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People and municipalities: decentralisation and the articulation of agency in local political arenas in Africa

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Decentralisation has a long history in development policy and research in Africa. At least since the 1980s, several interventions have targeted local administrations in Africa, to deliver responsive services, facilitate local democracy, and promote participation, but also to act as a panacea for local development challenges (Crawford 2009; Rondinelli, McCullough, and Johnson 1989; Rothchild 1996; Stren and Eyoh 2007; Wunsch and Olowu 1992). This hope was built on a particular understanding of decentralisation. As an umbrella term, decentralisation “translates into three modalities” (Dafflon 2013, 17). Deconcentration describes a situation where the central government establishes branch offices at the local level that follow clear hierarchical principles. Delegation turns local governments into agents to “act in place of the central governments” while following directives from the central government. Only devolution “effectively transfers powers and responsibilities to local governments” (Dafflon 2013, 17). This is a largely shared view in the decentralisation literature (see, e.g. Boulanger, Gauthier, and Vaillancourt 2012, 4–7). In the development debate, decentralisation is understood as devolution plus democratic elections of the local administration. Here, local civil servants and democratically elected officials would have both political and financial autonomy in making decisions regarding their most pressing needs (Crawford and Hartmann 2008, 9; Poteete 2020).

Building on this understanding, the contributions in this part special issue will at the same time point out some of the shortcomings of decentralisation programmes. We must bear in mind that in remote areas where the central state tends to be far away, decentralisation often elevates the formal local administration to a powerful actor in the local arena. This happens regardless of whether the process is deconcentration, delegation or devolution. When this new administrative structure takes on local democracy principles (e.g. election of local representatives, civic engagement and public dialogue), it presents a potential challenge for the established local elites.

The amount of funding given to democracy assistance for African local governments is clear evidence of the continuing importance of democratic decentralisation in

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international development (Dietrich and Wright 2015; Resnick and van de Walle 2013). More importantly, the African Union's Charter on decentralisation views municipal governments not only as entities for local democracy – through democratically elected representatives – but also as channels for transforming the rural periphery (AU 2014). Despite doubts about the realisation of decentralisation's promise of rural transformation (Asiimwe and Muisi 2007; Awortwi and Helmsing 2014; Bérédogo 2006; Crawford and Hartmann 2008; Kassibo 2006) or participation and empowerment (Dauda 2001; Hasselskog 2016; Macamo and Neubert 2005; Patterson 2002; Sy 2009), we barely understand the apparently mixed results of decentralisation reforms and the current reality on the ground. Inspired by recent studies of actors in decentralised municipal bureaucracies (Ayeko-Kümmeth 2015; Doumbia 2018; Sabbi 2017) with a focus on practices of municipal administrations and their interaction with other local actors, this part special issue takes an in-depth view of the reality of decentralisation beyond formal institutional arrangements and regulations.

The thesis of this part special issue has evolved and deepened from two academic meetings that led to the selection of the most fitting contributions.¹ We began with a conference held in Dakar, Senegal, from 16 to 19 May 2019. Following an interdisciplinary approach, the conference sought to overcome the shortcomings in the decentralisation debate, which has often focused on the administration and its developmental goals, while bridging the existing academic divide between Francophone and Anglophone Africa. Under the title "Dynamics of Everyday Life within Municipal Administrations in Francophone and Anglophone Africa," as part of the 2019 Programme Point Sud initiative (funded by the German Research Foundation), we co-operated with the *Deutsches Historisches Institut Paris* (DHIP) and with the *Centre de Recherches sur les Politiques Sociales* (CREPOS) in Dakar, Senegal. The workshop brought together a diverse group of early career and established researchers, municipal agents and civil society practitioners. Following the conference, a short list of interesting papers was drawn up, and contributors were encouraged to compete with other interesting proposals for a slot in our double panel at a follow-up (virtual) meeting at the German Conference of African Studies (Vereinigung für Afrikawissenschaften in Deutschland [VAD]) in Frankfurt in June 2021.² The selected papers deepened the discussion even further in framing the central themes of this part special issue, including accountability, central–local relations, citizen experiences, and the diversity of local experiences. The two preceding events were conceptually framed by the agency articulated by local actors in the numerous processes of decentralisation. We defined agency in the sense of the dynamic interplay between different dimensions and structural contexts of action (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 963).

After a short recap of "the current debate," we present our specific approach developed against the background of these meetings: "the local everyday life perspective." Our findings are organised according to three topics, namely local cases, the central government, and the political context; local citizens and accountability of the local administration; and the variety of local actors. We conclude with a short remarks section.

