

CDD/FNF 3RD ANNUAL LIBERAL LECTURE

**DEEPENING DECENTRALIZATION:
IS GHANA READY FOR SUBSIDIARITY?**



Wisdom J. Tettey

DEEPENING DECENTRALIZATION

IS GHANA READY FOR SUBSIDIARITY?

Paper presented at the CDD/FNF Third Annual Liberal
Lecture, June 22, 2006

The Ghana Center for democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) is an independent research think tank based in Accra, Ghana. CDD-Ghana is dedicated to the promotion of democracy, good governance and the development of a liberal political and economic environment in Ghana in particular and Africa in general. In so doing, CDD-Ghana seeks to enhance the democratic content of public policy and to advance the cause of constitutionalism, individual liberty, the rule of law, and integrity in public life.

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ISBN: 9988-614-40-3

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The Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) is pleased to publish under its Annual Liberal Lecture Series: 'Deepening Decentralization: Is Ghana Ready for Subsidiarity?' by Professor Wisdom Tettey of Calgary University (Canada) who was also a visiting professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Ghana, Legon and visiting fellow at the Center in 2006.

Professor Tettey's essay begins with two central contentions: that the fundamental premise from which the vision of Ghanaian decentralization emanates requires substantial revision in order to realize the goals of liberal democracy articulated in the 1992 Constitution; and that Ghanaian decentralization must be centered on the principle of "subsidiarity" if devolution is one of its key goals.

Applying a fairly standard definition of the principle of subsidiarity, that is "states must entrust downwardly accountable representative actors with significant domains of discretionary power", and that "those institutions that are closest to beneficiaries of government undertakings, and have the needed competencies, are the best situated to undertake those activities" Professor Tettey concedes that some of the basic structures, systems and processes of decentralized local government Ghana has put in place appear to be in consonance with the letter of the principle of subsidiarity. He argues, however, that the principle seems to exist mainly in form and not in substance. But he points out that the practical manifestations of Ghana's nearly two decades old decentralization program largely reflect persistent central government control of and marginalized role for local governments. In his assessment, power devolution in Ghana has not been accompanied by requisite authority and commensurate access to resources.

Professor Tettey entreats Ghana to take quick steps to ensure that the decentralization program is hinged to the principle of subsidiarity.

He specifically recommends that Ghana moves significantly beyond the rhetoric of decentralized local government and strengthen its local authorities politically, administratively and fiscally by encapsulating the core elements of practical subsidiarity, such as active civic engagement, discretionary power and fiscal autonomy for local governments as well as downward accountability.

CDD-Ghana is profoundly grateful to Professor Tettey for providing fresh ideas to stimulate reflection on some of the measures Ghana could take to revive its lagging decentralization program. We also remain ever grateful to the FNF for its partnership and sponsorship of the lecture and the ensuing publication. We hope you find the publication useful in helping to move Ghana toward its goal to achieve effective decentralized local government.

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The dominant public sector reform paradigm of the 1990s was the mantra of government reinvention. This is characterized by demands for transparency, accountability, responsiveness to citizen input, efficiency, and a trimmed-down state apparatus (Heeks, 1999a; Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). An important element in government reinvention is decentralization which, in development discourse, enjoys incontrovertible consensus, as desirable, from both the left and right.

For the left, interested in deepening democratic processes, decentralization offers the potential for enhanced political participation and greater popular control over decision-making at local level. For the neo-liberal right, decentralization is supported as a further dilution of the powers of the central state. A consequence of this consensus is that, since the late 1980s, decentralization has become an increasingly widespread and significant dimension of political and administrative reform throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America (Crawford, 2005a, p. 5).

Two broad dimensions of local government reform have been identified. These are the entrepreneurial (good management) and participatory (good democracy) dimensions (Musso et al., 2000). The former emphasizes the ability of local governments to enhance their service delivery functions, while the latter describes the quality of civic engagement. This delineation fits into two main components of the reinventing government paradigm - the 'citizen as customer' approach and the 'democratic decentralization' approach. The first approach advocates effective service delivery while the second emphasizes the opening up of the state apparatus to citizen input as well as responsiveness to the interests of communities served by the state bureaucracy. Democratic decentralization is, thus, expected to provide the basis for 'civic journalism' (Hall, 1998). "The concept of 'civic journalism' operates from the premise that an active citizenry can be built

by offering information to members of the community which they require to understand local government, local issues, and to get involved in solving community problems" (Tettyey, 2002, p. 171). As Gill and Yates-Mercer note,

Local Authorities [LAs] ... have a need to communicate with ... citizens. Part of the decentralization process is participation, and participation requires communication. This communication should be two-way - the LAs should inform their users and customers about their service, their performance, decision, plans, etc., and customers should have the opportunity to give the LA their comments, views, wishes, needs and opinion" (see also Steyaert, 2000).

While decentralization has the potential to promote local democracy, enhance public policy making, and improve service delivery, observers have noted a tendency by many sub-national political jurisdictions to emphasize service delivery applications to the neglect of the other areas (Pratchett, 1999). A study of 270 municipal websites in California, for instance, reveal most municipalities do not manifest the mechanisms that are conducive to good governance at the local level (Musso et al., 2000). The findings suggest that, at best, the entrepreneurial model subjugates the participatory model. Evidence from the African context indicates, however, that the entrepreneurial model is struggling to get a foothold in reality and that the participatory model may be registering relatively better progress in practice (Katsiaouni, 2003).

It will be argued in this paper that decentralization, as a process, does not necessarily lead to equal and reciprocal partnerships between the state and its citizens, that is, substantive devolution of authority to lower levels. Rather, the realization of genuine partnership between central and local government is contingent on other variables. These include the degree to which decision making authority is distributed among partners, the extent of resources available to them, the level of formality binding the relationship, and the kind of commitment displayed by the leaders of the partnership (Brown et al., 1998; see also Heeks, 1999b, pp. 2-3). "Positive

scores on these dimensions are critical to the achievement of both the entrepreneurial and participatory dimensions of local government reform" (Tettey, 2002, p. 172). It is also important to note that people will use, and give credibility to local government information only if they trust that source. Unfortunately, local government institutions in Africa have not accumulated a respectable level of public trust in order to make their information sources a basis for citizen planning and action.

