The role of local government in stimulating pro-poor economic development; what and how?

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0. Executive summary

During a regional meeting on decentralisation in 2007 in Arusha, staff members of several Netherlands Embassies and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs pointed out the need to gain insight into the role of local authorities in stimulating economic development at sub-national levels. It was decided to collect and analyse examples of good practices of the active role of local government in supporting the productive sectors, of which this paper documents some first findings.

An important precondition for pro-poor economic growth is that local government understand their potential role in supporting private sector development, and are aware of the opportunities and constraints for the private sector in its territory. On the other side, the private sector should be better organized in order to voice the concerns of its organisations more effectively. It is further illustrated that fostering public-private dialogue (PPD) is an important tool; it can build trust between both sectors, and can lay the foundation for a joint identification of policies that are likely to contribute to a more conducive environment for private sector development. Dialogue and bottom-up communication are however only effective when there is explicit commitment to act on the outcomes by both public and private sector. Municipal officials and policy makers may require capacity building to build effective PPD, while in many places, local governments need to change from a controlling to a more facilitating and service oriented organisation.

It is further argued that local governments can contribute in various ways to an enabling environment for pro-poor economic growth. First, local governments can foster effective and efficient registration and licences for business activities. It is also stressed that good economic governance means predictable and reliable action by the government, through the application of accessible, affordable and transparent policies and procedures. This also implies that taxes and levies should be collected and used in a transparent way. Moreover, experience shows that taxes are more successfully collected, when local government openly demonstrate how the money has been invested. In addition, fostering investments in physical infrastructure, such as roads, water, telecommunication services and electricity, is a major determinant of product quality and market access. This can be done for example through lobbying and including physical infrastructure in local planning tasks and budgets. Finally, local governments constitute an important market for the private sector, as buyers of services and goods. Preferring the procurement of local services is therefore highly important.
1. Introduction

The need for getting more insight in the (im)possibilities for local authorities to play a constructive role in stimulating economic development at sub-national levels became clear during a regional meeting on decentralisation in Arusha, Tanzania, at the beginning of 2007. Staff of 7 Netherlands Embassies and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs/Development Cooperation discussed ways to improved service delivery at sub-national levels by providing more assistance to local government reform programmes. Participants agreed on the opportunities that decentralisation processes may offer to strengthening pro-poor service delivery in social sectors like education, health and drinking water but questioned whether local governments should also play an active role in supporting the productive sectors. During the meeting in Arusha it was decided to start collecting and analysing examples of successes in order to identify good practices. This paper documents some first findings and builds further merely upon ongoing work of the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam.

2. Basic assumptions and definitions

Institutional reform towards strengthening decentralisation policies is becoming increasingly important in Africa. As a result, local governments are gaining in authority, powers and legitimacy and become more prominent in political processes. The role of local governments in the delivery of social services like health and education is growing too. Scope and possibilities for local governments to play a significant role in improving economic governance and public-private dialogue - both major drivers for a better business environment and creation of balanced growth and wealth – are gaining momentum.

Local governments in rural areas deal mostly with resource-poor entrepreneurs. Most of them are involved in agriculture and related sectors, often having an informal character. This group experiences a number of problems that hamper their development, which may be partly gendered. These include lack of knowledge on regulations and rights, relatively high taxes, limited access to financial services, insufficient access to markets, high costs of inputs or price fixing and poor service delivery by the public sector. Moreover, resource-poor farmers and entrepreneurs may be less well organised than other businesses, having also less access to existing business organizations and networks. They tend to have fewer contacts with policy makers. A number of these constraints can be addressed, however, by public policy at local level to promote pro-poor economic development, while others are more profound and require policy changes at higher levels.

