

The High Level Panel on UN System Wide Coherence

Comments from Local Government International Bureau

The Local Government International Bureau (LGIB) welcomes the opportunity to address the issue of system wide coherence in the United Nations through the High Level Panel. We hope that the panel will address all spheres of coherence, in particular taking into account the way the UN engages with and supports local government and local actors.

This paper by LGIB is a submission to the panel, seeking special UN observer status and as well as more coherent and targeted support for local government throughout the UN's work.

Local government and development

The UN's various agencies too often see local government as simply a 'service provider' and not as democratically elected representatives of local communities who can also make strategic and political contributions to development processes. Similarly, policy consultations with different parts of the UN typically group local government representatives together with NGOs and 'civil society' and not as a distinct entity – unlike parliamentarians.

Local government responsibilities typically include the delivery of key strategic processes and services that directly contribute to development such as planning, housing, water and sanitation, waste management, transport management, promoting local economic development, primary health care and education. How these key activities are provided have a major impact on attaining the UN Millennium Development Goals. Christophe Nuttall from the UNDP recently commented, "we need to recognise that achieving the Millennium Development Goals will be done thanks to local authorities. I would say that 70% of the agenda is typically the mandates of local authorities". However, as argued by UN Habitat's Executive Director Anna Tibaijuka recently "Decentralisation does not only entail the transfer of functions and responsibilities to lower levels, it has also to be accompanied with commensurate capacities and resources".

Internationally local government is committed to achieving the MDGs, and supporting effective decentralisation to the lowest appropriate level is a key approach to enabling development. However donors, including the UK, and UN agencies need to do more to enable local governments to work towards meeting the Millennium Development Goals. Whilst some donor governments and UN agencies have embraced decentralisation as a means to fight poverty, local governments are generally not given adequate support to permit them to deliver essential services effectively or to effectively represent the communities that have elected them.

A recent OECD report by the DAC Network on Development Evaluation outlined the 'Lessons learned on Donor Support to decentralization and local governance'. It noted a number of lessons and recommendations that the UN should take account of, including:

- The need for long term support for decentralisation – successful decentralization can take more than a decade in the context of financial and political instability
- Lack of central government support - implementation of decentralization is not always coupled with high-level commitment by the central governments involved
- Gender gap – it is not always clear how decentralization programmes have contributed to the empowerment of women in local decision-making or improved the delivery of local government services for women
- Pro-poor – There is still a lack of poverty focus in the practical implementation of many decentralization programmes
- Partnerships – where local government and civil society are both supported it can improve local democratic procedures and strengthen civil society's capacity to take advantage of such improvements
- Capacity and resources - Capacity building appear most successful when coupled with extra local government resources

The OECD study recommended:

- Greater coordination between donors and the partner governments – to better integrate programmes in the government's policies and plans

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- Enhanced coordination between donors – using forums to share information and coordinate initiatives, and establish basket funds when appropriate
- Sustainability of donor support – build in short and long term sustainability to decentralization and local government programmes
- Strengthen the poverty focus – enable local government to target underprivileged groups and stimulate grassroots voices e.g. citizen budget watching and service delivery monitoring
- Strengthen financial development and sustainability of local government – enable local government to have greater financial autonomy and stimulate local revenue generation

Promoting effective decentralization - Key recommendations

The UN needs to promote effective decentralisation processes and good local governance strengthening programmes by donors as well as by its own agencies, not as a form of conditionality, but as a means of enabling effective local dialogue and ownership in development in all its forms (also see Annex at end of paper).

- **Consistent approach to decentralization** - In programme delivery there needs to be a more consistent approach to working with and supporting local government. UN Habitat is currently drafting "Guidelines on decentralization and the strengthening of local authorities" to be agreed at UN Habitat's Council in 2007. Such guidance, should be agreed at the UN Habitat Governing Council and then endorsed by the UN General Assembly as an approach to be supported throughout the UN
- **Localising the MDGs** - Various UN agencies, not only UN Habitat and UNDP, need to do more to enable local governments to work towards meeting the Millennium Development Goals, including through technical cooperation and exchange of good practice between local authorities internationally. In addition budget support and other aid modalities need to specifically target local government strengthening.
- **National coordination function** – All UN programmes working at the national and local level should act in a coordinated fashion at the national level under a single umbrella to avoid duplication and improve the allocation of decentralization activities according to appropriate competencies and need. National processes such as Poverty Reduction Strategies should consult and work in partnership with national and regional associations of local government where they exist, alongside central government engagement. The UN should also assist the process of donor coordination and harmonization to improve the impact of aid delivery
- **Local gender equality: a new MDG indicator** – measuring the political representation of women in national parliaments as a indicator for the Gender MDG is a very important aspect of gender equality. However the MDG indicators should include the election of women as local councillors as well as parliamentarians, as is currently adopted – to recognize the important impact of women on local policy making and ensuring service delivery is better targeted to the needs of women
- **Review, monitoring and reporting** – UN agencies need to consult and work in partnership with national and regional associations of local government, as well as individual authorities where appropriate, in the development and implementation of programs and policies. UN agencies should also encourage local governments to show how they are accountable to their local communities in any decentralization / local development activities e.g. via public financial reporting, public meetings