It is the contention of this paper that in order to ensure that decentralization in Ghana leads to the goals and principles articulated in the constitution and other government policies there has to be a change in the fundamental premise from which these visions emanate. Such a change requires that the country's decentralization program be based on the principle of subsidiarity. This principle, which will be explained below, encapsulates a fusion of both the entrepreneurial and participatory dimensions of government re-invention discussed above, and advocates genuine devolution which requires states to "entrust downwardly, accountable representative actors with significant domains of discretionary power" (Ribot, 2001, p. 3; Ribot, 2003, p. 61).

The paper is organized as follows: The next section explores the principle of subsidiarity and analyzes its defining characteristics. This is followed by an assessment of Ghana's decentralization program, to ascertain the extent to which it reflects these characteristics. The paper then outlines suggestions for strengthening the subsidiarity principle in the country and concludes with the position that Ghana is ready for subsidiarity, but would have to reconfigure the philosophical basis of its decentralization program, as well as its practice, if it is to achieve genuine democratic decentralization.

Subsidiarity - Exploring its Principles and Characteristics

In order to promote effective, responsive and responsible government, it is appropriate to put in place two fundamental principles of democracy. These are the principles of subsidiarity and fiscal accountability. Fiscal accountability is premised on the expectation that the government which spends taxpayers' money should be the same government that sets related policies and raises the resources needed to accomplish policy objectives. Fiscal accountability flows from the principle of subsidiarity and will be subsumed under it in the following discussion.

Historically, the principle of subsidiarity has its provenance in Catholic philosophy (Schleicher-Tappeser and Strati, 2004; Henkel, 2002). Pope Pius XI's encyclical letter, *Quadregesimo Anno*, of 1931 provides a definition of subsidiarity which has, to a very large extent, endured up till now. In that document, he opines as follows:

It is indeed true, as history clearly proves, that owing to the change in social conditions, much that was formerly done by small bodies can nowadays be accomplished only by large corporations. Nonetheless, just as it is wrong to withdraw from the individual and commit to the community at large what private enterprise and industry can accomplish, so, too, it is an injustice, a grave evil and a disturbance of right order for a larger and higher organization to arrogate to itself functions which can be performed efficiently by smaller and lower bodies. This is a fundamental principle of social philosophy, unshaken and unchangeable, and it retains its full truth today (cited in Henkel 2002, p. 364; see also Mcilroy, 2003).

Over the last decade or so, the subsidiarity precept has gained currency as the core organizing principle for effective decentralization. The Governing Council of UN-Habitat, for instance, acknowledged it as the foundational principle upon which any credible and viable system of decentralized

governance can be built. From a jurisdictional perspective, the principle outlines the distribution of competence between national and sub-national governments. Local authorities get a legal status that clearly delineates their roles, responsibilities and obligations. These include the powers of discretion, the right to design and manage budgets, and to assume full authority for those areas for which it has been assigned legal responsibilities. The most renowned exposition on subsidiarity is contained in Article 5 of the Treaty Establishing the European Community, which provides that

in areas that do not fall within its exclusive competence, the Community shall take action only if and insofar as the objectives of the proposed action cannot be sufficiently achieved by Member States and can, therefore, by reason of the scale of effects of the proposed action, be better achieved by the Community (European Community, 1957).

The principle, thus, provides a rational criterion for allocating jurisdiction among different tiers of government, while recognizing the significance of sub-national autonomy in certain matters and the functional paramountcy of central government in others. The idea behind the principle is similar to the 'provincial inability test' in places such as Canada and seeks to promote mutual advantage for both central and local government by ensuring that the former only intervenes when the latter is not well-suited to an undertaking.

According to Gibson (2005), subsidiarity provides the intellectual anchor for, and the easiest way of, deepening decentralization as it proposes a minimalist role for central governments. The principle advocates that those institutions that are closest to beneficiaries of government undertakings, and have the needed competencies, are the best situated to undertake those activities (eg., policy development, program management, service delivery), and should be given the opportunity and mandate to do so. In the view of Gibson (2000, p. 4) "authority should reside at the lowest level commensurate with the necessary information and resources for making

and implementing decisions, with the onus of proof on those who would move powers to a higher level." Such a framework is believed to reduce costs and maximize human development.

The primary test of any government activity is whether it should be in that activity at all or whether that activity can best be performed at a subordinate level which is closest to the intended target. That way, the activity is more likely to reflect the wishes of that group, be efficacious, be more closely monitored by citizens, and government can be more easily held accountable by them. According to the subsidiarity precept, authority, by default, should reside at the lowest possible level of government, and delegated upwards under the rarest and most necessary of circumstances. This inverts the hierarchy of the governmental structure where the center delegates authority to the periphery, and invests in the latter the delegating authority.

Without devolutions any effort to promote government and community partnerships will lack trust and credibility. There is apathy and mistrust because for a lot of citizens, democracy is not real (DeBresson and Barker. 1998, p. 64). They lack participation. Issues are not debated and are imposed on them as *fait accompli*. Meanwhile, these decisions affect their daily lives. National level regulatory agencies and institutions are far removed from the reality of the people in various communities and are slow to act and implement policies and decisions

Thus, the principle of subsidiarity advocates curbing top-heavy, overly hierarchical bureaucratic institutions that operate from the center. They need to be replaced by agencies that are proximate to communities with the power to pursue administrative and regulatory functions which have resonance within their jurisdictions. As Onibon et al (1999) observe in the context of natural resource management in West Africa, central governments have arrogated to themselves the legal authority to regulate and run the sector, but do not have the capability to do so effectively. The consequence is what Soumare calls 'non-functioning legality' (cited in Onibon et al., 1999), resulting in environmental degradation and

destruction. Subsidiarity enables such incompetence to be curbed with the transfer of *de facto* authority and responsibility for natural resource management to sub-national structures. Implicit in the principle is a privileging of indigenous/local knowledge, and experience, over distant centers of knowledge production, as a more appropriate basis from which to pursue developmental initiatives. This position ruptures much contemporary approaches to development which tend to marginalize such knowledge and experience, and rather valorizes the position of central government and its experts.

