Towards Inclusive and Sustainable Development
in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

In early 1998, the World Bank prepared a paper on the decentralization and participation policies outlined but not fully implemented by the Congolese government in the early days of the third republic. If the country has since receded into war, it is perhaps in part because these ideas were never properly put into practice. Rather than de-legitimizing them, the renewed war makes it even more important that these ideas be heard.

Legacies from the past

Centralization has a long history in the Congo. Though with different justifications and characteristics, central government dominated decision-making and execution during both the colonial period and the second republic. Regarding decision-making, "everything came from above without any explanations". (Various statements and comments by government representative and citizens garnered through field visits are quoted verbatim in order to more accurately reflect local ideas). Though local authorities had certain powers, these were more often than not abused rather than used in the interest of the population.

Infrequent contact between central authorities and the population resulted in many provinces and territories being, and remaining, enclaved without access to neighboring regions, much less to the outside world.

Meanings of decentralization and participation

"Kinshasa is far removed from the real problems and less concerned with finding interventions addressing these problems." This is a recurrent theme about *decentralization*. Behind this statement lies the conviction that the Congo is too big a country to be controlled by central authority alone. Recognizing this limitation, "government should make the priorities of its people also its priorities". Indeed, "making grassroots responsible for development would be the best approach for the country."

On a fundamental level, *participation* requires a self-conscious citizenry whose rights are
protected, including "the right to be from somewhere, the right to being respected by government, the right that government responds to my needs, and the right to express my opinion and to being listened to." These rights "give confidence that I am, that I can influence decisions that affect me", in other words that it is worthwhile to participate.

The legacies of the neglect of the right to participate are manifold and overcoming them is challenging indeed. It requires that current leaders "show respect towards the population, respect criticism if something does not work, and do not start with a preconceived opinion about the people’s needs". It also requires open communication and listening to the people, "who have important things to say". With the administration thus responsive to the population’s needs, "the people will respect authority, will gain confidence in this authority, and will be willing to enter into a partnership of trust". "By sharing responsibility with the people, there will be less pressure on the authority if something goes wrong". But "if the population does not participate, the parameters of development are incomplete, and the people will have no commitment to maintain" whatever is being done on their behalf.

A critical question relates to the way such participation should be institutionalized to increase accountability and responsiveness. In the current context, adequate representation by all population groups appears to be the most suitable guiding principle. For that reason, "local negotiations are more appropriate than winner-takes-all elections". Such consensus building would help to manage diversity better and "to avoid further polarization".

**Economic and social policy directions**

The present government, soon after coming to power, initiated preparations for a national reconstruction conference and a territorial conference to rebuild the economy and state. The objective of the *national reconstruction conference* was the formulation of reconstruction strategies and policies from the longer-term perspective, within a participatory approach that consists of mobilizing the different segments of Congolese society around the ideal of national reconstruction. Whereas efforts under the earlier dispensation had mostly proven futile, preparations for the national reconstruction conference for the first time fully involved the population, who in turn responded enthusiastically to the chance of participating in the shaping and building of a new state.

*Provincial conferences* were held in late 1997/early 1998. Many local authorities actively participated in the process. They ensured an accurate representation of views and facilitated the participation of the population. In other instances, the process was more controlled at the provincial and territorial level and openness of views was limited as a result. By and large, however, the preparation process for the national reconstruction conference proved to be an important tool for making people conscientious of their role in development.

The national reconstruction conference, planned for mid-February 1998, was canceled at short notice for reasons which remain unclear. This cancellation has done much damage to the image of the process, and this damage has been compounded by the fact that the results of the provincial conferences have not been openly communicated or discussed. Nevertheless, the approach taken for organizing the national reconstruction conference warrants consideration.
for institutionalization. It has been *indigenous*, by building on a civil society that has become a potent factor for people-centered development; *inclusive*, by reaching out to citizens from all walks of life; and *responsive*, by listening to the needs of the people at the grassroots level.

The objective of the *territorial conference* was to restore the state nation-wide by increasing the role of the territory. The conference, held from February 12-14, 1998, was also intended to reinforce national reconstruction efforts. The territorial conference shared many views with the national reconstruction process about rebuilding the state. Recognizing that "making grassroots responsible for development would be the best approach for the country", the territorial conferences introduced consultative councils at the territorial level with representation from civil society to foster the participation of the local population in grassroots development, much like the territorial fora of the provincial reconstruction conferences had done.

**Making decentralization and participation work**

The year 1998 witnessed the organization (and subsequent cancellation) of the national reconstruction conference and the implementation of the territorial conference. Both have left their mark on the future socioeconomic development of the country, the former through the bottom-up identification of needs and interventions using territorial fora, the latter through its imprint on the 1998 decree-law which includes the creation of consultative councils for guiding local affairs. Any operationalization of the concepts of decentralization and participation needs to build on the lessons of these efforts. Yet it also depends on prospects for lasting peace and ownership of this peace by the population. It turn, through participation also in the political decision-making process, the population can help central authorities to find such lasting peace.

Any structure devised to meet this end should be "simple and understandable to people". It also should be inclusive of local government and the local population. The population is very much aware that "if the administration were left out, it could easily create problems and block decisions". The structure would, therefore, have to establish a mutually beneficial partnership between administration and population around tangible results, while at the same time avoiding the creation of a parallel local government. Another critical element for the successful functioning of this structure is the recognition that the process of decision-making is no less important than its result.

The envisaged *consultative councils* could be strengthened in two ways. First, by extending representation in the council to civil society and to lower levels of government. Second, by transferring decision-making authority about local socio-economic development to the council. The responsibilities of this consultative council could include the identification of local interventions, the appraisal of project proposals, the selection of implementing partners, and the monitoring and supervision of project implementation.

The modified consultative council would need to balance participation both functionally (women’s groups, farmers’ associations, churches, etc.) and regionally (collectivity, *groupements*, villages). The council would, thus, be an inclusive mechanism. Its decision-making authority over local social and economic development would enable it to allocate the
territory’s development budget between sectors and collectivities on the basis of priority needs. This process of partnership would bring tangible benefits to all groups involved.

If people understand that the funds they spend are theirs, they will have a direct interest that they are spent well. They will insist on transparent and clear rules and expect accountability from both the local administration managing the budgetary allocation and the implementing partner managing project funds. Decentralization, thus, requires central government control of the process to avoid losing authority over the macroeconomy and equitable national development. It also requires grassroots control to ensure that government, central and local alike, is transparent and accountable.

By encouraging people to exchange views, government can take a first step in the difficult task of managing diversity. Traditional leaders and civil society can assist the government in this. The search for partnerships beyond ethnic boundaries should, thus, be the first common goal. "If boundaries are opened, the people will open their minds and hearts, too, and there will be no more fear or threat." But talking to each other not only helps to overcome fear. It also helps to find a common purpose which will make people work together again." Because "what makes a community (and a state), is a common purpose."