

**Conference on decentralization and municipalisation and on the role of local authorities and autonomy of schools in education, organized by ELA in conjunction with the Law Faculty of the University of Lisbon and CRELL (EC), 14-16 December 2007, Lisbon**  
**Concluding remarks by Dr. Gracienne Lauwers**

**I. The reasons and goals for decentralization reforms (cfr. UNESCO)**

Decentralization reforms have been promoted due to economic and fiscal reasons (such as the need to reduce public spending, distribute social expenditure at provincial and municipal levels), technocratic and efficiency reasons (including the need to monitor the decision-making process to make it more effective, improve the efficiency of educational service, more rapid decision-making, and more effective use of funds), pedagogical reasons (such as using decentralization as a mechanism for improving educational quality, freedom of education and reducing state intervention to a minimum), reasons of participatory democracy and ethnic and linguistic reasons (including allowing local and regional authorities to enjoy greater autonomy in their decision-making, in their exercise of authority and in their use of resources), political reasons (such as weakening the teachers' unions and neutralizing expenditure to the greatest possible extent in the face of the different policies of the parties).

The goals of decentralization include better responding to local needs, making more effective use of resources, greater responsiveness and capacity for adjustment to groups that are ethnically and linguistically diverse and increasing the participation of citizens as a means of strengthening of the democratic system. Decentralization should be aimed in the first place at ensuring the continued improvement of educational quality and enhancing responsibility, transparency, effectiveness, and sustainability.

**II. Where has decentralization been most successful? The framework.**

Decentralization has been most successful in countries with a strong tradition and social capacity underpinning what is commonly described as 'civil society' in which institutions and the public impose accountability upon officials. It finds its reflection in innovative initiatives such as the charter school movement in the United States. In order to become successful, decentralization requires time for establishing a culture of decentralization in the minds of those concerned and its corresponding responsibilities to take root in practice. In this sense, decentralization policies can be a tool to foster social participation.

According to UNDP, decentralization tends to be successful when the central government is stable, solvent, and committed to transferring both responsibilities and resources, when local

authorities are able to assume these responsibilities, and when there is effective participation by people and by a well-organized civil society. (UNDP, 2003: p.137).

### **III. What recommendations can be formulated on the basis of country reports? The challenges of decentralization reforms: institutional and capacities plans**

1. Decentralization of educational systems usually forms a part of more general structural reforms of public administration. Fundamentally restructuring the management of educational systems includes the transfer of selected administrative and fiscal responsibilities from the centre and the regions. Under this approach, an administrative structure links the centre and local administrations and institutions so that partnerships are created among the different levels as they fulfill their particular responsibilities within the overall framework of a decentralized system.

2. The legal foundations for decentralization should be clear but leave room for flexibility and experimentation. Where responsibilities are clear, a decentralized system can work well. Where they are not, there can be an undesirable redundancy where things are done two times, or not at all, with the attendant frustrations.

3. There has to be a clear and well understood conceptual and political commitment to decentralization. This must include a clear delegation of rights and responsibilities and a high degree to which each level is able (and willing) to implement decentralization.

4. It is important to develop adequate mechanisms for monitoring and constructing indicators, which contribute to and validate decentralization processes.

5. Stakeholders must not only have support but must also be supported in the decentralization process. Decentralization policies require investment in capacity building. Decision-makers at all levels should be trained for their new roles, functions, and responsibilities. Decentralization reforms should include resources for intensive, continuing training, including financial training, for all managers, in particular heads of schools.

The tasks of the stakeholders can be described as follows:

The centre:

- The national ministry should be responsible for strategic planning for the overall system, with clear frameworks indicated for the roles of regional and municipal

authorities. Decentralization usually leads to an increase in the center's function of controlling and to greater responsibilities and accountability at school level;

- The ministry should do the work on educational standards and should put in place quality assurance mechanisms;
- The ministry should promote and safeguard equity within educational provision and citizens' rights in education and the right to education for all;
- The ministry should issue periodic overviews on the progress of educational reform drawn on data from information and monitoring systems (monitoring system).
- Studying the outcomes of decentralization requires mechanisms of collection and analysis of data on the system, so that differences between the language of the law and actual practice can be established.