Pro-poor economic development is geared to improve the degree to which poor men and women are able to take advantage of opportunities resulting in economic growth and welfare. Pro-poor private sector development contributes to a type of economic development that reduces the gap between the well-off and the poorer sections in society. This requires that better-off social groups and better-connected business are prevented from capturing government services disproportionally. Pro-poor private sector development thus needs to address the specific interests and requirements of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and contribute to the effective and efficient creation of decent employment. Biases and exclusionary mechanisms present within local government and other business support organizations that block working for small-scale farmers and MSME groups need to be identified and addressed.
The local level in this paper refers to two situations. The first setting is a community, such as villages, hamlets, urban neighbourhoods, nomadic camps and other types of human settlements. These communities lack an administrative or legal status but are nonetheless very relevant for economic activities and other human activity, and the locus for a set of institutions governing access to resources, labour and products. The second situation is the lowest sub-national governance level where elected local government (LG) and ‘frontline’ service providers engage with the private sector, citizens and their respective organizations. Elected officials such as mayors, councillors, and other politicians play an important role in policy making and implementation. Expectations of citizens towards LG are oriented more towards service delivery with respect to administration and basic social services. These formal, territorial units have political jurisdiction in their area, and may have the legitimacy of a democratically elected body. This makes local government an appropriate level for interventions oriented towards improving the business climate. The focus of this paper is on municipalities, local governments, ‘communes’, that is entities that are in direct contact with citizens. This paper will not deal with local government at the regional or provincial level, even, although this scale level may be more appropriate for planning private sector development and decision making on for instance some type of infrastructure investments.

3. **WHAT can local government best do to contribute to an enabling environment for pro-poor economic development?**

3.1 **FOSTERING EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT REGISTRATION AND LICENSES**

A great number of laws and regulations exist that influence the environment within which businesses operate, either positively and negatively. These are defined and implemented by the public sector, which is larger than just the LG. Public administration is composed of many different ministries, agencies and other structures. Very often it is difficult for entrepreneurs or farmers to know all the regulations they have to comply with; the type of business services, other support programs and subsidies that are available to the private sector; or which public department or agency they can approach for questions and concerns.

The main public policy objectives for registration are that business activities are in accordance with the existing legal framework and to minimize risks for the public of risky business. Other reasons include ensuring tax collection and for statistical purposes. In most countries starting a business tends to involve many steps and interactions with multiple public sector entities at different levels of government. Interactions with public sector authorities will continue also during the operation of the enterprise, be it tax reporting or government inspections.

All these different administrative processes and procedures form the legal and regulatory framework for private operations. Entrepreneurs – existing, new or informal – will look at the overall costs when deciding to register. The major driver for this is the degree in which the private sector can benefit from formalizing its business by having access to business services, finance or government procurement, thus increasing the chances for productivity gains and growth.

In most countries business registration typically involves regional or municipal authorities. LG’s may play a role in the registration of business (which thus become formal), issuing of permits to operate, for building premises, or involved in legislation on employment, etc.. In
Tanzania, for example each local government should set up a business registration centre\(^3\). In other situations, local governments may be involved formally in inspection of land and property (e.g. Nigeria, Lesotho) or issues declarations that taxes have been paid (DR Congo). So-called one-stop shops or special windows for private sector are being proposed all over the world to make the registration and administration process more efficient for the private sector.

Another registration and administration role of LG’s is developing around land rights and guarding deeds that record land related transaction. The role of LG in land administration is growing in importance in a number of countries (Ethiopia, Niger, Mali, Burundi). In Ethiopia land certificates are prepared at village level and issued at district level and small farmers are happy to pay land rent as it assures them that the recently issues land certificates are recognized by the LG’s as valid documents. In Benin, for example, copies of land sales or rentals are kept by LG’s (against a fee) for safekeeping and to prevent conflicts. LG is also involved in allocation of land for residential purposes and issuing certificates which allow people to occupy the land. They get involved in marking and protecting livestock corridors, which are essential for mobile livestock keeping and important for reducing conflicts between herders and farmers (e.g. Mali).