The preceding argument is not to suggest that central government bodies have no role in the sub-national structures that emerge from the re-configuration of the existing architecture of government. What is proposed is an effort to move the functions of such bodies in the direction of coordination, for general welfare, rather than serving as first order policy making and executing authorities. Central governments are well-situated to assist local authorities, through a genuinely consultative process, to carry out their duties in ways that are consonant with overall objectives of national development strategies. In fact, the draft World Charter of Local Self-Government granted supervisory powers to higher levels of government in order to ensure that national statutes, policies and programs are carried out appropriately in all local government jurisdictions. Moreover, there are certain functions of government (eg. national defence) that are more efficiently undertaken by the center because of the comparative advantage it has and the economies of scale derived.

The decision as to where authority resides should, therefore, not be an arbitrary one but should be "consistent with the nature of the decisions and services involved" (World Urban Forum, 2004, p. 5). By and large, the principle of subsidiarity shares an affinity with the current practice in the private sector where powers and responsibilities have been structurally relocated within smaller units to promote productivity, efficiency and quality output. The public sector is, therefore, being asked to consider employing the right principles in order to benefit from the opportunities that 'right-sizing' brings.

It must be noted that 'right sizing', in the context of subsidiarity, is not coterminous with the unbridled attempts by neo-liberal policies to divest the state of its obligations to citizens by becoming leaner largely for reasons of economic and fiscal expedience (see Amenga-Etego, 2004). In fact,

there is a dearth of mainstream economists who are radical regionalists and rigorously advocate much greater decentralization within federal systems. In other words, few of them favour substantive subsidiarity in which regions in a federal structure receive both greater policy recognition of their relative deprivation and more autonomous rights to allocate resources in line with their own priorities (Cameron and Ndhlovu, 2001, p. 334).

Thus, while sharing with neo-liberalism a desire to confine central government to the status of an enabler, facilitator and regulator, the principle emphasizes greater autonomy for local government, civic engagement and participation in decision making by citizens, redefines the role of local government to make it serve as a catalyst for mobilizing local stakeholders for community development, and to serve as a legitimate voice for those it represents. It is, therefore, different from 'burden sharing' because "burden sharing is concerned with the exchange of resources among authorities to realize common objectives whereas subsidiarity refers to the site of decision making authority within a tiered governance system" (O'brien, 2000, p. 58).

Subsidiarity does not embody a hierarchical structure in which local authorities occupy the lowest rungs of the administrative or governmental ladder. On the contrary, it represents a partnership in which various levels of government are synergistically integrated in order to provide the best possible engagement between citizens and government and the most efficient means and forms of service delivery and public goods. The World Urban Forum (2004, p. 5) notes that

Such cooperation between authorities is particularly relevant to the major issues facing our cities and human settlements, including employment creation, social inclusion, and improvement of the environment, urban policy and rural development. Acting entirely on its own, a single level of government can neither solve any of these crucial issues nor further urban renaissance: all spheres need to make their own relevant contribution in a genuine partnership.

An imperative precondition for the effective practice of decentralized government is transparency. This means that citizens should have access to information, on the basis of which they can engage with the political system as active citizens, and monitor decentralized institutions. The subsidiarity principle assumes that, because decision-making and authority are closer to the target population, it is easier for them to access information relevant to the functioning of their local government, and to monitor and verify developments within their localities. Gibson (2000, p. 5) notes that "the public has a right to know on a timely basis the results of monitoring governmental performance, the options available on questions of public policy, the arguments on each side, and the reasons for decisions taken."

Consequently, they can push for policies and programs which are relevant, and adapted, to their specific contexts and circumstances. They are also able to hold office-holders accountable for their stewardship in more effective ways than is likely with a government that is far removed from their daily realities. As Ayee (2001, p. 6), points out, "decentralization minimizes political apathy because government gets too close to be ignored." Furthermore, giving citizens an opportunity to be involved in the design of programs and projects, and to shape developmental priorities, raises their level of interest in government, boosts their watchdog role vis-à-vis local government, and gives them a sense of ownership over their government and its activities, and fosters the sustainability of those activities (see Anderson, 2000).

The principle of subsidiarity, thus, allows us to move the debate beyond 'representative government' to encompass 'responsible government', by ensuring that 'representatives' are beholden to the electorate and not to the dictates of a president, prime minister, or other central authority. Related to civic engagement, accountability and responsible government, therefore, is the subsidiarity principle's focus on empowerment vis-à-vis local government, in tandem with its advocacy of the latter's autonomy in its dealings with the center. Empowerment can be achieved by instituting mechanisms that give citizens control over the destiny of office-holders, by way of elections and recalls for example; as well as input into, and influence over, policy and program formulation and implementation. This is in line with Ribot's (1998) contention that decentralization without empowerment is tantamount to recentralization.

A controversial issue that comes up in discussions of subsidiarity pertains to whether there should be uniformity in the relationship between the center and all sub-national structures of governance and the territorial entities that they represent. This controversy emanates from those opposed to subsidiarity, as the principle around which decentralization should be tethered, and operates at two levels. The first question raised is whether all sub-national units should be treated as equal in legal and constitutional terms. The second focuses on whether all political and administrative units within the sub-national structure should have uniform expectations regarding their functions and capabilities for achieving assigned responsibilities. These concerns delve into issues of fairness as far as economic and political arrangements with the center, and lateral units, are concerned. For example, is it fair for the central government to disburse more resources to certain local government units than others? A further question flows from considerations regarding the place of pan-national strategies in addressing and attaining policy objectives that have national relevance. For instance, does subsidiarity allow for a national wildlife conservation or forest management plan or should they be left to the local governments, thereby allowing for diversity of responses?

It is important to note that the principle of subsidiarity, while acknowledging the primacy of local agents of governance, recognizes that different jurisdictions within the territorial unit of a polity are characterized by asymmetries which need to be taken into account as states seek to balance devolution of authority with equity and effectiveness. As Benoit Pelletier, Quebec's Intergovernmental Minister, notes in the Canadian context, "federalism entails respect, flexibility, understanding and sustained collaboration. Asymmetry is the way to accommodate regional needs and aspirations within a larger national structure" (cited in Gibson, 2005, p. 2). Thus, a larger metropolitan area will require higher degrees of autonomy in order to realize its potentials, compared to a smaller governmental unit.

