
Decentralization of education management

BRIEF 2

Microplanning of education

Decentralisation can improve learning when it enhances capacity and democratic participation, and when resources are distributed fairly.

Over the last few decades decentralisation of school management has occurred in most education systems around the globe. If implemented well, decentralisation has the potential to improve education quality and learning outcomes. Careful system design is needed in order to reduce the potential adverse effects of decentralization, such as regional disparities, overlapping/conflicting policies, and elite capture—each of which is discussed further in this article.

Issues and Discussion

What is Decentralisation? Decentralisation generally refers to the process of transferring decision making power, responsibility, and tasks from higher to lower organisational levels.⁽⁵⁾ The motives of shifting authority and management responsibilities to local levels are a) to enhance democracy in decision making, b) to promote the effective and efficient use of resources in education, c) to make public education more responsive to local needs, d) to reduce the central government's and increase local groups' financial responsibility for schooling provision, and e) to enable schools and teachers to exercise greater professional autonomy.⁽¹⁴⁾⁽²¹⁾

Different Forms of Decentralisation: Decentralisation can take different forms. One major distinction is that between functional and territorial decentralisation:⁽⁵⁾ *Functional decentralisation* refers to the distribution of powers between various authorities that operate in parallel (e.g. one ministry responsible for basic education and another ministry responsible for higher education and research, a separate examinations authority or accreditation/inspection authority operating within the ministry of education). Education planning may benefit from effective coordination and synergies among these authorities. *Territorial decentralisation* refers to the redistribution of authority among the different geographic tiers of government, such as central/federal government, states, regions, provinces, districts, and schools.

Territorial decentralisation is further classified in three types:

- Deconcentration is the process through which a central authority establishes and staffs field offices, but retains central control.
- Delegation implies a transmission of tasks and administrative responsibilities. The delegation of tasks does not mean a shift of power because the local office is only given the role of

executing decisions made at central level. The power can be withdrawn.

- Devolution is the most extreme of this spectrum and implies the transmission of authority and real responsibility from central to local level. This local authority becomes independent and autonomous, and it can act without first asking permission.(6)(14)

Recently, *privatisation* has also been categorised as another form of decentralisation when devolution causes the government to divest itself of public responsibilities and functions, implying a transfer of powers to private hands and a reduction in state authority over schools.(2)(10)(9)(11)

The role of the local education authority: Decentralisation changes the relationships between local authorities, schools/teachers, parents, communities, and governments.(9) Local governments and school boards acquire authority and resources in areas like construction and maintenance of buildings, leadership, monitoring of school performance, teacher recruitment, teachers' professional development, and teachers' salaries. Other areas, such as curriculum, content, and assessment, may be shared responsibilities depending on the forms of decentralisation in place.(23)

Effects of Decentralisation on Learning Outcomes: Decentralisation within education requires careful considerations of which elements of the system to decentralise and to what local level.(9) There is still insufficient evidence to draw conclusions about the direct and indirect relationship between decentralisation and learning outcomes, and the decentralisation of resource mobilisation and allocation leads to especially mixed effects.(27) Research suggests that decentralisation of administrative functions to school-based management can result in greater empowerment and collaboration among teachers, a greater school-wide focus on professional development, and a greater sense of accountability.(2)(7)(18) Decentralisation of curriculum development rests on the belief that it will give more room for local variance and relevance, potentially leading to more motivated students and a better culture of learning.(4)(14) The major factors determining the effect of any form of decentralisation are whether local educators are equipped with skills, knowledge and attitudes to accomplish the task, and whether upper-level authorities supply the support they need.

Adverse Effects in Implementation of Decentralisation: Decentralisation can cause overlapping and conflicting decisions to be made at different levels and the phenomenon of elite capture, reducing democratic spaces. In Nepal, there are conflicting teacher recruitment policies entailing different types of service contracts and benefits.(15) In Uganda and South Africa, the decentralised funds are driven by local elite interests and dominated by a small group of better educated and networked individuals who are capable of presenting themselves to the donors, central government and the local population as an effective conduit for handling these funds. Consequently the poor and disadvantaged groups are neglected or excluded.(22)(25) To mitigate these adverse effects, a review of decentralisation procedures is needed. In particular, the decentralised system must recover the capacity to hold local governments and schools to account, and it must build the capacity of disadvantaged groups to participate more effectively within the system.

Decentralisation and (Re)Centralisation: In many cases, movements to decentralise co-exist with movements to maintain or increase central control.(1)(9) This phenomenon is increasingly observed in Latin America, Asia and Europe.(1)(13)(14)(19)(26) In some cases, decentralisation reforms are initiated and designed from the top, while only implementation and accountability are local duties, or procedures for handing over control are complex, and central government officials do not relinquish their power.(9)(14)(15) Other models maintain central power and control over setting central goals and standards for outcomes, such as the national assessment system, the standardised school curriculum framework, and standardised funding formula and fiscal legal procedures.(14)(20)(26) Finally, decentralisation is often driven by political ideologies and the agenda of the government in

power, and may be limited by cultural orientations in each system that push back towards centralised accountability. (1)(4)(13)(26)

Inclusiveness and Equity

Regional Disparities: The relationship between decentralisation and regional disparities seems strongly affected by the level of wealth of a country, the type of welfare system, the dimension of its existing disparities, and the presence of solid fiscal redistribution systems.(24) Research shows that in the developed world political and fiscal decentralisation does not affect regional disparities whereas fiscal decentralisation has triggered a significant rise in regional inequalities in the low income countries.(16) This holds true for educational decentralisation because the impoverished regions have weak capacity to compete for capital, investment and talent which can generate good conditions for schools.(11)

Policy Examples

- Ethiopia [[PDF](#)]
- Hong Kong [[PDF](#)]
- School-Based Management [[PDF](#)]
- Thailand [[PDF](#)]
- Denmark [[PDF](#)]

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