The current debate

The debate on decentralisation mainly focuses on the formal structure and regulatory frameworks (e.g. the functions of the local administration, the municipal budget, and

personnel), their improvement and their implementation, which continue to be central to the development donors' reasoning for decentralisation. What is still needed, in our view, is an analysis of the impact of such changes on local power structures, politics and options for the participation of common people against the background of the wider socio-political context. A closer look at earlier studies, following the special issues by Paul Smoke and colleagues (see Smoke 2003) and Danielle Resnick and colleagues (Resnick 2014), reveals a focus on the anticipated goals as well as the embedded fiscal, institutional and political tensions of decentralisation. Analyses of these structural elements and political incentives of decentralisation often point to mixed results when considered from the perspective of improvements in democratic governance, accountability and efficient use of development assistance. A more recent analysis by Poteete (2020) indicates that these mixed outcomes persist regarding local governance processes and developmental outcomes more broadly. Her study points out decentralisation programmes' prospects for local democracy and socioeconomic transformation. These prospects are, nonetheless, mediated by the inherent political interest, the dependence on international support, and the multiple social forces that compete with the central state for control over the local political arena.

The studies by Von Braun and Grote (2002), Jütting, Corsi, and Kauffmann (2005), and Crawford (2008) reveal how the lack of commitment by political elites to implement decentralisation programmes affects service delivery and poverty reduction. Batley, McCourt, and McLoughlin (2012) concur with this argument regarding the political economy of service provision. They point out how service provision is shaped by elite interest, which in turn affects the systems of accountability, state capacity and legitimacy, and state–society relations. The contribution by Danielle Resnick and colleagues, with a focus on urban services, came to similar conclusions (see Resnick 2014). This is not surprising because they point out that the above-mentioned challenges, including elite capture, and the manipulation of service delivery in the local arena, are still there, and a mere change in administrative structures does not create the incentive and resources for implementing urgently needed projects.

These studies on elite interest underline that decentralisation is much broader than just a set of changes in formal structures and a shifting of responsibilities from the central state to the local administrative level along with the introduction of local elections. We gain an even wider perspective if we consider the socio-political context in which decentralisation programmes are embedded and analyse how these institutional changes shape the local power structures and the civic participation of the local population. Two strands of ethnographic studies have sought to open up this limited perspective. The first set of studies analyses competing claims by neo-traditional actors, especially when decentralisation is used by the state to control the local arena (Crook 1999; Derrider 2021; Komujuni and Büscher 2020; Purdeková 2011; Skalnik 2008; Van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal and van Dijk 1999; Vengroff and Johnston 1987). We use the term “neo-traditional,” following Spear (2003), because the role of kings, chiefs or elders who legitimise their present claims via recourse to traditions has at least fundamentally changed since pre-colonial times and they must liaise with state institutions to assert legitimacy. In some cases, these supposedly “traditional” positions are even a colonial invention (for the variety of political arrangements with regard to neo-traditional actors see Neubert 2019, 148–158; see also Tieleman and Uitermark 2019; Lund 2006).

The second strand focuses on the notion of everyday bureaucratisation and points out the range of “informal” practices and normative expectations that shape African bureaucracies despite the existence of formal roles and responsibilities (Bayart 2013; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014; Blundo 2006; Diawara and Röschenhaler 2016). So far, the latter studies primarily focus on professionals in the public service, thereby blurring our understanding of the quality of interactions in African municipalities. Thus, our approach in this part special issue provides important lessons for further research. With a clear focus on Anglophone and Francophone Africa – a challenging but academically enriching undertaking that is rarely pursued – it offers, among other things, key hints to widen the analytical perspective on the varying reactions of the local population, including local political actors in local government processes. The contributions address themes covering accountability, the relationship between the central and local governments, the experiences of citizens, and the diversity of encounters in the daily functioning of decentralisation.

A local everyday life perspective

The topics discussed in this issue link very well with the ongoing debate on decentralisation, which has often focused on the local administration and its practices, including its domination by central state elites, its developmental efforts, and the absence of local autonomy in delivering local services (Crawford 2009; Dafflon and Madiès 2013; Dickovick 2009; Crook 1999, 2003; Von Braun and Grote 2002; Smoke 2003). However, the contributions in this issue do not just offer more of the same. The novelty here is a consequent change in perspective. Our starting point is a critique of the gap in the debate on decentralisation. What is crucially missing is the already mentioned role of agency, understood as the dynamic ability to negotiate and influence formal processes of the local administration and the everyday interactions in local contexts. Through this agency, the legitimacy of the above-mentioned outside interference – seen from a local perspective – is simultaneously challenged and accommodated by competing claims from different societal actors. To reflect the promises and challenges of decentralisation, we contend that current debates and analyses of decentralisation should transcend the limitations of the local administration and include the wider local context and the variety of actors. We should take into account their different norms, values, interests and strategies for acting in the local political arena and in contributing to everyday local authority. Detailed analyses of the interfaces and practices between local administrations, elected officials, and societal actors are an important first step.

