This timid school-based management concerns for instance the evaluation of teachers, where the principal's role has expanded somewhat. More significant is probably a reform in Benin, where, since 2001-2002, funds are transferred directly from the central level to the schools, which have their own bank account, something which is not the case for most schools elsewhere. In Guinea, a step was taken in the same direction through the initiation of a project in the mid-1990s which provided a selection of bulk funds to finance the implementation of the improvement proposals. More significant than these 'official' amendments, however, are the changes on the ground. Faced with a lack of finances and teachers, principals recruit teachers from the community, who are paid small stipends, and ask parents to contribute to the school's financing through contribution to the Parents Teachers Association (PTA) funds and other fees.

A fourth trend is least evident, namely decentralization as a form of community empowerment. Although nearly everywhere structures exist to represent the community within the school, their at times unrepresentative constitution and their limited involvement mean that they have seldom led to genuine community participation, even less to their empowerment. In policy declarations though, this objective is quite prevalent, and in some cases, especially where NGO support has focussed on this issue, the relationship between schools and community has become tighter and more balanced.

These four trends are thus in part the result of a larger administrative reform, which impacts on education and on other sectors, such as health or rural development. But they are also caused by a lack of involvement by the central government, which forces the local actors to take initiatives. National governments face nearly insurmountable difficulties to ensure expansion and improvement in the quality of the education service, and other actors, by default, are taking over that responsibility. This is most clear at the school level. The context of scarcity, in which decentralization is being implemented,

intensifies the challenges local actors encounter while making it more necessary for the State to offer support to them. The purpose of the research was not to distinguish between the impact of poverty and that of decentralization but to study a process of decentralization in a context of lack of resources.

From among the many themes that deserve closer study, we decided to focus on the following:

- What is the nature of the relationships between the various actors (local authorities, education offices, communities and school staff), whose involvement in school is being promoted by the decentralization policy? How are these relationships working?
- How effective is the quality monitoring of schools? How competent are local offices and school managers in this area?
- What resources are available to local offices and schools, and how are they used?
- How are the different categories of teachers (public servant, contract, volunteer, ...) recruited, managed and supported?

The following sections address these points.

The relationships between education offices, local authorities, schools and communities

One of the core objectives of decentralization is to widen the implication of actors who do not belong to the community of education professionals, in particular elected local authorities and community or parent representatives.

There is a lot of variety in the involvement of local authorities in education. In quite a few cases it is very low, quasi nil, with teachers complaining about the total lack of support from the municipalities. Others do spend some resources on school construction or the hiring of teachers. In general, their interest does not go beyond the visible, which is in many cases superficial. In Benin, where elected municipalities started to function only a few months before the field research, this is not all that surprising, but the scenario is not very different in Mali, where they have existed since the early 1990s. There is a variety of reasons for this. Few municipalities have a lot of resources. Their tax base is low, and many complain that the delay of transfers of funds from the central level is too long. In one rural community in Mali, no local taxes were collected in 2003 because of a famine, the priority being to find food for the people rather than to tax them. There are many competing demands on municipalities, with schooling not always being a priority. Few have the expertise necessary to address complex educational issues. In some cases though, municipalities, especially the bigger ones, do take educational initiatives which go beyond the superficial, for instance working with NGOs to improve principals' and teachers' skills. The lack of involvement should therefore not be interpreted as an inherent characteristic of decentralization but more as the result of implementing decentralization in a context of scarcity.

A related factor is that the relationship between elected authorities and local education offices is as much one of conflict as of collaboration. Two different legitimacies are in confrontation: education officials refer to their professional legitimacy, while local authorities emphasize their political legitimacy. The balance between the two does not depend on an official framework, which does not exist everywhere, but on the

characteristics of each one and on the personal relationships between them. At times their collaboration is mutually beneficial, with the education office acting as technical support to the local authority. At other times there is conflict regarding the recruitment of teachers or the transfer of funds. The district education officer is seldom invited to participate, as an observer, in municipal council meetings – even if they concern education.

