

# **Management and Governance for EFA: Is Decentralisation Really the Answer?**

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## **1. Introduction**

In all parts of the world, recent decades have brought numerous political and administrative reforms in the education sector. A considerable proportion of these reforms bear the label of decentralisation. Indeed decentralisation has almost become a mantra among policy makers and international agencies. These individuals and bodies commonly assert that decentralisation can facilitate better management and governance of education, and, in turn, improve efficiency and enhance relevance.

The question for this paper is whether decentralisation can indeed deliver its promises. In particular, in the context of the goal of Education for All (EFA) the question is whether decentralisation is likely to provide the desired expansion of access and improvement in quality of provision to help achieve the goals of the 2000 World Education Forum (UNESCO 2000). The paper looks at the track record of decentralisation to date. It observes some of the complexities which confront policy makers and implementers, and presents recommendations for a way forward.

One difficulty is that the term decentralisation means different things to different people. Thus, the first need is to clarify some of the alternative meanings. However, even with clear definitions, decentralisation cannot usually be measured on a single template. Individual systems of education have multiple strands, some of which may be decentralised while others are centralised. This indeed is a clue to appropriate ways forward: rather than using excessively broad language and blanket advocacy, policy makers and implementers would be well advised to look in greater detail at precisely what dimensions of management and governance should be decentralised to whom under which conditions and at what points in time, and, conversely, what dimensions should be retained or strengthened at the central level.

The paper draws on examples from many different parts of the world. Since the paper aims to serve the goal of EFA, the main emphasis is on basic education in less developed countries. However, valuable lessons can also be learned from experiences at other levels of education and in industrialised countries.

## **2. Meanings, Motives and Measurement**

To set the framework for what follows, the paper commences with the range of meanings that can be attached to the term decentralisation. It then identifies some of the motives of those who advocate decentralisation, and considers some of the complexities of measurement.

### *2.1. Meanings*

As noted by Gershberg (1998, p.405), the concept of decentralisation is slippery. Gershberg compares it with the concepts of empowerment and sustainability, which seem to have inherently desirable qualities but which can be empty enough to be filled with almost anything. This is indeed a major problem with both advocacy and implementation of decentralisation policies (Chapman 2002; Bray 2003a).

A useful starting point is Hanson's (1998, p.112) general definition of decentralisation as "the transfer of decision making authority, responsibility, and tasks from higher to lower organizational levels or between organizations". This definition distinguishes redistribution of powers within the government machinery from the redistribution of functions between government and non-government organisations.

Focusing first on government machinery, it is helpful to separate functional from territorial dimensions. *Functional* decentralisation refers to a shift in the distribution of powers between various authorities that operate in parallel. For example:

- In some countries, a single ministry of education is responsible for all aspects of the public system of education. A move to split such a body into a ministry of basic education and a separate ministry of higher education could be called functional decentralisation.
- In some systems all public examinations are operated by the ministry of education. Creation of a separate examinations authority to take over this role could be called functional decentralisation, even if that examinations authority remained directly controlled by the government.
- In many countries, schools are operated by voluntary agencies as well as by governments. A loosening of government control on voluntary-agency schools could be called a form of functional decentralisation.

*Territorial* decentralisation, by contrast, refers to a redistribution of control among the different geographic tiers of government, such as nation, states/provinces, districts and schools. A transfer of power from higher to lower levels would be called territorial decentralisation. This is a spatial conception of the term. The category of territorial decentralisation includes three major sub-categories:

- *Deconcentration* is the process through which a central authority establishes branch offices, staffing them with its own officers. Thus, personnel of the ministry of education may all work in the same central building, or some of them may be posted out to provinces and districts.
- *Delegation* implies a stronger degree of decision making at the local level. Nevertheless, powers in a delegated system still basically rest with the central authority, which has chosen to 'lend' them to the local one. The powers can be withdrawn without resort to legislation.
- *Devolution* is the most extreme of these three forms of territorial decentralisation. Powers are formally held at sub-national levels, the officers of which do not need to seek higher-level approval for their actions. The sub-national officers may choose to inform the centre of their decisions, but the role of the centre is chiefly confined to collection and exchange of information.