Our approach follows an everyday life perspective à la Olivier de Sardan, building on socio-anthropological field research that offers new insights into local administrations with a focus on the daily processes inside the local administrations and local power structures (Bellagamba and Klute 2008; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014). Hagberg’s (2019) broader framework for a comparative ethnographic analysis of local politics offers a crucial starting point. Our part special issue aims to understand the everyday dynamics inside and outside of municipal councils and among their actors.

The contributions develop around a rich interdisciplinary approach with scholars in political science, social anthropology, sociology and history. The analysis of decentralisation goes beyond the formal administrative structure, the officeholders in the central

government, local administration, and elected politicians such as members of parliament (MPs) and councillors. The local government is seen as an important part of a local political arena, marked by the dynamics between the central state and the local government; dynamics between political representatives like MPs and elected local councillors and, in some cases, elected mayors; and the particular influence of relevant local actors outside this formal political system. This includes a variety of actors, e.g. local big men, local associations, social movements or non-governmental organisations (NGOs). As important – or even more important – from this perspective are the ordinary citizens and their relation to the local government. This is a cross-cutting topic in the five case studies. Thus, the issue offers a wider perspective to these topics, especially with an empirical view from outside the local bureaucracies, while foregrounding the interface between state and local actors situated in a contested local political arena.

This approach reflects Bayart's (2013) notions of "bureaucratization from below," which describes the everyday and quotidian actions of inventing, confronting and reformulating bureaucratic processes by societal structures including parastatal and non-state actors.³ In this regard, a comparative study of the missing qualifications of the managerial staff, who are often overburdened with everyday tasks like ordinary accounting, offers important insights from the administration's perspective.⁴ In addition, our part special issue analyses how ordinary citizens appropriate bureaucratic techniques of the state to organise, adapt, and challenge the daily practices of formal local bureaucracies. Both ways help to overcome the lack of critical dialogue across the Anglophone and Francophone African divide (based on enduring legacies and bonds to colonial rule) that is taken for granted in most analyses of municipal governance (e.g. Olivier de Sardan 2011). The few earlier comparative studies of Francophone and Anglophone African local governments (e.g. Assoua 2007; Dafflon and Madiès 2013; Dickovick 2009; Stren and Eyoh 2007) show that this is a helpful endeavour. The formal structure, the political culture and the history of decentralisation mark the current situation in each country. However, the notion of the Anglophone and Francophone divide is somewhat misleading because it overemphasises the administrative colonial heritage. As we will see, the structures of these arenas vary according to particular national and, of course, local conditions that are also influenced by the post-colonial developments in the different countries.⁵ In addition, we should be careful in stretching our case studies generally, in taking them to be fully representative of the countries in question. Case studies from one area or one particular town generally lack the scope to guarantee they represent the situation in the country as a whole.

A comparative study of Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali (Eisenberg et al., this issue) shows very clearly the systematic discrimination regarding administrative capacity in rural areas. Despite this urban–rural difference, regional and local peculiarities are also relevant.⁶ Thus, we do not systematically compare countries but rather focus on particular cases, intending to offer a deeper look at the variety of local situations and point out important criteria for understanding the different patterns of interaction and interfaces between state and local actors, especially ordinary citizens. With regard to actors in the local arena, an important strand in the debate on decentralisation refers to neo-traditional authorities⁷ as relevant actors, especially at the local level. Sometimes they compete with the authority of local government, but more often they are partly included in the political system as twilight institutions (Lund 2006). This topic has already been discussed at length, with detailed

insights (Derrider 2021; Klute and Fernandes 2011; Komujuni 2019; Tieleman and Uitermark 2019). Therefore, we will not follow that well-established line of research.

That does not mean that the papers ignore the role of neo-traditional authorities. We would rather address their differing relevance in the case studies. They are especially important in Ghana as custodians of land in rural areas, with a clearly defined role. But this has been well discussed in other studies (e.g. Sabbi 2019; Valsecchi 2008), and it is also not very relevant to the question of trust in state institutions, the main topic of the Ghana study. In the paper on a (peri-)urban area in Mali, neo-traditional land law and the neo-traditional authorities are actors in ongoing land conflicts in the local arena because a clearly defined legal security regarding land rights is still lacking. For the topics of the other papers, neo-traditional authorities are not highly relevant – as in Uganda, where neo-traditional authorities are politically influential, especially in the area of the former Buganda kingdom (Kasfir 2017), but are very weak in the Northern part of the country, and they do not play an active role in the accountability forums, which constitute the main topic of the Uganda paper. The most extreme cases, where they are widely absent in everyday life, are Rwanda and urban South Africa. We are well aware that there are many situations in which neo-traditional authorities are more important than the local government. This holds true especially for cases involving legal pluralism and customary law (e.g. Diala 2021) and, as mentioned, in the case of land tenure. Other typical cases include very weak states where government structures are hardly present, at least in the periphery. In these cases, local self-organisation in either neo-traditional or new forms is highly relevant (Bellagamba and Klute 2008).