At the school level, the relationship between the school and the community is a much closer one than that between the local education office and the municipality, but is not without problems either. Firstly, the relationship is especially strong between the school principal and the chair of the PTA. Teachers and other PTA members are poorly informed, if not excluded altogether. One reason concerns the profile of the PTA members: many are illiterates and have been chosen as members because of their possible usefulness as, for example, mechanics or plumbers. Many do not know the decrees which rule PTAs and accept easily that their role is mainly one of mobilizing funds and offering practical help. The principal in all four countries is, because of his/her position, the secretary of the PTA. As he (or she, though most principals are men) is also in many cases the only well educated person and the only one with a good knowledge of education issues, this position offers him great leverage over the decisions made by the PTA. Therefore, the PTA seems to have become an instrument in the hands of headteachers – at times in collaboration with the PTA chairperson – to reinforce their authority over the school and the teachers, rather than an organ representing parents.

At times, conflicts arise between the school and the surrounding community, especially regarding the use of land. The PTA structure does not seem to be of much help in such cases as it is not representative of the community as a whole, but only – and imperfectly so – of parents. There are also quarrels between the PTA and the principal, e.g. about the use of funds. The principal, then, will lean on his teachers to gain an advantage, but generally an outsider, such as the district education officer, will have to intervene.

Dissatisfaction with the PTAs has led Mali and Senegal to set up an alternative structure: the School Management Committee (SMC). But this structure is not functioning much better. One reason for this is that it was created only recently. But there are two other factors at play, which are more worrying: Firstly, the authority of this SMC comes into conflict with that of the PTA, and their relative powers, while they might be clear on paper, are much less evident in reality, especially as PTAs have a tradition to refer to. Such conflicts are already visible in some schools. Secondly, what is needed is not so much the creation of a new structure, but the development of a culture of accountability and participation. In the absence of such a culture, any structure will easily be hijacked by those who have the power at the local level. Building up such a culture is time-taking and complex. At the end of this article, we offer some hints how such a transformation can be achieved.

Quality monitoring

One key mission of a local education office is to monitor the quality of the teaching in its schools. Inspectors are expected to visit schools and examine the teaching provided at

regular intervals. Their recommendations should be followed up by the administration and the school itself. Statistical information, transformed into indicators, should be of assistance to the monitoring process. The reality, though, is quite different.

Little inspection is exercised, and this for several reasons, of which lack of staff and lack of resources are the most evident. The number of teachers per inspector has increased; for instance in one Senegalese district, four inspectors supervise nearly 800 teachers. The profile of teachers has also changed, with many having less training and lower qualifications than was the case some years ago. This is coupled with a lack of resources, especially as regards travelling. In Benin pedagogical advisors receive a petrol allowance, but many do not have vehicles. The result is that inspectors undertake few visits, and that these are generally short and superficial. The problem, though, is more than one of mere resources.

- The mandate of district offices is demanding, as they are expected to cover all schools, and conflicting, as they have to exercise control and offer support – tasks which are not easily combined.
- There is a serious discrepancy between the mandate and the available resources. While some offices have enough staff, they lack nearly always the necessary funds to allow this staff to undertake their tasks effectively.
- The profile of district officials sometimes leaves much to be desired. In Benin, quite a few offices are used to accommodate teachers who are, for health reasons, unable to continue classroom teaching.
- In their interaction with schools, the officers privilege the traditional visits with little reliance on other interventions to influence and guide schools, such as holding workshops or providing assistance in a school self-evaluation process.
- District offices very seldom engage in strategic planning. Their actions are more responses to administrative requests from higher up in the hierarchy, or to emergencies from further down.

