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# Getting the most out of local government: Lessons from Uganda

**For local government to serve as a meaningful democratic check, greater emphasis must be placed on building capacity through training and ensuring sufficient revenues are decentralised to local levels to allow high-quality public services to be delivered.**

Recent estimates suggest that at least [80% of developing countries worldwide](#) are pursuing a policy of decentralisation. This push for local democracy has been taken up by the international development community, with a wave of recent publications extolling the virtues of local governments in improving local democracy, accountability, and central government performance. Central governments are being encouraged to devolve service delivery, improve local tax collection, increase transfers from the centre and encourage citizens to get involved in local politics – all as a form of check on central government power. But what happens if these newly created local governments don't have qualified people in place to turn expectations into reality? And what if these people don't have the financial resources to carry out extensive service delivery?

This article builds on research conducted in Entebbe and Kampala, Uganda, in May 2013 into the training and finances that local government staff receive to be able to carry out their extensive functions. Uganda is heralded as one of the most successful decentralised systems in Africa with an extensive legal and constitutional framework that supports 112 districts. President Museveni put the current system in place upon coming to power in 1986, after the civil war. The district is in charge of primary education, primary healthcare, environmental sustainability and urban planning. Councillors are elected every five years (the next election is in 2016) and are responsible for performance of technical staff. As per the *1997 Local Government Act*, civil servants are hired, fired and monitored at the local government level. While this structure may seem coherent in theory, in practice there are two serious issues which have yet to be addressed centrally.

Firstly, both political and technical staff suffers from a general lack of capacity. Local governments in Uganda are managed by political staff, who are often illiterate, poorly educated and are given little training before taking up office. A one-week induction is provided by the central government, but little or no training is carried out in the five years they are in office. Not only does this cause problems for constituents it compromises

Only does this cause problems for constituents, it compromises their role as “monitors” of the performance of technical staff who are often higher degree educated professionals. One interviewee mentioned that this arrangement contributes heavily to local corruption – political staff often cannot even read technical reports. Technical staff are able to list their priorities for training, which are then part funded by the central government. Yet demand far outstrips the financial resources; often only one person per local council receives training each year. Even more worryingly, the amount of money provided for training is conditional on local government performance, a cycle that is hard to break for consistently under-performing councils.

Secondly, local governments suffer from an overwhelming lack of control over revenues to undertake effective and comprehensive capacity building and service delivery. 80% of service delivery has been devolved to local governments in Uganda, yet they only receive 17% of the national budget. Worryingly, this figure is declining (it was nearly 50% in 2002), despite central government statements that “local governments need 31% of the national budget to run properly”<sup>[1]</sup>. In one case study, Entebbe Municipal Council, salaries constituted 70% of their budget which leaves little revenue for service delivery, let alone capacity building. This situation is compounded by the lack of local revenue available. Personal graduated tax was abolished in 2005, and replaced with two local taxes, but these do not recoup anywhere near the same yields. In total, 95-99% of the local government budget comes from the central government ([Golooba-Mutebi 2005](#)). These trends show a worrying increased reliance on the centre for service delivery and increasing recentralisation.

This work was based on fieldwork conducted within a specific context, and while generality should not be presumed, it should not be overlooked either. Decentralisation should be encouraged – for many citizens local government is the part of government that most directly impacts their lives. Yet it is important that those in charge of creating these new systems of government are aware of the importance of having a well-trained cadre of political and technical staff in place, supported by sufficient revenue to allow them to carry out their new functions. Otherwise, they run the risk of expecting too much, too fast, out of a system that cannot cope with its new responsibilities.

<sup>[1]</sup> Patrick Mutabwire, Ag. Permanent Secretary of Ministry of Local Government (CLGF 2013:17)