Local cases, the central government and the political context

Against this backdrop, this part special issue offers five case studies and one comparative study. Antje Daniel's study deals with gentrification in Cape Town, South Africa, and a social movement that fights for the evicted poor people. It offers deep insight into the relationship between an active civil society and the local municipality. Lamine Doumbia and Drissa Tangara focus on the conflicts of land tenure and claimants' strategies of bypassing the different actors in (peri-)urban Bamako in Mali. This study points to ongoing contestations over local land titles and the resulting conflict among multiple actors. The contribution of Matthew Sabbi, Anja Osei, Daniel Wigmore-Shepherd and Ekoutiamé Ahlin analyses Ghanaian "municipalities as drivers of trust in public institutions." The central thesis is that a well-functioning programme of decentralisation with local democratic practices supports trust-building in local public institutions and, in turn, cascades into support for national institutions. Jane Ayeko-Kümmeth's study on the local political structure in Uganda, regarding the accountability mechanisms at the local level, shows the shortcomings of formal rules. She criticises the corruption that is still strong despite formal mechanisms of control. Matthew Sabbi and Jean-Baptiste Ndikubwimana show, with the example of Rwanda, a very strict accountability mechanism of performance contracts at the local level that works not just on paper but as a carefully implemented and well-functioning practice. Finally, Ewald Eisenberg, Mamane Djibo, Harouna Diallo and Clemens Schweizer present a comparative study on the problems of qualification and options for training of administrative staff at the local level in Burkina

Faso, Niger and Mali. This provides important background knowledge for understanding the weaknesses of local administrations, especially in rural areas.

Some typical topics of the decentralisation debate are also taken up in these contributions. This inclusion unsurprisingly points to their relevance for local political reforms. The first concerns the relationship between the central government and the local administration. Examples of the role of clearly defined tasks come from South Africa and Mali. The municipality of Cape Town has a clearly defined autonomy, especially regarding land use and urban planning, the main topic of the case study. The opposite case of peri-urban Bamako shows the problems resulting from the lack of a clearly defined administrative and formal political structure with defined tasks for the different administrative and political institutions. An important cross-cutting issue is that despite formally existing local autonomy, the central government may find ways to influence local politics and local decisions. A simple way they do so is via the financing of the local government and the control over local political resources. Poteete's (2020) recent observations demonstrate that despite the significantly low amount of central government transfers in relation to national income, state support (i.e. grants and transfers) still constitutes a substantial part of local government spending in most countries, including the case studies in this part special issue.⁸ These issues are discussed in the papers on Rwanda, Uganda and Ghana. A crucial element concerns general budget transfers and funds earmarked by the different ministries and/or specially designed interventions. Even when decision-making on local priorities and expenditure now occurs at the local level, these earmarked funds directly influence specific tasks that could be accomplished depending on how much money is available. This is most obvious in Rwanda, where the use of funds at the local level is controlled via the performance contracts between the local administration and the central government (discussed later). We also find hints for Ghana regarding how mayors use such funds to support programmes sanctioned by the national government (Sabbi et al. in this volume; Sabbi, Stroh, and Neubert 2022).

Another way to observe the more or less direct influence of the central government at the local level is through delegated officeholders in the local administration, such as the district and sector secretaries in Rwanda. Even more obvious are the cases of Ghana with appointed mayors and Uganda with the Resident District Commissioners (RDCs) who gain legitimacy through their links to the president. In the three Francophone countries of Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali especially, the senior administrative staff at the local level is deployed by the central government (Eisenberg et al., this issue). In Mali, the elected mayors and other elected local officials are frequently challenged by appointed regional officials and local nobles (i.e. *chef de village*) who could also run for mayor (Hetland 2007). A similar form of central government influence occurs in the field of land governance, which in principle constitutes a central theme in Mali's decentralisation programme, but whose actual implementation regarding land tenure has yet to materialise. This is partly because the legislation (i.e. Law 96/050) still lacks a supporting decree to enforce its application (Doumbia 2018). Finally, we find representatives of different ministries at the local level of administration. This shows that despite the formal devolution of decision-making through local-level representatives (i.e. delegation), assigning responsibilities to representatives of ministries at the local level (i.e. deconcentration) offers a considerable amount of control for the central government.

The above-mentioned question of improved service delivery is not directly addressed in the contributions of the part special issue. However, we find a sceptical undertone about service delivery from thematic publications on the topic.⁹ The most far-reaching promise of decentralisation, namely the promotion of democratisation and participation, is a cross-cutting topic among all the contributions (to be discussed later).