In all four countries, efforts are underway to reform the inspection services. In Mali, the offices have been renamed and are now called Pedagogical Animation Centres. This change in terminology reflects a change in their mandate: they no longer inspect, as the traditional inspection is felt to have no impact and leads to conflict with teachers. They focus on giving advice. In Senegal a few years ago, one district decided to group neighbouring schools into clusters and ask the directors to meet regularly and to visit each school to offer assistance where necessary to teachers, with one director acting as the cluster head and link with the central and district administration. Directors and teachers greatly appreciate this clustering initiative, which offers them more regular and appropriate support. It has recently become national policy, but its implementation is not without challenges. One somewhat controversial issue is: should these directors be given the authority to assess teachers, or should the whole structure remain more informal? Some directors find the latter option frustrating, but turning cluster heads into sub-district inspectors could simply mean that they will encounter the same problems as inspectors and lose their originality. In Benin, such clustering in what are called ‘pedagogical units’ has existed for some time and has become a tradition: teachers from neighbouring

schools meet nearly twice a month to discuss pedagogical and other matters. Every district office has a few advisors to support these units. The unit heads have no supervisory authority; their role is simply to ensure that teachers meet regularly and to guide their discussions.

Supervision by the district offices will never have much of an impact if it is not accompanied by control and support within the school. This puts emphasis on the headteachers. However, the latter face a scenario somewhat similar to that of inspectors. They are increasingly overburdened with tasks for which they are poorly prepared, such as mobilizing resources, negotiating with the municipality, recruiting volunteer teachers and getting funds to pay them. They lack time to give significant support to their teachers. Some have felt it very useful to delegate that task to senior teachers, and such delegation is greatly appreciated and in bigger schools functions well. Nevertheless, problems remain. Firstly, and this is especially serious in small schools, few principals have a suitable profile to be at the same time manager and pedagogical leader. In a small Malian school, the principal is 27 years old, only has a degree in plumbing, a few weeks of teacher training and no further experience. While this is an extreme example, it highlights the inexistence of a policy aimed at transforming the job of principal into a motivating profession. A related problem is that principals lack the authority and resources to take action, be it supportive or disciplinary.

The management of financial resources

In all four countries – and this is surely not a surprise – local offices and schools struggle with a lack of resources. The situation differs quite significantly. In Benin, for instance, many local offices function only because the schools, through student and parent fees, participate in their financing, including at times for the construction of new buildings. In one recent case parents finally refused to do so, arguing that this was surely the responsibility of the State and that their focus would remain on school construction. In Senegal, on the other hand, the financing provided by central government is just sufficient for the office's daily functioning but does not allow for much initiative-taking. The lack of resources, beyond the basics, goes some way in explaining why district offices are seldom able to plan strategically, take initiatives and focus their efforts where they are most needed. This weakness is not only the result of insufficient resources, but is compounded by three management related factors.

Firstly, resources made available by the central level generally come within tight budget lines, based at times on provisions made by the offices and the schools. Once the budget is in place, district and school managers have little, if any, autonomy in deciding how to spend them. Any change in planned spending needs approval from higher up in the hierarchy. This leads to absurd situations, which one would have liked to see as a thing of the past. One school in Guinea received at the beginning of the school year 40 staplers and 30 registers, but no notebooks or chalk.

Secondly, the level of financial support given by the government generally does not take into account the characteristics and needs of each district and its schools. In Senegal, for instance, the same budget for transport expenses is provided to all regions and districts,

regardless of the geography and the number or quality of schools. One district, whose total primary school population is nearly the same as the number of sixth graders in another district, receives the same budget as the second. This is not only inefficient; it also frustrates district managers, whose complaints in this regard are left unanswered.