Some writers (e.g. Cummings & Riddell 1994; UNFPA 2000) describe *privatisation* as another form of decentralisation. Their rationale is that privatisation can lead to a reduction in state authority over schools, and therefore to a redistribution of powers. Recent years have brought considerable proliferation of both for-profit private schools and not-for-profit community and voluntary agency schools.

## 2.2. *Motives*

Much contemporary advocacy of decentralisation lacks historical awareness. Some documents present decentralisation not only as if it is a panacea, but also as if it is a new idea. In reality, decentralisation has been widely advocated in the development literature for several decades (see e.g. United Nations 1962; Maddick 1963; Rondinelli 1981; Conyers 1982; UNESCO 1982). This fact must sound a note of caution. Logically, decentralisation should be seen as a process – an ‘-isation’ – rather than as a static situation. If decentralisation is seen as a process and is implemented according to the recommendations of the policy

advocates, then at some point it would seem necessary to stop: a decentralised system would have been achieved, and continued decentralisation would not be needed. The fact that decentralisation continues to be advocated so widely implies that it has not been strongly implemented in the preceding decades. The question then is why not. Part of the answer is that the benefits from decentralisation are less straightforward than is declared by many advocates. Ironically, some of these benefits, such as increased efficiency, are presented in other arenas as reasons for *reducing* decentralisation and shifting towards enhanced central control. Also, while it may be fashionable to advocate decentralisation, many implementers drag their feet because they fear lack of coordination in the system and do not want to lose their grip on control. Further, even when policy-makers and implementers are committed to decentralisation, the processes of redistributing power are complex.

In many settings, the pressure for decentralisation comes from political forces rather than from administrative ones. Among the most dramatic examples of politically-motivated reforms have been territorial decentralisation schemes in Russia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines and Sudan. Regionally-based separatist movements in these countries were sufficiently powerful to threaten secession if not granted strong autonomy. The central authorities conceded power in order to persuade the secessionist groups to remain within the national framework. However, secessionist threats can lead to different reactions. At points in the history of Ghana and Indonesia, for example, threats of secession have caused national authorities to centralise various controls and to stress a need for national unity within a common framework.

On a more bureaucratic plane, the efficiency arguments for decentralisation include the views that specialist parallel bodies are better able to focus on the needs of clients, and that territorially decentralised sub-national units are closer to the people and are better able to cater for local diversity. Winkler (1989, p.2) has added that decentralisation is commonly advocated as a way to reduce unit costs, particularly when centralised bureaucracies find themselves having to make decisions on even the most minor matters relating to schools in distant locations. However, some decentralisation initiatives have been found to increase costs, because they demand more coordination and staffing.

The last set of major motives for advocating decentralisation concerns the role of the state. During the last two decades, the world has seen a shift in views on the extent to which the state should provide and control education and other services. The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought an increasing role for the state, which was clearly seen as a central pillar in the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. This trajectory of an increasing role for the state continued into the 1960s and 1970s, but then began to falter. The collapse of the USSR brought an abrupt change in that part of the world, and the retreat of the state has also been evident elsewhere. The corollary of this has been an increasing role for the private sector and for voluntary agencies operating in partnership with the state, under the patronage of the state, or independently.

One element which is both a cause and an effect of this retreating role of the state concerns finance. Many governments have sought ways to reduce taxation, and even those which have not made reduction of taxation an active policy have commonly found their income bases eroded by economic recession and constraints in capacity to collect taxes. The combination of fiscal tightness and philosophical reorientation towards the private sector in education has encouraged the growth of non-government actors in countries where it was previously unheard of. This is especially obvious in the former socialist countries of Eastern

Europe and Central Asia, but is also evident in countries which officially remain socialist such as China, Laos and Vietnam.