Aside from putting the means of control in the hands of the central administration, the general political context in a country is relevant for the local administration and its relation to the citizens. Four of the case studies we present here share a relatively stable political situation, with a central government that is still strong enough to stand even in the case of an active political opposition.¹⁰ They have established a more or less accepted local government structure (Ghana, South Africa, Uganda and Rwanda). The situation in the Sahel region of West Africa is much less stable. In Mali, the uprising in the north (since early 2012) and the changing civil and military governments have created a volatile political context. However, in the south, including the capital city of Bamako, the effect on the operation of local government does not yet appear significant. The only direct link has been the Algiers Agreement (*Accord d'Alger*) and the annual *États généraux de la décentralisation*¹¹ in 2015, which pursued governance reforms through the process of decentralisation. This has pushed the Malian government and its international partners to focus attention on democratising local representation aimed at peace consolidation (Molenaar et al. 2019, 41). This resulted in the creation of the new regions of Ménaka and Taoudeni in 2016, bringing the number of regions in Mali to ten. Nevertheless, the local political arena in and around Bamako is much more contested than in the other cases presented in this issue. This reflects less the general political situation and more the weaknesses of the decentralisation process. This partly explains why grassroots actors and civil society groups make claims for more inclusion, participation and attention (Dolumbia and Tangara, this issue). Niger and Burkina Faso – that together with Mali constitute the subjects of Eisenberg et al.'s comparative study – are also in a precarious security situation given that threats from militias and terrorist groups have led to recent military coups. The comparative study shows that the volatile security situation may also offer the local level more room to manoeuvre and limit the influence of the central government (Eisenberg et al., this issue).

Local citizens and accountability of the local administration

Against this background of structural diversity, we can look at the main topics including how ordinary citizens relate to the local government and how these relations are handled in the local political arena. This links, obviously, to the question of democratisation and participation, but with a shift in perspective. A helpful analytical approach starts from the everyday life setting and the impact on democratisation and participation, but this is just one element among others. A crucial instrument for popular participation and democracy is accountability. In principle, there are two elements here: first, formal institutions and laws as means of control of politicians and administration; and, second, public meetings and personal contacts between officeholders and citizens.

The above-mentioned performance contracts in Rwanda (*Imihigo*) prove to be very powerful instruments not only for the central government but also for local actors, including ordinary citizens. All activities at the local level are formally agreed upon in these contracts. *Imihigo* contracts and their fulfilment are announced to the public and citizens can

follow their implementation. Communities that are ambitious and successful implementors are publicly honoured and rewarded by the central government, and their leaders' position is strengthened in the local political arena. Obviously, the strong central control of the *Imihigo* process undermines the autonomy of local officials to seek alternative and potentially innovative targets. At the same time, the central government's high expectation for the successful implementation of *Imihigo* ensures that the local administrative staff in Rwanda have the necessary professional qualifications to handle the *Imihigo* contracts appropriately. This reminds us of the role of education for a well-functioning administration (a point made by Eisenberg et al. in this issue). In the South African case of Cape Town, one important element of the social movement fighting against the displacement of poorer people is their engagement in legal counselling and legal support, up to and including court cases. This underlines the crucial importance of legal regulation and the rule of law regarding administrative action at the local level. In addition, legally appropriate political decisions are also criticised and challenged with lobbying, and with various forms of protest like rallies or more radical tactics like street blockades and occupation, which might lead again to legal disputes but might, at the same time, lead to the revision of the criticised political decisions.

In Uganda, formal institutions and the rule of law are less effective with regard to local government. Formally, the most important instrument for fighting corruption is the District Integrity Promotion Forum (DIPF). The DIPF is headed by the RDC together with other officeholders, e.g. the district chief accounting officer (CAO), the magistrate court, or the state attorney. The main task is to provide a forum for all agencies in the district to share information on accountability, integrity and anti-corruption. Even ordinary citizens can bring suspicious cases to the DIPF. This sounds very strong in theory, but the practice is less convincing. The RDC is directly appointed by the president and may be politically compromised when assessing potential corrupt practices. The DIPF cannot sanction any misbehaviour, and there are hardly any meetings. The most critical point is that those who might be potentially corrupt are part of the body (Ayeko-Kümmeth, this issue) and thus they will hardly attack themselves. Put differently, formal regulations turn out to be ineffective in addressing corrupt acts. We find a similar situation in the case of (peri-)urban Bamako, Mali. Although there are formal certificates for land rights, traditional land rights and formal land rights issued by the government may show different users, and as the result of a territorial reorganisation, there even exist different land certificates issued by the former local administration and the current one. In this case, contradictory formal regulations are the reasons for conflicts and undermine the goal of accountability of administrative action.