It is in this context that the concept of 'equalization' comes into play because, according to some observers (see Gibson 2005), the lack of asymmetry in dealings among constituent units of a decentralized government structure might, in itself, be construed as unfair. Less endowed areas require larger transfers, proportionally, from the center than better endowed ones, and more support in creating incentives for economic development. For example, the Western region which has large mining and timber resources could generate 58% of all royalties garnered in 2000, while the capacity of the two upper regions to generate royalties is compromised by lack of natural resources (Inanga and Osei-Wusu, 2004, p. 87). (NB: This is not to suggest homogeneity in the revenue-generating capacity of all areas in the Western region). Thus, decentralization should stress "the importance of transfer design and the desirability of providing for periodic evaluation of that design" (Asante and Ayee, 2004, p. 5). This argument mirrors Lipton's (1977) urban bias thesis and Friedman's argument about the peripheralization of certain regions and the attendant call for a focus on territoriality (Friedman and Weaver, 1979, p. 7).

Clearly, the implementation of decentralization, based on the subsidiarity principle, begs questions about the mechanics for achieving its substantive goals. Flowing from the principle is the position that groups and communities should actualize their needs by organizing the relevant financial resources to support the fulfillment of those needs. As noted

above, local government autonomy is a key ingredient for effective political decentralization and accountability. Local entities should, for example, be given the latitude to explore potential develop-related partnerships with external actors, without central government hindrance, if they are to develop a self-sustaining base from which to accomplish their assigned responsibilities. It is in this respect that Cameron and Ndhlovu (2001, p. 328) define substantive economic subsidiarity as the "complementary economic dimension to the case for decentralized federalism. It seeks rigorous economic principles that rationalize the placing of the public sector (direct) allocation and (indirect) regulation of resources in the most localized authority predicting good economic outcomes." These include their ability to develop collaborative initiatives and access international financial markets - areas that central governments tend to be very protective of and unyielding in their desire to hold on to.

Where local government initiatives have the potential to benefit others outside of the area concerned (eg. highways), it will be necessary for central government to provide relevant support. Implementation and management will, however, lie with the local authority. The need for local governments to source resources is premised on the importance of giving them some latitude to explore creative ideas for investment, economic development, and hence financial autonomy. Furthermore, there is the assumption that when such investments and financial transactions are made by local government on behalf of the communities, the latter have a vested interest in monitoring and protecting those transactions for which they have an indirect fiduciary role.

Among the means available for such undertakings are the building of relational investment with other actors in the private and public sector, as well as the enhancement of relational capital which provides credibility and support for the initiatives. Examples of this in Ghana include the Asantehene's World-Bank-supported water project and the Self-Help Electrification Projects (SHEP). Of course, not all local government areas will have the ability to source financial support on their own or earn requisite levels of revenue to undertake projects. In these cases, external

support from central government will be needed, based on an agreed-upon equalization formula. This is especially so in view of the fact that, in many cases, devolution has come with a significant number of new responsibilities, and local governments need not just financial resources, but human capacity as well, to effectively fulfill their obligations. Such external support, notwithstanding, it is important that local governments protect their autonomy by engaging in creative revenue-generating partnerships, thereby reducing dependence on central government. Consequently, external assistance should be seen as a means of gaining self-sufficiency, not an end in itself. Subsidiarity is thus useful in incorporating the element of time, noticing that levels of competence, as well as the scope and foci of action, do change (see Henkel, 2002, p. 361). Local governments should, therefore, be nurtured to take over appropriate domains of action by helping them attain the capacity to do so.

Ghana's Decentralization Program: Does it reflect the Principle of Subsidiarity?

Having provided some insight into the principle of subsidiary, we now turn to an evaluation of Ghana's experience with decentralization, to gauge the extent to which it upholds not only the letter of the principle but its spirit as well. We will do this by assessing policy, legislative provisions, and practice since 1988 when PNDC Law 207 set in motion the current decentralization program. The focus for this analysis will be district, municipal, and metropolitan assemblies which are the core political and administrative units undergirding decentralization in the country.

In what appears to be in line with the principle of subsidiarity, Ghana's decentralization program has given DAs responsibility for 86 functions, sole control over the provision of certain public services and the prerogative to make decisions regarding some executive and policy issues. The DAs can, for instance, award contracts not exceeding 20 million cedis, on the advice of District Tender Review Boards (Republic of Ghana, 2003a) and have been empowered to impose and collect certain categories of taxes, as well as enact by-laws.

The principle of subsidiarity that seems to have attended Ghana's decentralization program is, however, compromised when it comes to the practice of local government. This is, to a large extent, the result of the continuing existence of certain centralizing tendencies which claw back legislative provisions for autonomy, participation, and downward accountability. These tendencies include the requirement that all bye-laws enacted by the DAs have to be approved by the Minister of Local Government, Rural Development, and Environment. While the idea behind this requirement may be to ensure that bye-laws passed by the DAs are in conformity with overarching national laws and development strategies, it infuses the specter of central government interference in the affairs of localities based on political expediency, instead of the best interest of the localities. In some respects, the requirement is

condescending in assuming that the communities cannot take care of themselves and have to depend on the wisdom and magnanimity of the minister for direction. What is important is not ministerial monitoring of bye-laws, but efforts to develop a knowledgeable, pluralistic, and active citizenry, as well as DAs, with the capacity to protect themselves and ensure that bye-laws are in their best interest and that of the communities where they live.

The recent case whereby the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (MLGRD) overturned the action by the Accra Metropolitan Assembly to de-congest Accra, by ridding the central business district of hawkers, is clear evidence of, what was perceived by most analysts, as central government interference for partisan purposes. It was widely felt that the Ministry's decision was largely motivated by the NPP government's desire not to alienate the potential electorate in the 2005 Ododiodoo parliamentary bye-elections. The effect was gross undermining of the assembly's autonomy and legitimacy.

Owusu (2005) provides evidence from two districts to the effect that DAs have seen an increase in financial transfers from central government, leading to improvements in infrastructure. A significant percentage of these transfers come from the District Assemblies Common Fund (DA CF). In addition to this and ceded revenue from central government, fees and levies, imposed by the DAs, which constitute the main sources of self-generated revenue for the assemblies, contribute a minor share of total local government revenue. "Intergovernmental fiscal transfers accounted for an average of about 81 per cent of total district assembly revenues during 1999 and 2000" (Inanga and Osei-Wusu, 2004, p. 91). Clearly, fiscal deconcentration has still not been achieved, as DAs depend very much on central government for financial survival. Such dependence constrains the ability of the DAs to undertake independent, timely, and responsive initiatives that will address situation-specific demands and needs of their communities.