At the institutional level, decentralisation is commonly advocated in order to allow schools to link more closely to the communities they serve and to give parents and other stakeholders greater avenues for involvement. Decentralisation may take the form of giving headteachers one-line budgets over which they have decision-making control. It may also involve strengthening school management committees and similar bodies. Schools may be allowed greater autonomy in curriculum, employment of teachers, admissions of pupils, medium of instruction, and structure of the school year.

### *2.3. Measurement*

Decentralisation is very difficult to measure. This is partly because the phenomenon can be interpreted subjectively: what one person describes as a significant process of decentralisation, another person might describe as only a modest change. Indeed in some circumstances dispute may arise whether any decentralisation has occurred. This is especially likely in a deconcentration reform, where personnel from a central ministry are spread around the country. From the perspective of the centre, this may seem like decentralisation; but from the perspective of the periphery it may be interpreted as an instrument to exert closer supervision and greater control.

Related difficulties beset analysts who try to rank education systems on a single scale with strongly centralised systems at one end and strongly decentralised systems at the other. One problem arises from the custom of taking the nation state as the unit for analysis. National boundaries are arbitrary historical constructions, and they form countries of greatly differing sizes. Thus, to describe Japan (population 122,600,000) as having a centralised administration would mean something very different from similarly describing Tonga (population 97,000) as centralised. Some countries have considerable decentralisation from the national to provincial levels, but then strong centralisation within provincial levels.

A different difficulty in measurement arises from value judgements on the importance or otherwise of different powers. Thus the power to determine the structures and curricula of school systems might be considered very important, but the power to hire school cleaners might be considered rather less important. This would require weighting within any model for measurement.

A further complexity is that reforms might move systems simultaneously in opposite directions. Since 1997 the Hong Kong government has emphasised school-based management and has endeavoured to strengthen school management committees, giving them both support and power to take curricular decisions. However, one of the most important curricular decisions – that over the medium of instruction – has been removed. It is thus in some ways difficult to say whether the control of the Hong Kong education system has become more decentralised or less (Mok 2003).

## **3. Experiences and Evaluations**

Because decentralisation has been a major policy recommendation, it has been a focus for many institutions and independent scholars. Of particular usefulness has been work conducted by the World Bank. Chakraborty's (1995) review observed that decentralisation had been a component in many World Bank

projects; and the Bank's 1999 *Education Sector Strategy* (pp.28-29) highlighted decentralisation as major plank for systemic reform.

Among the World Bank publications on this theme are five booklets published between 1996 and 1998 under the generic title *Decentralization of Education* (Fiske 1996; Bray 1996; Patrinos & Ariasingam 1997; Florestal & Cooper 1997; Gaynor 1998). Drafts of these booklets were discussed in 1996 at a workshop which aimed to provide training in the domain of education and decentralisation (World Bank 1996).

The first booklet (Fiske 1996) pointed out that education in both industrialised and developing countries is inherently political. It commenced with the experience of Colombia, in which national leaders perceived decentralisation to be an instrument to promote stability and legitimacy. The first step towards decentralisation in Colombia came in 1985 with the decision to allow popular election of the mayors of the 1,024 municipalities. Four years later the municipal governments were given a stronger role in education, and in 1990 a comprehensive reform package took measures further. Resources were transferred from the centre to the municipalities, and schools were given responsibility for managing personnel, designing aspects of the curriculum, and controlling some finance. A greater voice was given to parents, teachers and students, and planning was reoriented as a bottom-up rather than top-down process. However, these moves were opposed by various groups including the teachers' union, which realised that much of its political muscle came from its ability to negotiate national contracts. The effects of the decentralisation scheme were therefore mixed. A voucher system for poor students was established and regulations on private schools were removed; but by 1993 only 70 per cent of schools had been transferred to municipal control, and the remainder included many of the country's wealthiest schools. One factor which hampered reform was that the central government was itself divided. Fiske concluded (p.4) that:

the decentralization effort in Colombia was successful in providing legitimacy to the government and improving education, but its impact was severely limited by the failure to obtain consensus and the support of important players, including the teachers who deliver education in the classroom.