A third problem concerns the lack of transparency in the use of resources. This is especially the case when funds are collected from parents or students. In nearly all schools in all four countries the headteacher and/or the chairperson of the PTA make/s decisions concerning the use of these funds, which can add up to sizeable amounts. Although in principle the PTA members have the right to control the use of these funds they are generally unable to do so. Many are illiterate or do not have, within the locality, the standing to contradict the headteacher or PTA chair. The ambivalent character of the fees (which could be considered public as well as private funds) complicates matters. The issue of transparency is equally preoccupying when it comes to spending by regional and district offices. Although there is an *ex ante* control through the tight budget lines, this control does not check for what specific purpose a sum was spent, neither in how far that spending contributed to educational improvement, as long as it respected the budget ceiling. In one country the research team visited a regional office, where the director had at his disposal a computer, printer, fax machine and television. The district office in the same region did not even have a telephone line. The lack of transparency reinforces the monopoly of power exercised by certain individuals within many offices and localities, which is in itself the cause of that lack of transparency.

The situation is paradoxical. Where autonomy is needed it is lacking because of a rigid control which, however, is inefficient and counterproductive. And where control is needed, for example as regards the use of parent contributions, it is equally lacking. As a result, without doubt, the already scarce resources are not used as much as they could be for educational improvement.

Teacher management

In all four countries there exist now different categories of teachers. Volunteer, contract and community teachers have joined the public servants to make up for the lack of recruitment in the public service resulting from the governments' financial difficulties.

The nomination and posting of teachers in the public service remains a somewhat contested domain. Headteachers argue that they are the best placed to decide who should teach in their school and that they cannot be held accountable for the results of their school if they have no say in teacher posting. District officials feel the interests of a single school should make place for those of the district as a whole and that they have a better insight into the needs of all of their schools. The central level, which pays salaries, keeps, in quite a few cases, control over this process; partly because teacher posts are scarce assets to be distributed. There is disagreement also over the best practice for headteacher nomination: headteachers are quite satisfied with the present arrangement, whereby the decision is made at a fairly high level and is based mainly on the grade. Teachers suggest two changes: that their voice in the process should be heard, and that the criteria should take into account personal competencies and leadership skills.

More contentious than these issues is the question of how to manage teachers recruited under contracts other than public service contracts. Governments did not go about the creation of these categories of teachers in the same way. In Senegal in the 1990s, the government took the initiative of recruiting volunteer teachers, and there is now a fairly clear career path open to all teachers, whatever their category. Volunteers can move from one category to another, until ultimately they become civil servants. Elsewhere, the existence of these various types of teachers has been more the result of initiatives taken by local communities, municipalities, NGOs, and even PTAs. In certain districts, the teaching corps now contains a minority of public servants, and some schools have only volunteer or community teachers. Somewhat surprisingly, the co-existence of these different categories in many, if not most schools does not create great tension between teachers. That does not mean, however, that there is no jealousy or conflict, but these are not played out within the school. Each category prefers to attack the policy-makers. Public servants feel that the teaching profession is undermined by the existence of unqualified and poorly trained youngsters. These same youngsters feel that they perform as well as their colleagues who have job security and higher salaries.

Policy-makers have not remained indifferent to these complaints, but have rather tried to better regulate teacher management through legislation specifying minimum recruitment criteria. But as long as the State does not have the financial resources to contribute to the salaries of these teachers, its legislation is poorly respected. To some extent, local offices prefer not to intervene too strongly in the recruitment process of volunteer or community teachers for fear that such intervention will lead to demands for greater financial involvement. Recruitment at the local level at times leads to the selection of candidates who belong to the community and therefore show greater commitment to the local school, but without regulation or a motivational career path. This creates many problems: a rapid turnover rate is one; another is that community teachers are left unpaid and get little response to their complaints, as both the principal and the district chief disclaim responsibility. A third problem – and not the least important – is that principals or PTA chairs select friends or relatives as teachers.