Institutional Impact

- **International local voice** – Establish UN special status for local government in the UN as recommended by the Cardoso Panel's report on civil society and UN relations

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- **International approach to decentralization** – Recognise and apply the “Guidelines on decentralization and the strengthening of local authorities” throughout UN programmes via the UN General Assembly
- **National coherence** - Establish a single national UN umbrella organization within each country to bring together the activities of separate UN agencies and programmes in a coherent fashion. This body should engage with local government actors as standard practice through consultation and partnership with national and regional local government associations, as well as individual authorities
- **Local government budgetary support** – Aid programmes need to specifically target local government strengthening to enable effective decentralization (see annex)

Contact:

Rosalie Callway, LGIB International Policy Officer
Email: rosalie.callway@lgib.gov.uk
Tel: 0207 664 3117

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Annex. Recommendations for 'Effective' Decentralisation

Aim	Recommendation
Good governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Instituting the right values</i> – Core principles of effective decentralisation, such as good local governance, human rights, sustainability and pro-poor orientation, should be recognised and encouraged • <i>Enabling local government</i> – Decentralisation is required in both regulatory powers (ability to enforce local guidelines, policies, and create revenue through taxation and fees) and resources (finance, technical, management and governance capacity) • <i>Local to national links</i> – Involvement of the local level in regional and national processes, policies, strategies, reporting and planning is strongly advised
Engaging the poor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Involving the poor</i> – Directly engaging the poor in decentralisation processes is vital for effective poverty eradication. This recognises that it is the poor that need to own and be a part of finding their own solutions. • <i>Participatory approaches</i> – Building participation skills in local government is required, to support active community involvement in planning, decision-making and service delivery. It is especially important to build up skills for involving poor and marginalised groups in local governance. Training should focus on: transparent participatory decision-making; civic dialogues; negotiation skills; conflict management; and consensus building
Local capacity building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Capacity building of local leadership</i> – Capacity building of local government leaders is crucial to achieve full understanding of the implications of various options for service delivery, including privatisation and partnerships • <i>Political and governance skills</i> – Enabling local officials and officers to be effective in sustainable governance and tackling locally relevant MDGs in the short to longer-term • <i>Technical practitioner support</i> – targeted capacity building is needed by key local practitioners e.g. planners, environmental health officers, sanitation and waste service providers, financial administrators • <i>Information for decision-making</i> – Support is required to strengthen local capacity for data collection and analysis to enhance monitoring, reporting and decision-making. This would also help provide better information for national government analysis and decision-making
Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Development of tools and mechanisms</i> – is urgently needed to increase finance of local infrastructure (water, sanitation, housing etc) • <i>Access to finance</i> – Mobilised access to finance locally and local revenue creation (e.g. capacity to raise taxes and fees) should be enabled and supported • <i>New mechanisms</i> – Support for new local finance mechanisms, e.g. coordinating local government bonds regionally to increase access to local funds
Long term sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Decentralisation and participation</i> – Local Agenda 21 (LA21) participatory processes need greater support at all levels to ensure that sustainable local action is achieved involving all groups in a community • <i>Sustainable consumption and production</i> – National policies should encourage local governments to purchase essential goods and services (e.g. transport, shelter, water and sanitation delivery) that meet sustainability criteria • <i>Urban - rural links</i> – National Strategies for Sustainable Development and National SD Councils need to foster dialogue and cooperation between urban and rural jurisdictions, encouraging greater regional coherence • <i>Inter-municipal cooperation</i> – Governments and international agencies should encourage local government networking, technical exchange, and study visits to support learning and capacity building for sustainable development. Bilateral, regional and international programmes require additional support e.g. UNDP Capacity 2015 programme • <i>Supportive institutional framework</i> – Governments and international agencies need to provide consistent policy and regulatory frameworks and greater encouragement for sustainable local action

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