In the cases of Rwanda and South Africa, citizens may at least partly refer to formal regulations to hold the local administration and local politicians accountable. Especially in the Cape Town case, the social movement pushes the citizens to claim their rights. In Rwanda, the transparency of *Imihigo* contracts offers the chance for citizens to follow the implementation of the announced projects. In a very different way, some people in (peri-)urban Mali make use of the legal uncertainty – mainly investors who try to find support from compliant officeholders to claim legal land titles and to evict the people who are not able to find politically strong allies. The simple and very obvious result is that the less reliable formal regulations appear, the more they contribute to distrust in formal regulations. Thus, what makes a difference is not the paperwork but rather the everyday practice.

The second instrument to strengthen accountability concerns public meetings and other forms of personal contact between officeholders and citizens. A typical strategy involves town hall meetings, e.g. in Ghana where the local administration offers a forum to discuss local policy issues. The Ghana paper shows that this can be a crucial element for public debate and the first personal contact between officeholders and citizens. At the same time, it offers the administration the chance to explain the administrative challenges they face in realising some of their tasks. In Uganda, *barazas* have the same function. Like the DIPF, the *barazas* are not regularly offered. The few *barazas* take place on short notice, usually in towns. Even some officeholders are taken by surprise when they are announced, and the rural population is excluded. Thus, *barazas* only work on paper. The municipality of Cape Town offers public participation meetings, such as community policy forums. They do not work effectively and hardly react to people's demands while de facto excluding the poor people. Rwanda's so-called Accountability Day events (*Journée des portes ouvertes*) encourage citizens to question district officials about the progress of community projects and the quality of service delivered. These interventions are expected to deepen the collective self-assessment of government agents. Despite acting as a top-down accounting mechanism, local actors still use the forum to articulate particular concerns and local needs. This may put pressure on councillors or on the administration to rethink their plans. If funds are available a particular concern might lead to an *Imihigo* contract.

In Rwanda, different officials are in charge of different sectors and therefore of particular clients in the municipality. The *Journée portes ouvertes*¹² serves not only to create a dialogue between the municipal administration's members and the people, to mutually and critically listen to each other, but also to sensitise the youth about the role of the municipal government, almost as described by the street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980). Subsequently, the grassroots actors do not systematically wait for the municipal government to organise the *Journée portes ouvertes*. In everyday life, the grassroots associations interact with the municipal officers through mass media, by direct correspondence, or in the assemblies that the associations organise weekly or monthly. The effect of these meetings on official reactions and interventions varies among the cases. This underlines again that the effectiveness of a potentially helpful instrument depends on the practice in everyday life. Sabbi et al. (in this issue) show in their Ghana case that well-functioning meetings are a crucial element that offers important personal contacts, supports democracy and creates trust in state institutions.

There are also other ways of making personal contact between officeholders and citizens that may work in the same direction. Ghanaian councillors report that they are directly approached by citizens with regard to personal or community problems and with proposals for community development. The councillors act as brokers between members of the community and the administration or with other development agencies, often alongside the formal structures of decision-making (Sabbi, Stroh, and Neubert 2022). If claims from citizens in Rwanda presented either in the public forums or directly to councillors are successful, they might be subsequently included in a performance contract. Personal contacts outside the official meetings are very important in Uganda, too. The citizens expect officeholders to support "their people," as expressed by the statement "whose child are you" (Ayeko-Kümmeth, this issue). This underlines a notion of autochthony referred to as "soilisation," which indicates an everyday local practice of

“looking at people from the perspective of son or daughter of the soil” (Ayeko-Kümmeth, this issue). The citizens also expect officeholders to take care of their people and create access to support from government resources for their needs. They expect to participate and receive a significant piece of the national pie. This reminds us broadly of Bayart’s views on the politics of the belly (Bayart 1993).

The peculiarity of the expectations and officials’ reactions leads to the question of whether the trust in institutions described for Ghana refers to the formal rules of the institution or to particular persons who represent the institution and who are viewed as trustworthy. Strictly speaking, these are two distinct modes of trust. The role of persons is most obvious in Uganda. Political or administrative decisions at the local level are not legitimated via the reference to law or rules but with reference to President Museveni – a pattern termed “musevinism” by Ayeko-Kümmeth (in this issue). At least in this case, the institutions are less relevant. Access to an administrative or political position is attractive because of its political influence and as a means towards personal enrichment and may be realised via bribes. Against this background, decentralisation creates additional small centres of power and the emergence or at least the intensification of so-called soilisation. The Mali case points in the same direction. The competition between different administrative and neo-traditional bodies is combined with corruption, and investors especially make use of this system to pay for political support for their own advancement at the expense of ordinary citizens. It is most obvious that in these cases trust in institutions is hardly possible. If there is trust at all then it is in powerful persons or persons to whom one is closely related.