This case study set the tone for Fiske's booklet, which emphasised the need for political consensus to achieve objectives.

The second booklet in the series (Bray 1996), focused on community financing of education. It began by noting that advocacy of community roles in education had increased in recent years. This was partly motivated by positive factors, such as a desire to secure stronger partnership, but was also motivated by stringency in government budgets. The booklet noted the wide range of models for community financing, and observed that systems which demanded substantial community inputs did not always give those communities strong controls over the contents and other dimensions of education. Some of these observations were followed up in one of the 14 Thematic Studies prepared for the 2000 World Education Forum in Senegal (Bray 2000). That study focused on community partnerships, and highlighted the strengths and challenges that can arise in systems which rely on community initiatives. The challenges include a tendency for community initiatives to increase social and geographic disparities (see also Bray 2003b).

The third publication in the World Bank's *Decentralization of Education* series (Patrinos & Ariasingam 1997) was in some respects related, and focused on demand-side financing. Instruments for such

financing include vouchers, targeted bursaries, and capitation grants. One purpose of such mechanisms is to increase school choice for families and consumers, and thus to shift the balance of control. However, Patrinos & Ariasingham were careful to point out that use of such mechanisms does not necessarily imply less public finance. The booklet gave examples from projects in many countries, with particular focus on Bangladesh, Chad, China, Mexico, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Pakistan and Jamaica. Formal evaluations were available for only a few of the projects reviewed, and the authors stressed the need more detailed and sustained collection of data. Nevertheless, the booklet did present various recommendations (pp.43-45). The authors stressed the importance of communicating with beneficiaries and working with parents and the private sector. They also highlighted the need for capacity building, both of government personnel and of school and community leaders. The recommendations on capitation grants emphasised the need for clear, simple and transparent formulas; and policy makers were advised to give particular attention to issues of equity.

The fourth booklet in the World Bank series (Florestal & Cooper 1997) focused on legal issues. It commenced by noting that in some countries decentralisation had taken place without any legislative action. In Haiti, for example, the transfer of responsibility had been more *de facto* than *de jure* because the central authorities had simply become unable to exercise their financial and administrative responsibilities and had passed them to the local level by default. This was clearly not a desirable situation, and the thrust of the booklet was on ways to ensure that legislative changes can both keep up with and support administrative changes.

The fifth and last booklet in the series (Gaynor 1998) was concerned with teacher management. It began by observing that in almost every developing country teachers are the largest group in the civil or public service, and comprise the largest item in the government's education budget. A major issue for administrators is how to manage teachers to maximise their effectiveness as educators, and, as part of this, to decide at which level of administration the supervision and management of teachers should rest. In some countries a centralised system has been considered desirable to permit the equitable allocation of scarce resources and to provide some uniformity in teachers' conditions of service. However, centralised structures cannot easily deal with day-to-day administrative tasks such as responding to grievances and keeping records. Also, many communities are demanding a greater say in how their schools are run; and classroom teachers are being given greater scope for creativity.

From this starting point, Gaynor examined experiences in such countries as Nicaragua, Mali, India, Sri Lanka, Burkina Faso and Chile. Her survey showed a wide range of models, but it did not lead to definitive conclusions. Rather, Gaynor observed (p.58), a case for or against decentralisation of teacher management had not yet been made, and "the evidence that we have so far is simply too sparse". She added that in developing countries there has been little full-scale decentralisation of teacher management to the school level in public education. Stronger experiences are available in industrialised countries, such as the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand; but even in industrialised countries the trend is far from uniform. The French government, for example, does not allow local control over teachers; and other countries, such as Ireland, do so only in the context of strong central rules and regulations. Gaynor added that decentralisation of teacher management functions will not increase operational efficiency if the level receiving the responsibility cannot support it. Such countries as Colombia, Mexico, Nigeria and Zimbabwe

saw policy swings back to centralisation after it became clear that there was inefficiency in handling teacher management at the levels to which it had been devolved.