3.2 PREDICTABILITY AND RELIABILITY

The predictability of action by local government, and other public sector actors, is a crucial factor of economic governance. Whether agreed policies, systems and procedures are applied, respected and enforced is another feature. Related issues of economic governance are honouring engagements and commitments and if interactions between local government staff and the private sector (and other citizens) are respectful. This includes supervision to keep the actions of local government staff and authorities in line with established rules, including the possibility for applying checks and oversights in order to prevent abuse. “Good” economic governance also assumes that certain groups or interests do not unduly influence decision-making and the allocation of resources.

All these issues affect the legitimacy of local government and whether it is perceived as trustworthy and credible, also by poor entrepreneurs and farmers. Private sector organization often refer to attributes of the exercise of power around the issuing of permits, licenses etc. when they are asked to rate the performance of the public sector. They value an efficient and fast process that is accessible, predictable (procedures are correctly implemented) and transparent; a level playing field with competitors, and speed.

Another important aspect is the costs of the service, including transaction costs for the demander and the timely provision of adequate information on what is required and how to achieve this. However, improving procedures and regulations may face resistance. Some of the ‘inefficiencies’ are a source of income to some and offer opportunities for political patronage or unfair competition (e.g. access to export licenses).

Strengthening accountability mechanisms is increasingly perceived as an important strategy towards improving economic governance for all and addressing inadequate performance and service delivery. However, there are cases where tax, labor, and environmental regulations were waved for small firms out of sympathy for their “plight” (and even political patronage), but it is argued that this type of general support may hinder rather than help local economies if it condemns them to low-level economic stagnation, degradation of the environment, and violation of worker rights.

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\(^3\) See Business registration act, 2005.
3.3 COLLECTION AND USE OF TAXES AND LEVIES IN A TRANSPARENT WAY

Increasing resource mobilisation is a key concern for local governments all over the world and are required for the functioning of the local administration and for investments, including in local economic development. The two major sources for LG are transfers by central government, projects and programmes, and local taxes and levies.

LG often look towards local taxation for raising revenues, as this is more under their control. However, “excessive” taxation can harm economic development and undermine sustainability. A related issue is the efficiency and transparency of resource use by local government. Local tax rates may also vary from one LG area to another, across markets and commodities, which are sometimes distorting markets and competition. When flat tax rates are used, this creates a relatively large tax burden for the category of the smallest enterprises. As a result, business licenses dues can be relatively high, becoming a burden for enterprises that want to become formal. Tax collection methods can be perceived as harassment, and also discourage formalization when this implies more visibility.

LG’s become more successfully in collecting local taxes and levies, when they can openly show how they have invested the money. When these funds are not used just for covering administrative cost but also for investments in development, including measures to improve the business environment, citizens are generally more willing to pay taxes.

3.4 FOSTERING INVESTMENTS IN PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Availability of physical infrastructure is a major determinant of production costs, product quality and market access. Business land and workspace, reliable water supply, sewage facilities, roads, postal and telecommunication services and electricity are often critical constraints for economic development. Local government may be responsible for creating an enabling physical environment through e.g. provision of legally demarcated land for business development, maintenance and supply of feeder roads and basic utilities such as delivery of electricity and water.

Investments in infrastructure are not only made by the public sector. Telecommunication services are increasingly provided by the private sector. Telecommunication networks, for instance, are very often entirely private in Africa.

An important role of local government is to address the necessity of proper physical infrastructure in its planning and coordination tasks, in their lobby work, and to include resources (and co-financing arrangements) for physical infrastructure in its budgets. In Cameroon, for example, the commune of Bikok secured resources for improving the main road in the commune (through an investment fund for local government), which tend to be impassable during the raining season. The mayor of the commune of Aguégué in southern Benin lobbied central government for access to electricity, for investment in an irrigation scheme and to exploit sand. The mayor of Glazoué, again in Benin, used LG resources to pay the salaries of a number of extension workers to support cotton production and feeder road maintenance. A local government area in the arid lands of Tanzania encouraged the local vocational training institutes to adapt their (general) curriculum to the specific local conditions.

