THEMATIC EVALUATION OF FRANCE’S SUPPORT FOR DECENTRALIZATION AND TERRITORIAL GOVERNANCE

SUMMARY
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OF FRANCE’S SUPPORT FOR DECENTRALIZATION AND TERRITORIAL GOVERNANCE

SUMMARY
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Directorate-General of Global Affairs, Development and Partnerships - DGM
1. Evaluation objectives

As part of its official development assistance policy, France has been supporting decentralization and territorial governance processes for over twenty years. Although those processes have proved difficult to implement, they are still an issue of primary importance. Through a specific evaluation of its actions in those areas, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development (MAEDI) has decided to launch a comprehensive reflection ultimately designed to define a concerted French strategy.

The evaluation’s objective was twofold:

- accountability, to report on the various projects implemented through the Priority Solidarity Fund (PSF) since the start of the 2000s;
- learning, to flesh out the definition of a multi-stakeholder French strategy for supporting decentralization and territorial governance.

It concerned first and foremost the geographical scope of the focus of French aid as defined during the last meeting of the Interministerial International Co-operation and Development Committee (CICID) on 31 July 2013, namely the priority poor countries, southern and eastern Mediterranean countries and countries in crisis.

This document summarizes the principal analyses and recommendations made by the evaluators.

2. Current status of decentralization: stalled processes

Decentralization processes, which are chiefly implemented in most countries where French aid has concentrated since the period of national conferences held around the cusp of the 1980s and 1990s, have brought about:

- institutional advances, with the inclusion of decentralization in the constitutions and the passing of most bills required for a decentralized state to function properly;

- the establishment of a decentralized system of government, by extending the network of local governments and levels within them throughout national territories.

Yet, in 2014, we cannot but observe that these decentralization processes are stalling or even regressing at times due to the stopping of transfers of competencies, stagnating transfers of resources, the calling into question of local autonomy, etc.

This situation is explained by three main factors:

- a general lack of political will on the part of national leaders to deepen the decentralization process for fear that decentralization will prove to be a factor of loss of power;

- resistance on the part of most central and deconcentrated administrations which view decentralization as the calling into question of their position and the benefits they draw from development revenues;

- “disillusionment” of technical and financial partners who, after supporting these processes for twenty years, are withdrawing direct support for decentralization or focusing on technical areas such as, for example, training and local planning as regards German cooperation.
3. French support for decentralization: a fragmented support system

French support for decentralization is significant as implemented over the long term, but it remains modest in terms of the resources mobilized (estimated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – OECD – at 0.05% of French official development assistance – ODA). The small amount of mobilized resources should be viewed in relation to the vast number of public institutions contributing to them, thus demonstrating this support’s extreme fragmentation and dispersal.

French support for decentralization is, in effect, multi-faceted, multi-stakeholder driven and multi-level:

- multi-faceted as mobilizing many tools: loan-based projects, gift-based projects, subsidies, contributions, debt reduction and development contracts (C2Ds), provision of technical expertise, international advocacy, etc.;
- multi-stakeholder driven, as involving in France:
  - departments of the following ministries: MAEDI (Democratic Governance Department, Delegation for the External Action of Local Government, policy directorates); French Development Agency – AFD – (Agriculture, Rural Development and Biodiversity Division, Local Authorities and Urban Development Division, External Affairs and Partnerships Division); Ministries of the Economy and Finance; Ministry of the Interior; Ministry for Decentralization and the Civil Service,
  - local governments in the framework of their external action (decentralized cooperation, local government networks, etc.),
  - different public institutions (National Training Centre of Local Civil Service – CNFPT –, École Nationale d’Administration – ENA –, prefectures, Court of Audit, etc.),
  - NGOs, in connection with the decentralization and local government support projects they implement,
  - platforms and networks (French Alliance for Cities and Territorial Development – PFVT –, Water Solidarity Programme – pS-Eau –, multi-stakeholder regional networks, etc.),

and mobilizing the following stakeholders in partner countries:

- ministries (ministries with responsibility for decentralization, whether full-fledged or attached to the Ministry of the Interior, to territorial planning, and so on),
- services attached to the Prime Minister’s Office (police stations, etc.),
- local governments,
- national and international associations, local government associations,
- NGOs and service providers;

- multi-level, as the actions are conducted at:
  - local level (projects are fully or partly implemented at that level, the external action of French local governments is mostly territorialized),
  - national level (certain MAEDI projects contain national components and most of its expertise is positioned at national level, attached to ministries),
  - subregional and international levels (experts with international organizations and international associations of local governments, subsidies, contributions, and so on).
Little horizontal consistency has been observed between actions conducted in a single country and in neighbouring countries, and little vertical consistency between actions conducted at the local, national and international levels. Projects focus on their own objectives rather than on seeking to influence political processes. The international technical experts provided by MAEDI seem to be very isolated and little able to influence public policy.