This also describes two different methods for accountability at the local level, namely the formal legally bounded idea of a Weberian administration and service delivery, on the one hand, and personalised links with commitments such as patronage, nepotism and bribing, on the other hand. From a legal perspective, the latter is simply corruption, or a local version of the criminalisation of the state (Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999). As we know from earlier studies, this is just one perspective. Seen from a societal perspective where the social and economic exchanges are intertwined and regulated according to social obligations either along kinship networks or in social networks, this would count not as corruption but as an “economy of affection” (Hyden 2008) or a “moral economy” (Scott 1976).¹³ These different modes may openly conflict. For example, at the few *barazas* in Uganda or on radio talk shows, some individual citizens and/or NGO representatives openly criticise the corruption and ask for the respect of laws and legal rules (Ayeko-Kümmeth, this issue). Still, we should be aware that trust in impersonal institutions stands at the end of a very long social process. Formal institutions have to prove their reliability in acting according to rules and laws, even independently from personal relations, for an extended period of time.¹⁴ Even when they have done so, there is always at least a little hope that one can influence decisions when one has a personal relation to representatives of formal institutions. Against this background, democratic elections are often just the chance to choose the preferred patron (Neubert 1999). Of course, this is not just an African phenomenon but a reality in many democracies, especially at the local level.¹⁵

Variety of local actors

Our focus on the relationship between the local administration and the citizens should not be misunderstood. “Citizens” are far from being a homogeneous group. They have

different interests, different social positions and, of course, different political positions. The contributions in this issue try to present the perspective of the ordinary citizen or have, as in the South Africa case, a focus on the poor. At the same time, the studies underline the diversity of people with competing claims and different norms, values and interests acting in the local political arena and contributing to everyday local authority. The Uganda study refers to new local power centres of officeholders and/or local big men. The Cape Town case presents the activity of a social movement of evicted people and a supporting NGO, both in conflict with the municipality. The prime example is the Mali case, which presents a wide range of actors in the field of land tenure and land rights: different municipal officers, especially the one responsible for the issue of land titles; the mayor; a land surveyor as an expert; members of social movements and associations of the evictees; and neo-traditional authorities. These are just the social actors in the particular case of land tenure. For other topics, we will have even more different actors. This underlines the diversity of the local political arena.

This variety of local actors constitutes one of the reasons for decentralisation. It leads to an upgrading of the local political arena and, ideally, offers a space for democratic debate. The South African case of Cape Town shows quite well the interaction of formal rules; their claim in court, if necessary; the action of local investors – legally legitimised or illegal; the action of the poor represented by the social movement; and the supporting NGOs with their legal claims, protests, disobedience and illegal occupation. The political discontent of the different actors is also a topic for national, provincial and local elections. The Ghana study points mainly to the positive effects of decentralisation for democracy via personal contacts in public meetings. However, the above-mentioned potential element of brokerage and patronage is not pursued. In Ghana, discontent is a topic for local and national elections and sometimes accounts for regular national power changes, especially because the appointed mayors represent the ruling national party. Therefore, the president replaces mayors whose actions reflect poorly on the party. For Uganda, we have already mentioned that decentralisation gives space for local politics, especially for strong local actors. However, the critique of corruption at the few *barazas* that are held shows that it is also a political issue at the local level. The Mali contribution shows that an intensification of political debates at the local leads to a deepening of local democracy.

Rwanda is a particularly interesting case. The strictly observed performance contracts offer strong options for a follow-up on administrative tasks and strengthen accountability along the formal rules. At the same time, a possible critique carefully focuses on the local level and sidesteps the central government. This offers certain room for political debate without touching the national level. All in all, the different structure of the local arenas shows that the impact of decentralisation at the local level is substantially moulded by the wider political structure and the particular political culture. This becomes very clear when we look at the DIPF in Uganda, which exists only on paper, in contrast to the strictly followed performance contracts in Rwanda. At the same time, the consequent implementation of formal elements of control does not automatically support a lively democracy, at least not at the national level. It remains an open question whether and how the local arenas in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger will develop now that they have withdrawn from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and formed their own union, the *Alliance des États du Sahel* (AES). What are the intentions of the military

rulers with regard to decentralisation? And how will the local arena develop in the regions outside the authority of the central state?¹⁶

Conclusions

The combination of cases in this themed section underlines that we should be careful when drawing conclusions on the outcomes of decentralisation programmes. In all our cases, the formal regulations of decentralisation represent the devolution of authority to the local level with a clear scope for local autonomous decisions and local democracy. When we follow the everyday life processes of political decision-making at the local level and the relations between citizens and the local administration, we observe that the central state still has the power to intervene in local politics. Most obvious is the ongoing control of financial means. While a closer look shows that the devolution of power has its limits, we still find patterns of delegation, as in the case of the Ghana mayors, the RDCs in Uganda, or the district and sector secretaries in Rwanda, that offer government agents direct access to local political decisions. In all the case studies, decentralisation also includes deconcentration. The central ministries are present at the local level with their representatives and/or with local officials. All in all, this combination of devolution, including participatory local democracy, with the existing influence of the central state strengthens the local political arena. This offers chances to hold the local administration and politicians accountable.