In Ethiopia, (urban) local governments tend to focus on the establishment and promotion of locations for exporting horticultural businesses. This includes allocating land, ensuring that basic infrastructure is available, and that the area is easily accessible. LA’s may even offer tax
holidays or subsidies. The intention is to promote economic development and employment in their territory, and eventually also generate more income for local government now (land sales) or in future (taxes paid by companies and their employees).

3.5 PREFERING PROCUREMENT OF LOCAL SERVICES

Local government purchase services and goods and may outsource also some of their responsibilities. Local government can be an important “buyer” of services and goods in rural areas thus contributing and influencing the type of economic growth and employment generation (for example infrastructure-led economic development). They are thus a market for the private sector, which is growing when devolution is strengthened.

It is estimated that for example in Uganda one third of all procurement by the state, is handled by local governments\(^4\). In Ghana, for example, local governments have influenced the system for sourcing for school meals, emphasising the importance of buying locally produced food. Local governments procure also advisory services, may tender for the construction of infrastructure and may outsource the provision and maintenance of public utilities such as drinking water, markets, and even tax collection.

The type of procurement system used may contribute to pro-poor development and job creation. But, the scope for a preferential policy may be restricted by existing regulations that set minimum conditions to ensure quality and to ensure open competition. Lack of transparency and even corruption in procurement systems, also at the local government level, may undermine the development of a healthy private sector and the quality of their work. Corrupt systems are beneficial for enterprises that have good relations and are prepared to pay, while not necessarily doing a good job.

In South Africa, legislation is put in place to promote pro-poor economic development and local employment creation by means of a preferential procurement framework for goods and services that targets local companies, and in particular small firms and companies owned by persons from previously disadvantaged communities (i.e. Black Economic Empowerment). The policy has worked best in larger towns where there are more small businesses present. The results improve when municipal officials are more aware of the situation of small and micro enterprises and how therefore to draft tender documents, but also have more knowledge on the possibilities of using more labour intensive approaches and to improve quality.

4. HOW can local government best contribute to an improved enabling environment for sustainable economic development?

4.1 LOCAL GOVERNMENT SHOULD UNDERSTAND THEIR ROLE IN SUPPORTING PSD

The ability of local governments to contribute to private sector development largely depends on the legal framework that sets out their authority, mandate and resources available to them. This includes the level of fiscal autonomy. Local government may have own staff and departments or host ‘deconcentrated’ branches or some staff of line ministries. In practice, however, there is often a huge gap between policy and implementation, particularly regarding the transfer of resources. This often affects negatively the actual capacity and motivation of local governments to act, including in the field of economic governance.

\(^4\) http://www.busiweek.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1317&Itemid=58
Development plans of LG’s are often not very explicit on economic development. The degree of consultation and meaningful participation of the private sector varies enormously, both in and between countries as well as over time. Although economic opportunities are generally included, assessments are often rather general and descriptive, whereas the actions identified tend to refer more to the taxation potential than to the issue of how LA’s could best contribute to pro-poor economic development.

Against this background it is important to realize that local governments can only contribute constructively to PSD if they are aware of their (potential) support to private sector development and sufficiently equipped. LA’s need therefore fully understand issues like local economic development, sustainability, pro-poor growth, the role of the private sector etc. Complementary to this LA’s should know the opportunities in their territory for the private sector as well as key constraints for realising the potential.

4.2 PRIVATE SECTOR SHOULD GET BETTER ORGANIZED

A constructive dialogue between the public and private sector is crucial for PSD. Effective and efficient public-private dialogue (PPD), however, requires not only an active and knowledgeable local government but also a well-organised, capable and accountable private sector with sufficient capacity and resources to effectively voice the opinions and concerns of their entire constituency.

Although in most countries there is a wide variety of private sector organisations (PSOs) - from national chambers of commerce and/or agriculture and their branches at sub-national level, to many sub-sector, formal and informal associations that are often organised around a certain trade in a particular location (e.g. informal association of local fruit vendors, cotton farmers organisations, savings and credit groups or a local association of shop owners) there is hardly co-operation and co-ordination. The variety in interest simply seems too large. This surely reduces the impact of PPD.