Consequently, few field actions conducted locally with local governments and state services can build on the feedback of information at a higher level in order to influence national policy and policy-makers. Moreover, there is no monitoring system to sustain the advocacy and strategic reflection work conducted by MAEDI at the subregional and international levels.
French support for decentralization as well as support from the other technical and financial partners have failed to date to restart decentralization processes, mostly because they are not dimensioned to influencing policy and raising policy-maker awareness.

Yet the issues relating to the success of decentralization processes have never been so important, both at the national and international levels. Indeed, for the past twenty years now in rural and urban territories, these processes have sustained the hope of the *retour de l’administration à la maison* (“the administration’s return home”),² of improving the provision of public services and the capacity of territories to administer themselves, and that it would be possible for citizens and local stakeholders to contribute to local policy-making.

The decline of decentralization, the restriction on the autonomy granted to local governments and decreasing or stagnating transfers of resources are all factors that help break the social contract between local stakeholders and the state. These factors are instrumental in leading citizens away from public affairs, the rise of social movements and even individual and group support for extremist ideologies and terrorist movements.

Now is no longer the time to ask ourselves whether decentralization processes are justified. The situation implies that we are “condemned to ensure the success of these processes” with a view to contributing to peace and security. Development, governance and security are today three closely related dimensions, whatever territorial level is being considered.

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The programming law for development aid and international solidarity policy (2014-773 of 7 July 2014) has made support for decentralization and territorial governance a French co-operation priority.

However, despite the many priorities contained in the Act, and diminishing resources, the administration should be able to translate this priority into an operational strategy. This requires mobilizing and organizing resources into a strong and cross-cutting thrust of French cooperation policy to be taken on board by sectoral cooperation.

To achieve this, we suggest that this strategy:

- retains the term “decentralization” as it clearly refers to the political dimension in redefining the role of the state and affirming the role of local governments;

- by combining with it the term “territorial governance” which is broader and more inclusive than “local governance”.

5.1. Policy directions

The strategy for supporting decentralization and territorial governance could be based on the following five policy directions.

5.1.1. Basing French public action on a political understanding of decentralization

Decentralization is understood here as the remodelling of the organization of the state, not only as a way of providing citizens with the best services at the lowest possible cost.

The political reading of decentralization implies enabling territories to define and implement their policies, within a framework defined by the texts governing the organization and functioning of the state. It affirms the project management and contracting capacity of local governments.

This therefore means viewing decentralization as a means of organizing the recognition of territory diversity within the state, providing solutions to local claims, establishing a crisis-absorbing function, contributing to peace and security and producing material well-being for people (access to utilities, boosting economic development), as well as immaterial well-being (recognition, decision-sharing, local democracy, etc.).

5.1.2. Strengthening local governments and their associations on a priority basis

Institutional decentralization frameworks have now been established, though they often remain virtual. The priority is to back local governments and their national associations to enable them to play their part and hence demonstrate the merits of
decentralization policies to national authorities and help restart these processes at national level. This also applies at the subregional and international levels, where support for defining and implementing international policies is to be put in place by backing international local government associations, which are the best-placed and most legitimate to defend the place and role of local governments.

5.1.3. Helping search for common interests between national authorities, local authorities, and citizens and their organizations

Decentralization as a political process can only restart if common issues to be decentralized can be found and made to emerge among the different stakeholders such as national and local authorities, and citizens.

Identifying such issues (such as improved living conditions for citizens, organizing their participation in local public action, social peace and local, national and international security, etc.) helps to understand how decentralization contributes to the public interest. This observation will be useful to local as well as national elites, who will therefore be more concerned by the subject once stakes have been clarified and they have identified what they stood to gain.

French cooperation has a key role to play in helping identify and make visible these stakes that are common to the different stakeholder groups.

5.1.4. Viewing the French strategy in connection with those of other development partners

The French strategy for supporting decentralization and territorial governance cannot be designed and implemented without taking account of the strategies of other development partners, whether for the sake of consistency and hence mutual reinforcement as in the case of the European strategy, or of achieving influence as should be the case in relations with bodies of the United Nations system.

5.1.5. Promoting the integration of decentralization in sectoral policies, programmes and projects

As decentralization is a cross-cutting policy, sectoral programmes should take account of local governments and their role in project management and contracting. Development partners and aid recipient states should therefore transfer to local governments funds and decision-making capacity relating to policies, programmes and projects that come under transferred competencies. This concerns project aid as well as global and sectoral budget support.
5.2. Principles for supporting decentralization and territorial governance

Based on these policy directions and whereas the time when we referred to a “decentralization model” is now over, supporting decentralization and territorial governance implies affirming and respecting major principles. Four of them could be more particularly supported by French cooperation.

