

## **Decentralization and Local Governance in Mali**

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### **Summary**

Decentralization is a major aim of the political reforms adopted by African nations since the early 1990s. However, researchers have not always played the role they should in the development, implementation and monitoring of this new reform programme. With a focus on Mali and Burkina Faso, two of the leaders in policy of decentralization in the region, the project aims to assess the state of current research on decentralization; provide a framework for ongoing research so that case studies can be used comparatively; conduct research that is relevant to policy; ensure adequate feedback to the research subjects; and develop information useful for other West African countries.

### **Justification/Context**

Since the early 1990s, many West African nations have introduced political, economic, legal and institutional reforms, one of the most important of which has been decentralization. By transferring certain national powers to local bodies, decentralization reform aims to improve efficiency and effectiveness of state operations; increase the state's capacity to provide services and react to local needs; promote transparency; and expand political representation and the participation of different social groups in the decision-making process.

Decentralization reform, however, confronts a number of challenges. It is transposed onto already existing power dynamics. While it has the potential to change local power relationships and promote participation by habitually disenfranchised groups (womens, migrants, youth), it also has the potential to reinforce inegalitarian social systems.

The governments of Mali and Burkina Faso committed to the decentralization process in the early 1990s. However, it has been widely acknowledged that social science research has played a far too limited role in the development, implementation, and evaluation of the reforms. This project seeks to address this need, by developing a permanent system for analysis and review of the decentralization process and for providing feedback to those implementing the reform.

At a planning workshop held in Bamako in March 2005, an inventory was taken of existing research on decentralization in Mali. It revealed that while several research projects are in progress, these are mostly unconnected case studies of individual *communes*. Because they are not linked within any comparative framework, they are of limited value. The government has also set up a quantitative system to monitor the reform and sponsored a number of investigations of varied quality. Representatives from the municipalities confirm that, for the most part, researchers and consultants request information but never send back their report nor provide any restitution. The preliminary meeting also confirmed a lack of coordination among research institutes.

Documents and resources are dispersed among several libraries and resource centers; no center has a complete set of resources and no mechanism exists to ensure that researchers send final reports to these resource centers.

There is an urgent need for quality, pertinent and coordinated research in order to elucidate the issues and challenges confronting the decentralization process, propose solutions to the problems encountered thus far, and ensure that lessons can be drawn from Mali's experience.

### **Objectives and Expected Outcomes**

The overarching objective of this project is to contribute to the debate on decentralization and its influence on local government practices through comparative field research. Specific objectives include:

- Documenting and analysing the process of adaptation to decentralization by the citizenry;
- Analyzing the evolution of legitimacy and the related effects on government practices, local development, equity, and inclusion;
- Facilitating dissemination of research results and their utilization;
- Providing opportunities and support to student researchers
- Reinforcing cooperation between research institutions in the social sciences; between fundamental research and development (operational) research; and between researchers, decision makers, elected officials and lay persons.

The expected outcomes include:

- Empirical and analytical appraisal of the process of adaptation to decentralization by the citizenry;
- Knowledge of the population's perceptions of the status of local government practices;
- Identification of the factors influencing legitimacy, equity, and inclusion;
- Completion of an inventory of research results that is available to the various participants (national and local decision makers, lay persons, development partners, etc.)
- Training and experience for student researchers in the various research teams;
- Dissemination of the work done by student researchers, post-doctoral researchers and research-developers, through publication and accreditation activities;
- Enhanced exchange and information mechanisms between research institutes, researchers and other players in the decentralization process.

## Activities

In contrast to existing research on decentralization which consists mostly of case studies of individual municipalities or villages, this research will be organized to ensure comprehensive coverage of Malian territories and establish a comparative framework within which case studies can be linked. Activities include:

1. Develop a research protocol and a common research procedure which will enable comparison of case studies on the evolution of decentralization reform, changes in local government practices and the role, the influence and the inclusion of the population;
2. Develop an approach for formulating research objectives with all participants (decision makers, participants, municipalities), to present the results in a format adapted to the end-users;
3. Organize workshops for training, information, feed-back and follow-up;
4. Reinforce access to publications, to network resource centers, to encourage filing of documents, and eventually a web site;
5. Organize an annual information fair;
6. Organize an annual scientific colloquium to promote discussion, exchange, and to build relationships between researchers;
7. Increase support to student researchers, post-doctoral researchers, and development professionals;
8. Publish research results;
9. Replicate the research system for use in other contexts and organize yearly exchanges.

During Phase I of CDP, this project looked at decentralization and local governance reform in Mali and Burkina Faso. The specific question that the project tried to answer was that of whether or not decentralisation has made local governance more democratic and, whether the decentralization processes and the institutions born out of them have become rooted and owned by the local communities. The project team chose to focus on the involvement in, and ownership of the decentralization processes by the local, particularly the rural, communities.

The research reports produced by this project are being processed for publication by CODESRIA as Occasional Papers that will be both in print and posted on the CDP web pages of the CODESRIA website.