All-purpose business associations tend to have many members and address a broad perspective of the business environment but have often less in-depth knowledge of sector issues or for instance specific MSME concerns like the sector organisations and more specialised membership organisations (MSME, farmers). Next to that, goals of members are not necessarily always the same: some of them are indeed prepared to co-operate and to defend their interest via a business organisation whereas others are driven by self-interest and suspicion. Moreover, many grassroots level private sector organisations are not linked to apex private sector organisations such as chambers of commerce at the regional or central level which potentially could have taken care of their interests in national level dialogue processes.

Despite the shortage of strong national and sub-national private sector bodies that genuinely represent resource-rich and –poor entrepreneurs and labourers, strong farmers’ and other business associations that genuinely speak for MSME show that they can make a clear difference. There are enough examples, also in Africa, that show that such organisations can be extremely helpful in making sure that the concerns of their members are heard.

In order to improve the potential impact of PPD, three policy approaches seem to be important: (1) self-organisation by MSME should be encouraged as well as co-operation with apex organisations; (2) private sector organisations should be stimulated to become more representative and enhance awareness and understanding of MSME issues; and (3) existing farmer and business organisations should be assisted to focus on organisational strengthening and promoting mechanisms that enhance accountability and transparency of their way of
working, as well as capacity building on issues such as sub-sector analysis, lobby and advocacy in order for them to participate effectively in local PPD.

4.3 LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND PRIVATE SECTOR SHOULD FOSTER PUBLIC-PRIVATE DIALOGUE

PPD is an institutional arrangement that brings together a group of mostly public and private sector actors. PPD discussion forums range from highly formal/structured to more informal/ad hoc, and initiatives may last from only a few hours or continue over several years. Objectives of PPD include building trust and bridging gaps, to laying the foundation for a joint problem analysis and identification of policies and institutional reform that contribute to a more conducive environment for private sector development. It is argued that governments engaging in PPD are more likely to promote sensible, workable reforms, while enterprises participating in meaningful PPD processes are more likely to support these. Key challenges for PPD are promoting sub-sector and horizontal dialogue processes, and improving vertical linkages and communications to ensure that issues that have to be addressed at a higher policy level are indeed taken up.

The poor enabling environment for especially farmers and other MSME - in terms of overly complex legal and regulatory frameworks, registration, licensing and tax regimes, corruption and limited support provided - is for instance an obvious area for dialogue. At the same time, this problematic relation with public officials and entities is the reason why these entrepreneurs are often so reluctant to trust the government in the first place.

Before a PPD can be fruitful, local government authorities need to understand first that by collaborating with the private sector they stand more chance of achieving their development objectives and improve their revenue base, while the private sector should understand that it has obligations (respecting rules and regulations), as well as right to demand for accountability, better services, and being consulted on policy making.

Using PPD mechanisms to make PSD policy more pro-poor requires more insight in approaches and mechanisms that are needed to ensure that MSME, informal sector and smaller agricultural producers (through their organizations preferably) can voice their concerns through PPD processes. The policy process should not be limited to a small elite with privileged access to political and governance structures, but must build on structures and process that are deliberately set up to elicit citizen participation in policy formulation and implementation, and promote accountability of policy makers. Without a more equitable dialogue, governments tend to follow the loudest, most powerful voices, which rarely speak in the best interest of broad based private sector growth, let alone poverty reduction.

Even when MSME organisations are invited to a PPD, the effectiveness of their participation, however, may be limited. Small businesses’ voices often are drowned out, even in well-established PPD systems with formal structures. Larger firms will always have better informal links to policy makers, so MSME need to be well-organised and focussed to make a difference. The design, preparation and quality of facilitation of the PPD can prevent that the process and issues covered are dominated by larger, more powerful businesses. Training and coaching may have to be made available to MSME before starting the PPD, so that they learn how to present their case effectively, and assist them with the design of mechanisms for consultation and feedback of their constituency.
There is also a requirement for a (more) even playing field between LG and the private sector including the capacity to (re)negotiate public-private partnerships (PPPs) and implement them to achieve the economic objectives. A greater sharing between municipalities of lessons and experiences of different kinds of PPPs helps since a lack of exposure to information means that weak partnerships are self-perpetuating. Cost benefit analyses are needed to make appropriate decisions in favour of or against PPP in service delivery.