Constructing a decentralization policy

The above summary paints a somewhat frustrating picture of the implementation of decentralization, but the research has also highlighted some elements of hope. First, parents contribute strongly to the education of their children, even going as far in some places as financing the functioning of local education offices. While this is not a sustainable policy and while its impact on equity is probably negative, it shows a commitment to education, which is an indispensable building block for any decentralization policy. It also puts into perspective a core belief that has pervaded educational planning since the 1980s: that the slow progress of enrolment in rural Africa was to a large extent the result of a lack of demand for education. This dedication to education can surely be used for better purposes than that of resource mobilization. The case-studies have offered examples of parents participating in school life without financial repercussions, and of how such involvement strengthens the linkages between

the school and the community. Two such examples can be given. In one school, PTA members contact the parents of kids who have been absent from school for a while to enquire why and, if necessary, attempt to convince them of sending their child back to school. In a second case, an older woman in the village has become the “school mother”: she takes care of practical or minor health problems pupils experience and in this way she makes the school a more child-friendly one.

A second positive element is that there is a strong belief among parents, teachers, local councillors and education officials who were interviewed in the research that decentralization is the way forward. There are of course differences of opinion: many teachers in Mali, for instance, are among the most disappointed and feel that decentralization has made no difference whatsoever. The support for decentralization among many other actors is not an indication of gullibility. They are all conscious of what decentralization should entail and of its weaknesses, but this does not translate into a refusal of the policy. The feeling expressed the most is: if only everybody would play their role fully....

A third encouraging finding concerns the fact that several schools and local offices, although they struggle with resource constraints, have taken innovative initiatives. Arguably, the lack of support from the central level obliges them to do so, while the absence of a regulatory framework makes room for such initiatives. We have already referred to the reorganization of quality monitoring. Several others can be mentioned; many are small scale, but they do point to possible ways forward. In one school, teachers and parents are working together on the preparation of a school improvement plan with support from the NGO Plan. In another locality, the inspector systematically assists the mayor and the council with decisions concerning education.

This commitment to education and to decentralization, linked to the existence of effective initiatives, provides fertile ground for the successful implementation of decentralization. The challenge remains to transform these initiatives into national practice, which demands strong and concerted government efforts. The research has helped to identify key principles to guide such efforts and has highlighted examples of a number of promising ways forward.

A first principle concerns the need for complementarity. The essence of decentralization is to incite more actors to work together towards Education for All. While the efforts of one single individual are easily outweighed by the challenges, collaboration between all can make a difference. Indeed, the schools which function most satisfactorily are those where there is a good relationship between the community and the teachers, and where the PTA assists the headteacher. Legislation recognizes this principle, but isolation or conflict are often the order of the day.

One reason for such conflict lies precisely in the disrespect of a second principle, namely that the mandate of all actors should take into account their resources, competences and assets. The opposite is at times the case: parents contribute from their very scarce resources but are refused control over teacher presence. Principals manage finances and

recruit teachers (delicate and intricate tasks) but their involvement in pedagogical supervision has not been strengthened. Inspectors have to supervise all teachers, while their resources allow them very few visits during each term. A strategic reflection is needed on the balance between the mandate and resources of all actors. The term 'resource' in this regard should be understood in a broad sense. It includes not only the finances at the disposal of actors or their formal qualifications, but also for instance their credibility and social network. In that sense, school principals might have better assets to supervise the teachers than inspectors because of their credibility.

This principle of complementarity helps in rethinking quality monitoring, a key concern in a context of decentralization. Initiatives in Benin and Senegal show the potential of school networks, where teachers exchange experiences and which develop a tradition of peer support. Research in Africa and elsewhere shows that many principals are competent to monitor the performance of their teachers, while parents, community organizations and municipalities can exercise responsibility in supervising teacher presence and maybe in their recruitment. The district office is best placed to offer intensive support to a few schools that are seriously under-performing. There is a need to reform school supervision by changing: its mandate, from inspection to professional development; its focus, towards the most needy schools; and its practices, from school visits to a mixture of visits, workshops, exchanges and the creation of networks.