Gaynor also noted that little evidence existed on the extent to which decentralisation of teacher management had improved teaching quality and learning outcomes; and that it did not commonly increase teacher morale. She concluded that even if other aspects of teacher management are devolved, it may be necessary to retain central legislative or normative control over some functions in order to minimise inequities. Central authorities may wish to control teacher qualifications, standards and distribution, though local discretion may be allowed in the implementation of teacher incentive schemes, accelerated promotion, special study leave, etc..

Also worth noting in this cluster of publications is a comparable booklet by McGinn & Welsh (1999) which was published by UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP). The overall tone of the booklet was one of advocacy of decentralisation, but the authors did note that specific components of education systems should be treated in different ways. They added (p.76):

Two kinds of conditions must be met for implementation of any kind of reform, including decentralization: there must be political support for the proposed changes; and those involved in the reforms must be capable of carrying it out. Most decentralization reforms have failed to reach the objectives set for them, because they did not meet adequately one or both of the two conditions.

This point was consistent with the messages of the World Bank booklets. It also matched observations in more detailed case studies, such as those by Lamichane et al. (1997) in Nepal, and Gershberg (1999) in Mexico and Nicaragua. Mukundan's (2003a, 2003b) work on Kerala State in India showed that even in this state, which has a reputation for democracy and in 1996 launched a People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning, implementation was left at the level of rhetoric rather than reality. This was partly because actors at the local level lacked the capacity to take the powers, and partly because both the lower-level and the higher-level actors were unconvinced that decentralisation was desirable.

Similar remarks apply to the specific form of decentralisation which focuses on the school level. The movement for school-based management has been spearheaded by industrialised countries (e.g. see Brown 1990; O'Donoghue & Dimmock 1998; Abu-Duhou 1999), but has also attracted considerable attention in other contexts (see e.g. Heneveld & Craig 1996). The movement is partly premised on the view that because principals and teachers are best able to diagnose students' needs because they have direct contact with students and access to local information. Yet even in industrialised countries which typically have strong human resource bases and professional expertise at the school level, evaluations of school-based management have been far from uniform in their applause. Schools have commonly found the weight of responsibility excessive, and extreme forms of decentralisation have excessive diversity in the educational experiences of pupils even in neighbouring institutions.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Experience around the world suggests that decentralisation can indeed present a solution to some problems in some circumstances. However, it is not a panacea, and it can create other problems. With specific reference to the goal of EFA, decentralisation can stimulate diversity in educational provision to meet the

needs of different target groups. It can allow teaching in different languages, for example, and permit different curricula and timetables to suit different religious, occupational and other groups. Decentralised structures can also encourage individuals and non-governmental organisations to make human and financial contributions to education which might not be forthcoming in centralised systems. In this respect, decentralisation can help mobilise additional resources for education. Also, by reducing the number of links in a chain of control and reducing delays in the processing of decisions, decentralisation can help improve efficiency in education systems.

However, decentralisation can also create major problems. Among the most obvious is the tendency for disparities to increase. In the case of territorial decentralisation, this means disparities between states/provinces, or, if the decentralisation is below the state/provincial level, disparities between districts and schools. Also, decentralisation can lead to proliferation of different models of schooling, which makes operation of a unified system of education more difficult. This may have implications for social cohesion as well as for other domains. These factors are among the reasons why in some countries decentralisation reforms have been reversed.