A better dialogue and more communication between the public and private sector can be a first step to improve policy, with sector dialogue having been the most effective in producing results. Usually there are multiple stakeholders involved in local economic development, which may include project staff, customary authorities, formal and informal community-based organizations and groups, NGOs, local government agencies, private and public service providers, politicians, entrepreneurs, etc. Clearly, improved service provision and local economic development require the input and collaboration of this multitude of actors. These new configurations also raise questions with respect to horizontal coordination, connecting effectively with other (vertical) levels, and accountability.

Smooth partnerships are essential for efficiency, to avoid duplication and prevent gaps. Network governance is about enhancing functional and transparent relationships between stakeholders working on similar issues in an informal or formal partnership context, such as coordination meetings, platforms, public-private dialogues, cadre de concertation, inter-profession etc. However, this is easier said than done and the challenge is to arrive at a dialogue on expectations regarding roles and responsibilities. In a multi-stakeholder setting, this implies being clear on roles and responsibilities, on quality standards, sharing information, undertaking joint analysis, and honouring agreements.

Misunderstanding, uneasy relationships and distrust between public and private sector actors is common in many countries, resulting in limited responsiveness of public sector institutions to requests voiced by the private sector. Suspicion and non-co-operation leads to inefficiency and waste, which inhibits growth, investment and poverty reduction. This needs to be overcome effectively before any sustainable reform can take place. Policy makers can only learn from local experiences when functional, communication processes are in place. When this is insufficient, this may lead to inadequate policies and programmes that sometimes even aggravate the business climate. Getting the knowledge and experience of private sector actors into policy making requires at least:

- Consultation of the private sector during planning exercises,
- Mechanisms for regular public-private dialogue by sub-sector or at the appropriate policy level,
- Bottom-up communication processes to ensure that local level issues are fed into higher level policy processes.

More dialogue and better communication alone, however, will not be enough to improve the environment within which the private sector operates. As mentioned above, parts of the public sector still do not understand the private sector, and do not believe that dialogue is useful. At

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5 Many of the older public-private partnerships, for instance on water and sanitation contracts, lack a clear poverty-focus. There is a need to improve targeting and to reconsider the scope and processes of delivery. Skilled specialists are needed to support municipalities achieve pro-poor objectives.
most, they may regard the private sector as a useful cash cow. Moreover, a coherent formal policy making process is lacking in many countries. Therefore, dialogue is only effective when there is an explicit commitment and willingness to act on its outcomes by the public and private sector.

5. Conclusions
Local government need to become more aware of their role in economic development, which is not always that obvious to them, and that they have to interact with the range of private sector actors in their territory, farmers, informal business, MSME etc. Newly-elected politicians often need to develop the skills to understand the potential of these partnerships and the council's partnering role and responsibilities. Municipal officials and policy-makers may also require capacity building focused on building effective public-private partnerships for the delivery of municipal services.

Where there is a lack of dialogue between public and private institutions, limited capacity for analysis and weak bottom-up communication, the result will be a limited understanding of the real constraints to pro-poor PSD and economic growth. The extent to which policymaking is demand-led and responsive to private sectors’ needs and expectations depends partly on the information used for policy development, such as the quality of data and analysis. Other aspects relate to the coherence between the various activities and the effectiveness of feedback systems for timely detection of problems. The capacity for internal learning is an important factor for improving performance.

In many places, local governments need to change from a controlling to a facilitating and service oriented organisation. Interventions may be needed towards changing the mindset of staff working for local governments, which may demand a review of the incentive and other reward systems in place. Accountability and the establishment of mechanisms to resolve complaints and malpractice need to be addressed too, such a change in organisational culture and management require leadership and time.

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