The regions:

- Regional authorities should design action plans aimed at strengthening the capacity of regional leaders to improve regional educational planning, coordination and policy development;
- Staff working in regional and municipal education departments should be supported and trained for their new responsibilities;
- Regional authorities should issue periodic reports on education within their regions, drawing on improved statistical data and including commentary of an educational, social, and economic issues relevant to a review of education;
- Regional authorities should bring heads of schools in marginal schools into contact with those in innovative schools to strengthen the basis of reform.

The institutions:

- Institutional leadership and management training for the heads of schools should be a major priority in in-service education programmes;
- Heads of schools also need to know clearly what is expected of them and to have freedom and discretion to exercise their leadership roles, including in school budget planning;
- Much depends on the head of schools' ability to manage the staff and guide them through the problems of reforms and to set the agenda.

Parents

- Efforts should be made to encourage parental and community involvement in educational reform. Parents are more likely to care about issues that directly affect

their children. Methods to solicit regular parental input in helping schools meet short-term and long-term objectives are needed.

#### **IV. Lessons drawn from the decentralization experience. The risks of decentralization.**

In a highly decentralized system with a high degree of autonomy with almost no layers of management between the centre and the schools, the task of the centre is coordinating changes and shaping the environment conducive to successful implementation of decentralization at micro level.

At the same time, the centre should take measures for creating social cohesion within the society by encouraging equal educational opportunities for quality education for all.

In order to avoid fragmentation of society, heads of schools should not adopt micro-level views of their work only, but should try to match the micro-level policy at schools with those envisaged by their educational ministries in order to promote social cohesion. The centre should provide incentives for heads of schools to be concerned with events outside their own micro-environments.

#### **V. Indicators for measuring the decentralization impact.**

A uniform measurement by indicators of results and consequences of decentralization is not yet available. Such a measurement includes but is not necessarily limited to the following information:

- Has the decentralization contributed to a greater democratization?
- Is regional management more efficient?
- Is school management more efficient?
- Has decentralization brought about privatization?
- Has decentralization deepen or reduced the inequalities concerning the distribution of resources between regions?
- Has decentralization created significant differences in terms of quality of education?
- Is there a technical support to planning?
- Have there been conflicts with the teachers in the process of decentralization and over which aspects?
- Is there an evaluation of the reform?
- Is there a precise schedule for reform with precise phases defined?
- Do they correspond to concrete strategies and precise budgets?
- Has the schedule been followed?

- What is the role of international agencies in the decentralization process?
- Are there specific loans? With what conditionality clauses?
- Have social "actors" been included in the decentralization reforms?
- What "type" of space is allocated to public debate in the face of political decision: type and level of negotiation, value of political representation, etc.
- What are the concrete objectives of the reform assigned to decentralization: access, equity, pedagogical, administrative, financial management. Have these objectives been clearly expressed in the planning?
- Is there a political and technical feasibility and viability study with regard to institutional, organizational, and mobilized human and material means?

### **Annex 1: Follow-up of the conference**

The country reports will be published in the *International Journal for Education Law and Policy*.

### **Annex 2: Definitions used by UNESCO**

Deconcentration.

Deconcentration means the transfer or delegation of responsibility for managing educational activities from the national level to local level of a ministry or central institution. This devolution of authority concerns the application of regulations, but not of their formulation. Decision-making and policy formulation remain largely centralized.

Decentralization.

Decentralization involves the transfer of all or part of the decision-making, responsibilities, and management vested in the central authority towards another regional, provincial or local authority (districts, municipalities, "communities") or towards schools themselves.

Decentralization is therefore political and financial. Regional and local authorities may change and/ or adapt educational priorities, curricula, teaching methods, and educational management while managing their budgets and the expenditures.

Devolution

Some people speak of devolution when local units of government are autonomous and independent with their legal status separate and apart from that of the central government. In such a system, central authorities exercise only indirect control and monitoring of local units but may set up machinery to regulate and evaluate local policies. This process is basically different from privatization, which is a transfer of authority to private companies or

individuals. The degree of decentralization may differ greatly from one country to another. Decentralization may be limited to the material and financial management of educational institutions, but also concern curriculum design.

Privatization.

Privatization denotes the transfer of school decision-making, responsibilities and management towards private entities. In this context, decentralization is akin to the privatization of the entire public service.

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