These constraints stem from the fact that some expenditures are subject to approval by central government, disbursements are delayed for inordinate

periods, and rates and fees chargeable by the DAs are subject to MLGRD controls. For example, the Minister for Local Government and Rural Development has the power to establish guidelines regarding fees that can be charged for services and facilities, rates, permits, etc., thereby making him/her a key factor in determining the revenue generating capacities of the DAs, and hence their ability to achieve fiscal independence. In addition to the fact that significant disbursements and guidelines on how they can raise funds come from central government, the DAs have to contend with delays in releasing funds to them from the relevant centralized authorities. Prof. Gyan-Baffour, Deputy Minister of Finance and Economic Planning, for example, disclosed to parliament, in June 2006, that the last time ceded money was paid to DAs was May 2005 and that there was still an outstanding amount of six billion cedis from the period ending December 2004 (Ghana News Agency, June 1, 2006a). Inanga and Osei-Wusu (2004, p. 97) also disclose that "actual amounts released to MMDAs each year are lower than budgeted amounts. For example, only 50 percent of the allocations was actually received by MMDAs during the 2000 fiscal year."

The Center for Democratic Development (CDD)-Ghana has revealed evidence to suggest that even when disbursements do flow from the center to the DAs, they are characterized by severe leakages between their release from the center and their arrival in the localities. In fact, according to the organization, only

51 percent of the non-salary resources which the education sector thought had been allocated to any given primary school actually arrived there. The position in Health was even worse[;] for non-salary items, clinics suffered a leakage of no less than 79%. [A]s a result patients were forced themselves to pay more than half of the total cost of their treatment - much more than the ministry had intended (Ghana News Agency, Dec. 19, 2005).

Whereas the Local Government Act, Act 462, of 1993 gives DAs responsibility for "the overall development of the district," it stymies the autonomy of the districts, in Article 10 (3), by subjecting their medium term development plans (MTDP) and budgets to approval by central government. Fiscal decentralization has also been undermined by the

unwillingness of the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning to implement composite budgeting, that will allow the segregation of DA budgets from that of central government (Ayee, 2003a). In addition, existing laws such as the Financial Administration Act 2003 [Act 654] (Republic of Ghana, 2003b) and the Local Government Act itself, do not encourage such delineation.

Local governments in Ghana have the authority to pursue investment opportunities, including loans, for their districts by entering into agreements with external partners. This is obviously a positive idea if they are to undertake large-scale programs for social and economic development. Some DAs are taking advantage of this provision and embarking on collaborative projects with private partners and civil society organizations. An example of this is a 500 million cedis dormitory project, funded by the Makbreneth Foundation of Canada, to house female students of the Bole Senior Secondary School (Ghana News Agency, June 1, 2006b). The initiative came from a local NGO, the Northern Empowerment Association.

As noted above, Section 88 of the Local Government Act, however, limits the autonomous pursuit of loans to amounts of 20 million cedis or less. Any arrangements in excess of this amount require central government guarantee, hence approval. Without suggesting that central government oversight is always unwelcome, it must be conceded that the ability of the DAs to undertake independent and creative programs can be restricted by the bureaucratic encumbrances that central government involvement entails. On the other hand,

there is considerable weight of evidence to suggest that the application of subsidiarity principles to investment or scheme implementation can lead, through a more developed sense of local ownership, to improved efficiency, enhanced flexibility and better assets ... The more directly involved a given public is in scheme implementation, the more likely it is to keep a close eye on and contribute resources to asset production (United Nations Capital Development Fund, 2005, p. 145).

There are arguments to the effect that DAs have not taken full advantage of the Local Government Act's provisions for investment and, implicitly, blame them for this. "Mr Kwodwo Filson of Ghana Investment Promotion Centre (GIPC) has said that despite the fact that district assemblies have the legal authority to enter into business partnership to exploit the resources at their disposal, most had not applied the law and are always crying for investments." (Ghanaweb, April 5, 2006). Such arguments lose sight of a number of factors. First, the 20 million cedis limit provided for in the Act seems anachronistic in current circumstances. It cannot be a credible benchmark for embarking on locally developed investment initiatives, and needs to be significantly revised upwards. Secondly, most DAs lack the professional expertise and organizational capacity to even take advantage of the provision.

For local governments to enjoy legitimacy, they need not only financial resources, but the requisite human resource capacity to discharge their responsibilities. Unfortunately, in a context where they have been loaded with responsibility for several functions, DAs are confronted with shortages in the complement of staff as well as low levels of expertise in various areas of professional competence (see CLGF, 2006; Assibey-Mensah, 2000). The Amansie East DA, for example, has disclosed that it does not have the full complement of revenue collectors needed to help it meet its targeted internally generated funds of 1.39 billion cedis for 2006 (Ghanaweb, May 9, 2006). The central government needs to take advantage of the constitutional provision that "not less than 5% of total revenues of Ghana" should be paid into the District Assemblies Common Fund to be allocated to DAs, and increase funding to the DAs. It has been suggested by some observers that a 10% allocation will inject significant resources into the assemblies' operations to enable them fulfill their mandate (see Chronicle, June 6, 2006).

The autonomy of local governments is further eroded by the absence of a true local government service which is under the uncontested control of DAs. "Fifteen years after [local government] ... reform, most of the line Ministries are still not entirely under the control of the local governments and in some cases such as Health and Education have been taken out of

the local government system altogether, becoming autonomous 'agencies' under central government control" (Crook and Ayee, 2006, p. 58). In the current situation where the functions and powers of the assemblies overlap with those of central government institutions, the former play second fiddle to deconcentrated units of the state, and are unable to wield authority over staff or elicit their full loyalty (Ayee, 2003b). In sum,

Despite the constitutional provisions that implied an autonomous and lead role for local government in initiating and co-ordinating local development policies (Article 240[2][b]), the evidence of the degree of central government control and the lack of local government autonomy undermines any notion of 'domains of discretionary power'. ... Where public services are deconcentrated or delegated, DAs merely act as agencies for the central state or have tasks delegated to them by central government ministries, with little or no discretionary powers. There is little to suggest that DAs have become the principle [sic] authority, providing direction and supervision to all other authorities in the district, including central government departments and agencies, as outlined in constitutional and legislative provisions. On the contrary, central government appears to remain dominant at district level, in terms of topdown policy direction and guidance from the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, the National Development Planning Commission and the Ministry of Finance, and in terms of policy implementation by central government agencies (Crawford, 2004, pp. 32-33).

