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ABOUT THE PROJECT

This is the first issue in a series of *Project Briefs* from the formative process research (FPR) on the local government reform programme (LGRP) in Tanzania. The *Project Briefs* intend to present and discuss cases illustrating experiences from various councils in implementing the reform. The Project Briefs will also provide discussions on special issues and themes of broader interest. In this issue the objectives and main themes of the research project are presented.

Objectives

The overall aim of this four-year research project, which runs till end 2005, is to document processes of change and impacts of the LGRP, and to provide key stakeholders with operationally relevant data and analyses of lessons learned during implementation. The research project is designed in close consultation with the Local Government Reform Team, main donors and other key stakeholders. Although the project collaborates with the established monitoring and evaluation set-up of LGRP, it is organised *independently*.

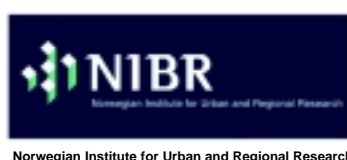
The project is managed by the Research on Poverty Alleviation, and involves researchers from Tanzania (REPOA and UDSM) and Norway (Chr. Michelsen Institute and the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research). Funding is provided by NORAD.

Main themes

In 1997, as part of the overall civil service reform programme, a Local Government Reform Process was initiated. Starting from 2000, powers and central government resources are transferred to the local level to enable the local governments to improve their level of service delivery. The essence of LGRP is to transfer duties, financial resources and legal opportunities from the central to the local government levels. The extent to which this will result in improved services, such as in health, education, water supply, transport infrastructure etc., depends on the quality of local governance as well as financial management. Thus, the research programme concentrates on the following three broad dimensions of the local government reform:

- (1) Governance: local autonomy and citizen participation.
- (2) Finances and financial management: accountability, efficiency and local resource mobilisation.
- (3) Service delivery and poverty alleviation: criteria of success and operational constraints.

Whereas improved service delivery represents the ultimate goal of the reform, the other two themes represent means to this end. Moreover, an important element of the study is associated with trust relations between the local government and society, and changes in the ability of the civil society to act as development agents.



Chr. Michelson Institute



Data collection

Six case councils have been selected for in-depth studies. These are: Bagamoyo DC, Ilala MC, Iringa DC, Kilosa DC, Moshi DC and Mwanza CC. They were selected on the basis of the following criteria: (i) variations in resource bases; (ii) rural-urban variations; (iii) degree of inclusion in the LGRP; (iv) degree of donor presence or support; and (v) composition of political parties.

To establish the baseline for the research, data collection is linked closely to *indicators of change* induced by the LGRP. Such indicators are based on a set of common data (at council, ward and village/mtaa levels) that is easily accessible, easily compiled and easily maintained for all case districts over time. Priority is given to data needed for *comparison* of impacts and effects across districts. In essence, a small, common database is developed for all districts. Moreover, a *Database on local government and decentralisation* is developed. This literature base contains at present more than 300 references, the bulk of which are on Tanzania, and includes both published and unpublished ('grey') material. The base also includes some relevant publications on local government reforms in other African countries (including Uganda) and international experiences.

Methodological challenges

The researchers are connected by a common focus on the reform process as a whole, and on the overarching cross-sector rather than compartmentalised effects of the reform. This approach implies major methodological challenges, partly because of the many ongoing reforms (at present, 17 reforms related to decentralisation are being implemented), which have direct and/or indirect impacts on governance, finances and service delivery in local authorities. Thus, the causal linkages between the LGRP and the three main themes are not obvious. Improvements in service delivery, for instance, in education and health services may not be directly linked to the LGRP, but are more likely due to increased allocation of financial resources from the central government. Thus, a challenge for the research group is to establish indicators of change that directly and/or indirectly can be linked to the LGRP.

Furthermore, the causal linkages between the three main themes are not easy to trace. Do improvements in finances and governance lead to improved services, or does causality go both ways? For instance, improvements in service delivery may have positive impacts on tax compliance which, thus, generates more resources for service provision, which again impacts positively on tax compliance, etc. It is not likely that the research will be capable to trace the relative importance of the various factors that cause changes, and on that basis provide scientifically plausible causal explanations

We must also acknowledge that reform processes take time. This is particularly true for local government reforms which involve many political and bureaucratic institutions at all levels, as well as political parties, NGOs, CBOs and different foreign donors. Moreover, successful devolution also implies changing peoples' mindsets on governance, the role of the state, the roles and sharing of responsibilities between councillors and the bureaucracy, citizens' involvement and awareness of their rights and obligations, etc. It is unlikely to observe measurable changes in some of these factors during the project period of 3-4 years. In depth case studies may, however, illuminate some of the issues at stake, and provide insights on opportunities and obstacles, as well as indications of change.

Lessons from the research

An essential precondition for organisational learning is that actors involved feel that the actual issues under study, the data produced, the findings and analyses made is of relevance and interest for the major stakeholders in the programme. There may, however, be diverse opinions on what will be of *interest* and what will be *useful* as background information for programme management, monitoring and evaluation of results. Thus, we acknowledge that the design of the actual thematic modules or case studies will have to strike a balance between possible conflicting opinions – if a common understanding cannot be reached.

One mechanism of disseminating findings from the research to stakeholders and the general public is through this series of *Project Briefs*. It is our sincere hope that the forthcoming *Project Briefs* will provide useful comments and analyses on the current local government reform based on research findings, and that they will stimulate discussions on the local government reform in Tanzania.

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