5.2.1. The development of territorial governance and active subsidiarity

In this case, it means setting up and running local spaces for dialogue and monitoring and evaluation of public territorial action involving relevant territorial stakeholders, under the responsibility of local governments.

5.2.2. Respect of local self-government

This means here contributing to the effective recognition of the “right and the ability of local authorities, within the limits of the law, to regulate and manage a substantial share of public affairs under their own responsibility and in the interests of the local population”, without interference from the state.

5.2.3. The introduction of asymmetric and gradual decentralization

It is necessary to establish local authorities with different characteristics throughout the national territory, suited to the characteristics of territories and their developments.

5.2.4. The development of local governments’ political, technical and financial capacities

Lastly, local governments and their elected officials should be allowed to make policy choices consistent with their social projects and develop their capacities and their teams (technical services, administrative services, etc.) in order to offer to provide the best public services at the best possible cost. They should also be enabled to acquire the capacity to mobilize resources (state grants, local taxation, own resources, mobilization of external resources) corresponding to policy choices.

5.3. Foundations for supporting decentralization and territorial governance

For the French strategy in this area to produce the expected lasting effects, it is necessary to determine a general framework for intervention which could include the following elements.

5.3.1. Relying on clearer political support

Current political support, which is fragmented between MAEDI departments, AFD and the other ministries, needs to be clarified and centralized within, that is, MAEDI’s Directorate-General of Global Affairs, Development and Partnerships (DGM). This will ensure effective co-ordination of the positions and actions of the different public stakeholders.

5.3.2. Long-term support

Support for decentralization, like all public policy support, should be viewed over the long term, i.e. over ten to fifteen years.
This means endorsing and organizing what is already being done in many countries where projects and technical expert assessments are sometimes carried out in succession over a long period of time, without this being clearly stated or meant to be done in such a way.

This involves defining long-term policies and phasing technical expert assessments and projects to ensure continued support for initially identified themes for long-term implementation.

5.3.3. Enhanced interconnection of scales of intervention

As cooperation between French stakeholders is multi-level, achieving better interconnection between scales of intervention appears to be crucial to:

• ensure horizontal communication between cooperation territories and hence disseminate experiences;
• flesh out national and international policies based on local experiences;
• identify, in the different countries and international forums, common priority themes for France to build on and support its positions based on its local and national experiences.

5.3.4. Strengthening the politically influential role of technical assistance

The functions of an international technical expert (ITE) at the level of a ministry, an international organization, a local government or a local authority association, whether or not charged with implementing a project, require recruiting policy-makers rather than project managers or technicians. This also requires that they act over the long term so as to be able to influence policies and help restart decentralization processes.

With a view to this, it is necessary, on the one hand, to develop a “body” of national (or subregional) technical experts capable of working over the long term and, on the other hand, to make changes in the profile of expatriate technical assistants.

5.3.5. Strengthening partnerships

Between French stakeholders

The diversity of French stakeholders involved in supporting decentralization and territorial governance is undeniably a boon yet entails, at the same time, a real risk of fragmentation and even contradiction between the different approaches implemented.

The operationalization of a unified political leadership and a strategy, which is to be implemented by all French stakeholders, requires networking to develop familiarity and coherence and encourage participation within institutional systems.

With national stakeholders

The passage from an aid relationship, in which projects are largely initiated by the French party which designs and often steers them, to a partnership relationship in which projects are co-produced by both parties, will no doubt be facilitated by defining sustainable development goals (SDGs) that will concern, globally speaking, all countries on the planet. But this will also call for significant investment by MAEDI’s DGM, to monitor and support project design and build capacities of the embassies in terms of partnership work.

With international stakeholders

MAEDI is developing diverse international partnerships which need refocusing in terms of available resources and the strategic policies to be adopted. They can be refocused on international local government associations and on cooperation geographical focus areas.
5.4. Operational recommendations

5.4.1. Experimenting, building on and promoting local experiences at the national and international levels

In view of their wealth and diversity, local experiences stemming from projects led by MAEDI, AFD, local governments in decentralized cooperation and NGOs need to be spotted, capitalized and later promoted at the national and international levels. This will make it possible to sustain national and international public policies and, above all, to convince policymakers of the interest of decentralization and hence to revive the political will of decision-makers and technical and financial partners. This work should be carried out as part of PSF projects and integrated into ITE job descriptions.

It requires that projects be designed, at their inception, to help develop public policies.