Dependence on the office of the Head of Civil Service and the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Environment to provide staff for the DAs makes it difficult for local institutions to advance measures that will enable them, with the requisite financial autonomy, to attract, recruit and retain the right caliber of professionals to run their affairs and to develop their communities. "Without such autonomous powers, along with a corresponding resource, local state institutions will remain largely under state control, and or cash-starved, and therefore relatively limited in what they can achieve." (Crawford, 2005a, p. 25).

The subsidiarity principle requires democratic participation as one of its key elements, because without it citizens are unable to influence policy, monitor their government and hold it accountable. The Constitution and the Local Government Act recognize this fact, as evidenced by the Article 35 (5d) which enjoins the state "to take appropriate measures .. to give opportunities to people to participate in decisionmaking at every level in national life and government" (Government of Ghana, 1992). Generally, the element of participation in Ghana's decentralization program seems moderate and growing (Ayee, 2003b), with space for involvement by previously excluded groups (Asante and Ayee, 2004). However, when the focus shifts to decision-making in particular, participation by citizens remains relatively stunted. For example, whereas central government guidelines require that the preparation of Medium Term Development Plans (MTDPs) be "driven by public participation" (National Development Planning Commission, 2002, p. 15), evidence from several studies suggest that this is not the case in practice (see Ayee, 2003b; Crawford, 2005a). In instances where some modicum of participation in decision-making has been registered, the spaces for such public participation has been limited, selective and state-defined - what Cornwall (2004) refers to as 'invited space'. Furthermore, the requirement, in the Local Government Act, that Assembly members meet, consult, and report back to their communities on the business of the Assemblies is not being met. An illustration from Crawford's (2005a, p. 16) study is instructive:

Findings from household questionnaires and focus groups indicated that such legal duties were not being met, with the practice of holding constituency meetings being variable at best. Since the 2002 elections, occasional meetings had been held in four communities, while no meetings had been called by the Assembly member in the other four.

The Local Government Act, Act 462, gives the electorate power to elect 70% of DAs membership and the authority to recall them if necessary. There are, nevertheless, provisions in the Local Government Act which blunt these powers. These include the power of the president to dissolve what he/she considers to be non-performing or defaulting assemblies,

without consulting the electorate. This compromises the democratic participatory credentials of the decentralization program, and makes it possible for central government to do away with an assembly that may be at loggerheads with it because of disagreements emanating from the DAs desire for downward accountability, as opposed to upward accountability. The fact that the power of revocation has been rarely used in the past 18 years is not enough reason to maintain it. The possibility that a president could invoke it, at his/her whim, when it is expedient to do so, because the law allows it, is worrying enough. We cannot be comforted that all presidents, in all circumstances, will be generous enough not to apply the law when it suits their own purposes instead of the nation's or when they conflate the personal with the national.

Furthermore, the continuing practice where the president appoints District Chief Executives (DCEs) makes such appointees more loyal to the president than to the people. Popular election of DCEs will mean that they derive their mandate and authority from the electorate and, therefore, accountable to them. Nana Kwasi Agyemang's tenure as Metropolitan Chief Executive of Kumasi, for example, is a quintessential example of how non-elected DCEs can ignore local voices. It was characterized by arrogant intransigence, vis-à-vis the citizenry and their elected assembly members. He rode roughshod over the community because he was certain of support from the president and did not feel vulnerable to electoral defeat.

While Nana Agyemang's case may be an extreme example in form, the fundamental essence of what is being argued here is indisputable. That is, there are still manifestations of attitudes and behavior which indicate the subordination of downward accountability to upward accountability on the part of DCEs, because their power derives from central government and not from the people. In fact, there are contemporary cases where government appointees in executive positions, at various sub-regional levels have comfortably maintained their positions (eg., Isaac Edumadze as Central Regional Minister), in spite of outcries by citizens and citizen groups, because they still enjoy the support of central government.

The New Patriotic Party (NIP), in opposition, saw non-elected DCEs as a problem and promised to change the office to an elective one. Despite having been in power for six years, it has not made good on that promise, despite acknowledgement by Mr. Asamoah-Boateng (Minister of Local Government, Rural Development, and the Environment) that "when DCEs are elected, they would be more accountable to the people because they will be aware of the fact that the power they wield flowed directly from the populace" (Ghana News Agency, June 1, 2006c). The issue about the direction of accountability is made even more germane by accusations, such as the one by the NIP member of parliament for Asunafo South constituency, to the effect that "if the billions of cedis made available to the assemblies on yearly basis were to be used judiciously by the chief executives, Ghana would have seen monumental development" (Chronicle, June 6, 2006). The foregoing argument is not to suggest that the election of DCEs will solve all problems with downward accountability. Admittedly, some DAs, such as the Keta District in 2004 and the Tamale Municipality in 2005/2006, have demonstrated the capacity to reject presidential nominees for DCEs or to push for votes of no confidence (eg. Wenchi, in 2006). These are commendable developments in local governance and shows progress toward downward accountability. Nevertheless, an opportunity for informed and engaged citizens to have some direct input into who runs the affairs of their localities, and the ability to terminate DCEs' tenure when necessary, is critical for deepening democratic decentralization and confirming the citizenry as sovereign.

In addition to critiques of the intensiveness and extensiveness of central government's role in decentralization, there is also skepticism about the donor community's commitment to democratic participation. In an analysis of the European Union's (EU) promotion of democracy in Africa, in general, and Ghana, in particular, Crawford (2005b, p. 571) suggests that "[f]irst the EU's political activities in Africa are driven more by its self-interests than by the norms and principles of democratic governance. Second, democracy is narrowly conceived by the EU, being more concerned with limiting state power than extending popular control, consistent with hegemonic neo-liberalism."

Basic public education, which is one of the areas under the purview of DAs, provides a palpable illustration of civic disengagement instead of engagement. Here, accountability is weak because public education clients, such as students and parents, have a weak voice in policy formulation, school management, and performance monitoring. The situation reflects Winkler's (2004, p. 4) observation that

almost no one suffers adverse consequences if children fail to learn. Teachers' pay is not linked to their performance in the classroom. Teachers and principals never lose their employment as a result of students' poor test performance. In developing countries, teachers and principals are seldom evaluated, much less rewarded or penalized for performance.