At the same time, we find a large variety of actors in the local arena also depending on the local structures. This plays out in very different ways. We observe the interplay between formal rules and civil society actions, as in South Africa. We also observe the use of local elections, town hall meetings, and national elections as the expression of political will in Ghana, or a kind of concentration of the political debate to the local level without any criticism of national policies, as in Rwanda. In all the cases presented in this part special issue, it becomes obvious that formal regulations are just one side of the coin. Personal relations, whether in the form of patron–client relations or local political alliances or networks, are a cross-cutting element. The comparative perspective of our cases in Anglophone and Francophone Africa offers a compelling framework for understanding the patterns of agency emerging from the decentralisation processes discussed herein. Following this combined understanding, we see that with a certain degree of openness – at least at the local level – political participation by local actors intensifies. This does not guarantee that all citizens get a chance to participate in this debate with the possibility to influence policy. It might only privilege the most powerful, as in Uganda and partly in Mali, or it may be open to larger parts of the citizenry as in Ghana and, presumably, in Rwanda. As the Cape Town case also shows, even the poor might get a voice, at least when they receive some support from a social movement and an NGO. The practice of the political game might follow the formal rules or open up the chance for highly personalised patterns of patronage and nepotism seen variously as corruption, an economy of affection, or “politics of the belly” (Bayart 1993).

To a certain extent, this is a disillusioning but not surprising result. Decentralisation is far from a magic bullet that supports democracy. Even if decentralisation is combined with devolution of (some) power to the local level, it is simply a means to strengthen

the local political arena. This will reflect the wider political context and local power structures, including the concrete practical skills of the administration to carry out its daily tasks. This underlines our contention that an analysis of this kind of political reform needs to understand the everyday life process on the ground and cannot be assessed by analysing only the formal rules and institutional structures.

Notes

1. <https://vad-africachallenges.de/panel/p-21-in-the-shadows-of-autonomy-decentralized-state-structures-and-local-contexts-in-africa/>
2. <http://pointsud.org/wp-content/uploads/PPS-2019-Dynamics-of-Everyday-Life-within-Municipal-Administrations-Dakar-Report.pdf>. See also Sabbi et al. (2020).
3. Bayart articulates this view in the *La cité bureaucratique* (2013).
4. At least in the francophone West African countries of Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali, this challenge will hardly be solved soon. The few existing training programmes are mainly donor funded and thus comprise only projects with a limited time perspective (Eisenberg et al. in this issue).
5. We should not forget that there is also a pre-colonial heritage and, at least in some countries, there were well-established empires with central power and a certain degree of devolved authority (see e.g. Diarra 2004, 15).
6. For Mali see Derrider (2021, 249f).
7. We address these actors as “neo-traditional” to underline that besides the reference to tradition as a crucial element of legitimacy, the authorities underwent a far-reaching change from the beginning of colonisation to this day. Some chieftaincies are even reactions to colonial policies that tried to establish an indirect rule via local chiefs (Van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal and van Dijk 1999). A more recent case is the newly established chieftaincies of former chiefless societies in Northern Ghana, as in the case of the Konkomba (Bogner 2009; see also Neubert 2019, 148–159).
8. According to Poteete (2020), this ranges from complete or near-complete dependence on government transfers in Mali (100%), Burkina Faso (90%), Uganda (90%) and Rwanda (90%) to moderate and low support in Ghana (69%) and South Africa (18%), respectively. In Niger, the support is, strikingly, nil (0%).
9. All the case studies took place years after the decentralisation process and thus they could hardly compare the difference before and after the decentralisation.
10. In Rwanda and Uganda, the government uses authoritarian means and significantly restricts the political space.
11. <http://news.abamako.com/h/29724.html>
12. <https://www.maliweb.net/societe/journee-porte-ouverte-avec-les-jeunes-de-la-commune-v-mieux-edifier-la-population-sur-les-roles-et-les-missions-des-structures-demploi-2746388.html>
13. How local “traditional” rules are adopted and even changed according to the persons involved is an ongoing topic in Sara Berry’s book *No Condition Is Permanent* (Berry 1993).
14. Giddens describes with regard to “expert systems” that people trust even without knowing those who represent expert systems or those who work in these systems. Giddens’ view marks a fundamental difference from trust in persons (Giddens 1990, 96–106).
15. Patronage has been described for Sicily (Boissevain 1966; Mühlmann and Llaryora 1968) or as a somewhat natural part of modern civil societies in Europe and in the USA (Roniger and Günes-Ayata 1994).
16. In Mali, for instance, the *Coordination locale de sécurité* was founded in every rural municipality overseen by the minister for territorial administration. The structure coordinates the collection and reporting of security-related information to the state representative (Prefect). Currently, this kind of deconcentrated information strategy between local-level actors and the central government appears to function effectively. Its sustainability, however, remains to be seen.

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