

## **Africa – Europe Relationship: Deepening Local Governance and Democracy**

Africa has often been plagued with the challenge of governing of states made up of plural constituents. Centralisation became a tool in the hands of many African leaders to exert influence and authority on all spheres of governance with a clear purpose to ensure a tight grip on power. But this was at the expense of participatory governance, as all decisions no matter its peculiarity to a local community is often under the influence and control of the central government.

Thus, with citizens' aspirations for more freedom and increased participation in governance, many African states have been opting for decentralisation as an appropriate response to challenges faced by local populations; albeit hesitantly with deeply rooted vestiges of centralisation. Local government as a form of decentralisation is a popular choice amongst the people as it affords them the opportunity to participate in their choice of policy priorities; allocation of resources; and election of leaders to drive these policies.

In view of the many merits of Local Government in the realisation of good governance, the African Union (AU) in June 2014, Malabo, Equatorial Guinea adopted the African Charter on the Values and Principles of Decentralization, Local Governance and Local Development (The African Charter on Decentralisation) as a model on local government which should guide member states during the drafting of laws or constitutional review of laws in relation to decentralisation and local governance in their respective countries. The Charter on Decentralisation as spelled out in its preamble is “determined to promote the values and principles of decentralisation, local governance and local development in Africa as a means for improving the livelihood of peoples on the continent”.

Ratification of the charter is an important step to enshrine participatory governance in African states. Unfortunately, only eighteen (18) member states have signed it, while only seven (7) member states have ratified the charter. The charter requires fifteen (15) ratifications for it to come into force. The lack of political will to change the status quo and perhaps the cumbersome nature of ratification in many African states may have caused the slow pace of the ratification of the charter.

Herein lies the need for a new impetus to expedite actions to facilitate grassroots' participation in governance through the adoption of the charter for the deepening of local democratic values in

African states. A new Africa – Europe partnership promoting the principles of subsidiarity and participatory local governance can birth a new era in our relationship by putting power into the hands of the people where it truly belongs. The principle of subsidiarity recognises that any issue that can be handled at the local government level, must not be centralised out of such context into the purview of the central government.

Local Governance facilitates the grassroots participation of the people who are the most fundamental factor in governance. Hence, the principle of subsidiarity is well captured in the African Charter on Decentralisation; and it is also one of the critical foundation of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR).

An association of Local Governments from both continents formed out of the Africa - Europe partnership could birth many opportunities to foster grassroots development in both continents and especially Africa which would serve as incentives for African states to ratify the African Charter on Decentralisation. Such a partnership could:

**Promote Local Democracy:** This partnership could serve as a platform for the promotion of local democratic governance and:

- Ensure that Local governments are recognised as an important tier of government and granted autonomy to carry out their mandates to the people.
- Support free, fair and regular elections in local governments.
- Support members to design and develop more inclusive and participatory form of local governance.
- Encourage central governments to take concrete actions in support of stronger local governance.

**Build Capacity of members:** Local governments in Africa are at a disadvantage in attracting talents into its service in comparison to other spheres of government. The AU-EU partnership on local government could build the capacity of members through:

- Practitioner exchange programmes of officials of local governments.
- Collaboration on technical cooperation projects for the transfer of knowledge.
- Support for regional capacity building programs.

- Scholarly cooperation, workshops and trainings.

**Develop Practical Policies on Local Governance:** Many local governments are bereft of good policies which are an adequate response to the genuine, popular and legitimate needs and expectations of the grassroots. This partnership could:

- Develop evidence-based policy recommendations.
- Exchange ideas, experience, innovations and good practice on decentralisation and local governance.
- Promote better understanding on the delivery of good governance to the grassroots.

Re-emphasising the place of local government in the constitutional apparatus of African and European states translates to placing the people once again at the heart of democratic governance in both continents!