In principle, the devolution of basic education to the DAs should shorten the distance between parents and policymakers. In reality, the distance is still very long. Part of the reason appears to be the failure to localize basic education sufficiently and to provide the space for users of the system to engage with it in a genuinely participatory manner. Citizen voice is given high audibility in education matters when decision-making resides at lower levels of the politico-administrative structure. Similar concerns have been noted in relation to environmental management. Sumberg and Okali (2006) observe that central government appointees dominate district environmental management committees, with their loyalties directed toward the appointing authority rather than the local communities. They argue that "despite the existence of real environmental management problems at the local level, and the rhetorical emphasis on local knowledge and local resource management, much environmental policy and regulation is still being driven by the center and informed by a distant meta-narrative about environmental change and degradation" (Sumberg and Okali., 2006, p. 20).

In Ghana, the absence of single-purpose governments, such as elected school boards, with responsibility for a network of schools, means that citizens' voices regarding this important area can be drowned by more powerful interests in other areas, as elected officials, whose mandate straddles various areas, try to respond to a multiplicity of forces. Elected

school boards, whose mandate focuses solely on education issues, can be held accountable based on election promises, identified performance targets, and indicators of success. The disconnect between the educational system and citizens, and the attendant lack of involvement and accountability that it engenders, is what prompted Gyimah-Boadi (2005, pp. 21-22) to propose that

all concerned stakeholders ... teachers, students, parents, alumni, religious and community leaders should all be involved alongside school administrators. Decentralized education administration will be enhanced by the application of the principle of 'subsidiarity' - where local communities are permitted to do whatever it is possible to do well at the local level.

While the unwillingness of governments, at various levels, to provide political space for civic engagement is a major concern, it is important to recognize that power is not ceded easily and so citizens and civil society have to wrestle political space for themselves. Devas and Korboe (2000, p. 132) observe, however, that "civil society in Kumasi appears to be relatively weak. Although Ghana has a long tradition of community organizations involved in development ... these have become less effective over time, particularly in urban areas" (see also Asante and Ayee, 2004) In this respect, it is heartening that the European Union signed an agreement with the Ghana government in February 2006, under which it has earmarked 4.5 billion cedis towards strengthening civil society to enable it mobilize and represent the interest of vulnerable and marginalized groups in local governance (Ghanaweb, Feb. 3, 2006). It is important, though, that civil society is not construed as a homogeneous space for the articulation and aggregation of common interests. Some civil society groups may be hierarchically structured, undemocratic organizations which represent and present the voice of the powerful within their group and/or in society as a whole. In dealing with and supporting civil society groups, therefore, the concept of pluralism needs to be at the fore.

Citizen involvement in local government elections is not very encouraging either. The Commonwealth Local Government Forum (2006) notes that

voter turnout in the August 2002 DA elections was only 35%. It states further that in spite of concerted efforts towards making unit committee elections in 2002 successful, not enough people put themselves forward to stand for election, thereby leaving some unit committees without a full complement of elected members. There appears not to be an improvement over the first unit committee elections, in 1998, when 65 percent of elections were uncontested (Asante and Ayee, 2004, p. 14). The proportion of women in the political structures of the local government system has also been a perennial problem (Crawford, 2004, p. 29).

Regarding appointed memberships, in 1988 the government introduced a quota allotting 30 per cent of those seats to women, and in 2002 the quota was increased to 50 per cent. However, adherence to the quota directions varied considerably from district to district. ... In 2002, women constituted approximately 35.5 per cent of appointed members in 97 of the 110 districts - a figure that fell considerably short of the 50 per cent target set by the Ministry of Local Government. In all, only six districts managed to meet the quota (Ofei-Aboagye, 2004, p. 754).

The reason for this level of disengagement and/or apathy is largely due to a perception among citizens that the DAs do not have the capacity to fulfill the needs of communities and the lack of incentives for holding elective office within local government institutions (see Asante and Ayee, 2004). Crawford (2005a, p. 14 provides an illustration of the lack confidence in the DAs, when he observes that "in two communities, two boreholes had been broken for two years and four years respectively. In one case it was stated that the unit committee had contacted the District Assembly, but no help had been provided."

Achieving Subsidiarity in Ghana - Which Way Forward?

Based on the forgoing, it is fair to say that Ghana has put in place structures, systems and processes which appear to be in consonance with the letter of principle of subsidiarity. That is, the principle seems to exist in form. It must be acknowledged, however, that the practical manifestations of the decentralization program reflect a continuing preponderance of central government control, a marginalized role for local governments, and hence some variance with the spirit of the principle. Devolution has not been accompanied by requisite authority and a commensurate access to resources. As noted in the Greater Toronto Charter (Avana Capital Corporation, n.d., p. 3), "the devolution of responsibility, without the requisite authority to set policy and secure resources to fund, runs in opposition to the principles of subsidiarity and fiscal accountability."

In order to ensure that the country's decentralization program is anchored around the principle of subsidiarity, it is critical that we move very fast towards strengthening local authorities and not be stymied by a seemingly endless fascination with decentralization as a process. It is important to critically engage with Ghana's efforts at decentralization in order to ensure that they move significantly beyond rhetoric to encapsulate the core elements of practical subsidiarity, such as active civic engagement, discretionary and fiscal autonomy for local governments, and downward accountability. The conditions necessary for correcting the country's democratic deficit at the local level, therefore, need to be put in place and/or strengthened.

A fundamental step in that direction is to reconfigure the philosophical basis for the relationship between central government and sub-national structures. The next step is, through genuine partnership of all levels of government, a major redefinition of central government's role that culminates in a credible reorganization of the entire structure and system of governance, with the necessary reallocation of resources that makes it

possible to achieve substantive democratic decentralization. The National Decentralization Action Plan, endorsed by Cabinet in February 2004, articulates some key objectives aimed at deepening decentralization. A principal tenet in fulfilling those objectives should be a commitment to letting institutions closest to the people handle their affairs, and providing them with the political and financial wherewithal to do so. After all, "subsidiarity stands as the keystone which all other principles - including local autonomy - build upon. It can act as a guarantee of improved levels of accountability and efficient delivery" (World Urban Forum, 2004, p. 5).