This paper has paid particular attention to publications by the World Bank, and has noted that organisation's generic advocacy of decentralisation. Beneath the surface, however, even World Bank literature is ambivalent. The set of five booklets highlighted above seemed to be in line with the World Bank advocacy, and all had the generic title *Decentralization of Education*. Yet even the first (Fiske 1996), which was perhaps the most strongly oriented toward such advocacy, commenced by noting that the results of the Colombian initiative in the 1980s and 1990s had been mixed. Arguably the most important message of Fiske's booklet was not that decentralisation can inherently be considered desirable, but rather that policy-makers should seek appropriate balances. As the booklet stated (pp.10-11):

Given the Rubik's Cube nature of the options open to educational policymakers, the relevant issue is not whether to decentralize or not. Elmore (1993, 9) observes that in the practical world of political and administrative decisions no "absolute" values attach to centralization or decentralization. Planners should seek the optimum balance or mix of centralized and decentralized elements. The critical question becomes: what levels of government are best suited in any given set of particular circumstances to carry out what functions of the educational system?

The answers to this question must necessarily vary in different countries and at different points in time. One generic answer given by Fiske (1996, p.11) is that central authorities should concentrate on setting goals, generating resources, targeting resources to meet special needs, and monitoring performance, while everyday management of schools is best devolved to lower-level authorities and to the institutions themselves. Yet even this generic answer cannot be accepted uniformly in every country. Much depends on the size of the system, political circumstances, the nature of the communications infrastructure, the extent to which the central authorities can secure adequate financial resources, and the quality of the professional expertise at each level.

A further problem highlighted in this paper is that decentralisation is a broad term with multiple meanings. Thus a further recommendation to policy-makers would be to clarify what they mean each time they use the word. Indeed in some contexts it would be preferable to use other words, such as

deconcentration, delegation and devolution, and to distinguish between territorial and functional redistributions of powers. Policy-makers should also recognise that a reform which from some viewpoints might be described as decentralisation, might be described from other viewpoints as centralisation.

Further, while the term decentralisation seems to imply a deliberate and planned action, in some settings decentralisation occurs by default rather than by design. Some governments are weak, and lack the financial and human resources to operate a strong education system. In such circumstances, private and community schools commonly form a large proportion of the total number of institutions. This especially common in the countries which have the greatest distance to go to achieve EFA. Yet while such arrangements may be pragmatic, they are not necessarily ideal. Education systems in these countries are rarely coherent and integrated, and often encounter major problems of inequity.

At the other end of the scale, since the collapse of communism in the USSR, the advent of market economies in China, Vietnam and elsewhere, and the reform of strongly centralised systems influenced by French traditions, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the world has rather few countries in which the central authorities exercise tight control over every dimension of national education systems. Nevertheless, examples can easily be found of systems in which the central government presence remains strong; and in most cases this is for reasons that can easily be justified by the authorities in those countries.

Returning to the beginning of this paper, the fact that decentralisation has been such a constant refrain for over two decades itself sounds a warning. If such continued policy-advocacy is still needed, it implies either that authorities have been unwilling to accept the advice (in which case the reasons for this reluctance must be investigated and taken on board), or that decentralisation has been tried but has not worked as anticipated (in which case the reasons for the shortcomings must be revisited, and the goals reassessed). A considerable literature now exists on failures in decentralisation processes. It is perhaps ironic that decentralisation seems still to be so widely advocated in an unbalanced way despite the existence of this literature.

The question posed in the sub-title of this paper was: "Is decentralisation really the answer?". In certain circumstances decentralisation can certainly help achieve the goal of EFA, and should be pursued. However, much depends on the starting point, on the availability of human and other resources, and on the extent to which political consensus exists. In some settings decentralisation can actually obstruct achievement of goals, and it should therefore not be advocated bluntly and vaguely in all circumstances with a 'one size fits all' approach. Instead, policy-makers and planners must seek appropriate balances in the specific circumstances that confront them at particular points in time.

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