Comparing the present situation to such an ideal scenario could easily lead to a sentiment of pessimism: actors at the local level do not have many resources, whatever meaning we give to that term, and those who do have them might be tempted to use them for their personal interest rather than for the benefit of society. This pessimism should not lead to inaction, but should rather be taken as a call for action on two fronts. On the one hand, resources, competencies and assets are not immobile; they change continuously, and governments have opportunities and the obligation to impact upon them. Legislation, capacity-building and awareness-raising are indispensable steps in this regard. It might also be useful to review recruitment criteria and procedures in order to close the gap between the expected role of an actor and his or her profile.

On the other hand, autonomy at the local level needs to be counterbalanced by an effective evaluation and accountability framework. One of the more disappointing findings of the research is that in none of the four countries has much attention been given to monitor the actions taken at the lower levels. Information on the performance of local offices or on how schools use the funds, which in some cases are put at their disposal, is scarce, if not completely lacking. This is particularly worrying when disparities are vast, and decentralization might aggravate them further. An effective accountability mechanism also informs, therefore, about the evolution of disparities. When the decentralization process is more the result of abandonment than policy, then its regulation and monitoring pose serious problems.

The absence of transparency in the local management of resources is probably the clearest expression of the challenges of decentralization. Ensuring that rules and regulations are known to all and that parents who contribute to school financing have an

explicit right to know how these were spent is indispensable. Training and setting up financial control structures is equally important. This could be part of a wider accountability framework linking the actors to whom the district office and the school are responsible: the administration; the other teachers and schools; the students and parents; and the public at large. Such transparency and accountability, though, may encounter serious resistance when it threatens the existing power relations. It takes time to change traditions of power monopolization and refusal of participation. Arguably, NGOs who work at the local level are the best placed outsiders to work on a cultural transformation.

The existence of different corps of teachers is not a result of a policy of decentralization, but it is surely an issue that decentralized actors need to face. The profile of the teaching force has changed considerably because of the inclusion of volunteer, contract and community teachers. The motivation and quality of this new teaching corps need to be addressed. The development of a transparent career plan, allowing for a movement from volunteer to contract teacher to public servant based on commitment and on performance, and their inclusion in school-level management and decision-making help retain their motivation. Quality improvement demands regular support from within the school and outside, some basic resources, and recruiting teachers who belong to a community, be it that of the school or that of the locality.

A core principle runs through the previous paragraphs: decentralization does not imply abandonment by the State, but rather a change in the role of the State. Where its supervision and support is weak and where its absence is not counterbalanced by strong local accountability, the inefficiency and mismanagement which characterized central management might be repeated, if not multiplied, at lower levels. Decentralization is therefore neither a panacea nor a shortcut. In all countries disparities will continue to exist. Some municipalities, districts and schools have all that is needed to benefit from more autonomy, others need support, orientation and control. In all countries, changing the social and institutional cultures will take time. The implication is two-fold: on the one hand, decentralization is not a policy objective in itself, it is a management strategy, adopted when and where centralized management is felt to be inefficient. On the other hand, decentralization demands flexible implementation, with a balance between the autonomy and the characteristics of its beneficiaries.

References

- Carron, G. & Chaû, T.N. (1996). *The Quality of primary schools in different development contexts*. Paris: UNESCO/IIEP.
- Dalin, P. (1994). *How schools improve: an international report*. London : Cassell.
- Davies, L., Harber, C. & Dzimadzi, C. (2003) Educational decentralisation in Malawi: a study of process. *Compare*, 33 (2), 139-154.
- Heneveld, W. & Craig, H. (1996). *Schools count: World Bank project designs and the quality of primary education in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Washington DC: World Bank.
- McGinn, N.F.& Welsh, T. (1999). *Decentralization of education: why, when, what and how?* Paris: UNESCO/IIEP.
- Randinelli, D.A. (1981). Government decentralization in comparative perspective : theory and practice in developing countries. *International review of administrative science*, 47 (2), 133-145.