Achieving it, however, requires attitudinal changes within governments, a commitment to active citizenship and civic journalism, on the part of communities, and the infusion of needed resources (through local and supplementary central government efforts) in order to realize the goal of a responsive and accountable system of governance. So far decentralization efforts have not given these issues the needed urgency. The changes advocated above are critical in addressing malfeasance, lack of data on the basis of which to design and administer revenue collection, and credible and consistent mechanisms of enforcement and answerability in respect of tax/rate defaulters (see Inanga and Osei-Wusu, 2004, p. 88).

A key component of the re-configuration of intergovernmental relations is the acceptance, and promotion, of pluralism in local governance. There is a tendency for opponents of democratic decentralization to point to the possible chaos that might be generated if multiple interests are allowed to drive local governance without the imposition of central control. These fears are unfounded in most cases. Pluralism rather allows for checks and balances and mutual monitoring by autonomous groups, with the likelihood that good governance will be sustained. As Fiszbein (cited in Anderson, 2000, p. 21) observes, "decentralization means that certain functions previously performed by national bureaucracies will be performed by a given combination of public and private agents at the local level." Pluralism, thus, implies that neither central government or its agents, nor any single entity, has a monopolistic hold on what is best for a locality. It provides the space for multiple voices to be articulated and hence for local capacity to be developed in terms of policy and project planning,

implementation, and monitoring. As Asante and Ayee (2004, p. 5) rightly point out, "effective implementation of poverty reduction strategies often requires detailed and specific local knowledge which may be most readily obtainable through a decentralized and locally accountable system of governance."

In order for pluralism to work, however, there needs to be a solid base of social capital from which to draw (Putnam, 1993). This means "norms, trust, and reciprocity networks that facilitate mutually beneficial cooperation in a community" (Mosser, cited in Harris and de Renzio, 1997, p.931). When these variables are present in local governance, it is easier to organize collaborative initiatives to which all partners can commit, claim ownership of, and work together to sustain (see Schweigert, 2002, pp. 36-37; Bebbington and Kopp, 1998). These values can be developed with the construction of spaces where "various actors ... come together and methods of participation that are indeed empowering and take into consideration dissent and dissonance" (Anderson, 2000, p. 24). Programs such as the "Government Accountability Improves Trust" (GAIT), which has been rolled out in 20 districts, HIPC Watch of SEND Foundation, and the Social Auditing approach of the National Commission on Civic Education, are helping to develop social capital and engender strong attitudes and mechanisms of accountability (see Soyir-Yariga et al. 2004). There are, however, concerns about their sustainability because of their dependence on donor-funding which may not be available over the long haul (see Soyir-Yariga et al. 2004, pp. 18-19, Appiah et al., 2003). It is, therefore important, that these pilot initiatives are sustained and expanded to other regions for them to make a significant impact on the country's local government system. As Appiah et al. (2003, p. 3) reveal, "the gains realized are fragile, and if no effort is made to maintain links to existing GAIT districts in the coming strategy period, these gains could be lost with the civic unions (CUs) dissolving in most districts."

Of course, access to information is critical for citizens to avail themselves of the opportunities provided by expanded spaces for participation. They have demonstrated that with the appropriate information, they can demand greater accountability from DCEs and DA members (Ayee, 2004). That is

why it is important that efforts be made to rejuvenate sub-district structures, such as town/area councils and unit committees, which are fast becoming moribund even before they have had a chance to be weaned (see Crawford, 2005a). Incentives need to be provided to members and staff of these sub-structures to encourage them to serve as channels for interest articulation and aggregation on behalf of their communities. Furthermore, it is absolutely critical that the spaces created for participation, whether within civil society organizations or in relation to local government, are not captured by elite or other parochial interests, to the neglect of other groups in the community, especially the traditionally marginalized ones such as women and different categories of minorities. As Katsiouni (2003, p. 4) admonishes,

the irony is that the vices of the centre, including political patronage and cronyism, are transmitted or inherited by the local government structures. Then the system regenerates itself whereby local political elites capture and use local councils as means to further primarily their own interests. Thus, devolution is no panacea if it does not bring about empowerment, participation and inclusion by the governed - which in most Africa countries means largely the rural poor.

Conclusion - Is Ghana Ready for Subsidiarity?

In spite of the shortcomings of Ghana's decentralization program and the lukewarm attitude toward local government, it can be argued that Ghana has put in place the basic building blocks for the transformation of sub-national government. It seems that the country is ready for subsidiarity, at least in certain sectors of local governance, such as education, natural resource management, vehicle and driver licensing. The country's decentralization process has come far enough to provide a good platform from which democratic decentralization can be strengthened. We cannot be hamstrung by the perennial excuse given for the slow pace of decentralization - i.e., that the decentralized units lack capacity to handle the demands of full devolution of authority (see Albrechts, 2001). Such an argument just perpetuates a self-fulfilling prophecy of incompetence and oftentimes confuses a lack of capacity with disagreements between local units/people and central government over priorities, means, and perspectives. As Anderson (2000, p. 21), points out, "local authorities can never prove their abilities unless they have some authority ... Only through decentralization would these capacities be developed."

Furthermore, initiatives such as the District Capacity Building Project, supported with CIDA funding, are very useful in helping DAs move closer to the requisite level of competence needed to accomplish their responsibilities. Seven million dollars has been used in the past five years, under this program, to enhance capacity for good governance in 24 districts of the three northern regions of the country (Ghanaweb, May 6, 2006). The EUs commitment to channel part of its 32 billion cedis commitment, in support the country's National Decentralization Action Plan, towards capacity building and human resource development is commendable (Ghanaweb, Feb. 3, 2006). An important part of that process should encompass the envisaged full integration of the eleven line departments and organizations of central government into the decentralized local government system.

The transition to full and substantive subsidiarity is, therefore, attainable, if the suggestions discussed above are pursued (see Agyeman-Duah, 2004, p. 6). DAs still enjoy goodwill among the population as potentially viable mechanisms of governance and service delivery. 51.6% of people surveyed by Ayee and Amponsah (2003) in 12 districts recognize them as the appropriate instruments for effective delivery of services and resolution of local problems. An untinctured infusion of the subsidiarity principle into local government, with commensurate resource capacity, will help to significantly elevate the entrepreneurial and democratic participation dimensions of DAs, and promote efficacy. Only through this can the following stated aim of the 1988 Local Government Law be achieved; i.e.: "to promote popular participation and ownership of the machinery of government ... by devolving power, competence and resource/means to the district level" (cited in MAP Consult 2002, p. 35).

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