5.4.2. Helping upgrade financing tools

Financing tools need to be adapted to strategy requirements. It is necessary to combine:

- a tool to finance local experiments intended to help define and implement national and international public policies
  This means viewing projects over the long term for periods of ten to fifteen years in successive stages, by focusing them on support for introducing local and sectoral experiments and placing them under the responsibility of an ITE really working as an adviser for the government institutions in charge of decentralization or for local governments and their associations.

  The ITE acting as project manager would hence be in charge of capitalising on these experiences (and others led by others partners) and of related feedback with a view to achieving influence. The ITE project manager would also be responsible for creating conditions for political dialogue work with technical and financial partners and the country’s political authorities, so as to influence decentralization policy, based on arguments stemming from return on field experiences;

- contributions in the form of “target agreements”
  Flexible financing designed to strengthen institutional partners such as national and international local government associations, not on a project-based logic for operating subsidies intended to enable partners to achieve the targets set jointly with MAEDI;

- one-time “meso” subsidies
  Such credits, in the region of €50,000-100,000, would make it possible to intervene, on request, for a one-off operation or to supplement a joint fund at the local, national and international levels.

5.4.3. Enhancing international expertise and developing national expertise

The profiles of ITEs mobilized by MAEDI are mostly technical and should evolve so as to keep up with developments in decentralization and territorial governance processes and with partners’ needs which today are more political than technical.

It is necessary that ITEs be incorporated into the French strategy for supporting decentralization and territorial governance. This implies strengthening relations and the monitoring of ITEs by the embassies and MAEDI, by means of a clear road map that should be assessed regularly.

It is important that they be assigned to local governments and their associations, as well as to ministries and international organizations.
Finally, establishing long-term national technical expertise will guarantee the durability and stability of French cooperation support strategies at bilateral and multilateral level, which is not possible at present owing to the too rapid turnover of ITEs.

5.4.4. Supporting the creation of a pool of decentralization ambassadors

The creation of a group of prominent figures from Africa and other regions of the world, whose career paths confer on them the legitimacy to address their political elites on issues of decentralization to influence them in the adoption of the reforms required for the proper functioning of decentralized local governments, will be an important lever to put in place. This group of prominent figures should be backed by an existing subregional organization (Global Local Forum, Alliance for Rebuilding Governance in Africa – ARGA –, United Cities and Local Governments of Africa – UCLGA –, and so on).

5.4.5. Establishing the institutional systems required to steer and implement the strategy and developing them

Establishing a political system for steering the strategy

In order to ensure coherence of actions among the principal public stakeholders in decentralization and territorial governance, a steering committee – streamlined for efficiency purposes – should be set up, bringing together, for MAEDI: the Delegation for the External Action of Local Government and of the Democratic Governance Department (on behalf of the Directorate-General of Global Affairs, Development and Partnerships); the geographic directorates (on behalf of the Directorate-General for Political and Security Affairs), the Directorate-General for Local Governments (on behalf of both its supervisory ministries [of Decentralization and the Interior]), AFD and Cités Unies France (CUF) (on behalf of French local governments). The steering committee may be gradually extended to other central stakeholders in support for decentralization and territorial governance (including other ministries, civil society and training institutes), while making sure that its perimeter does not become too large as this would impede its effectiveness.

Establishing an evolving technical system for implementing the strategy

Implementation of the strategy will be entrusted to an operational team made up of the team of the former unit for state reform and territorial governance of the Democratic Governance Department; of the team of the Delegation for the External Action of Local Government, and of policy officer from the Directorate-General for Local Governments, AFD and Cités Unies France (working full time or part time), so that the work programme to implement the strategy for supporting decentralization and territorial governance is divided among the principal institutions responsible for implementing the strategy.

The integration of this operational team may be strengthened by extending the mandate of the Delegation for the External Action of Local Government to include decentralization and territorial governance, and hence the integration of the former unit for state reform and territorial governance of the Democratic Governance Department within the Delegation, thus making it possible to constitute a real “task force” in support of decentralization.

Establishing an evolving advisory system

Finally, the establishment of a multi-stakeholder advisory space that may become a space for dialogue bringing together the principal stakeholder groups involved in supporting decentralization will make available an independent body capable of reflecting on, analyzing and suggesting strategy-related changes.
5.5. Taking account of the conditions for implementing these recommendations

5.5.1. Implementation process

The post-evaluation stage should be used to design the strategy for supporting decentralization and territorial governance. It will be significant in co-building the institutional system for steering and implementing the strategy, that system being as important as the strategy’s content.

5.5.2. Political support

Given the resources devoted by French co-operation to supporting local governments and decentralization, the strategy should receive strong political support within MAEDI including from the staff of ministerial offices, to ensure that it does not remain virtual.

5.5.3. Human and material resources

The strategy’s implementation requires:

- maintaining the financing and budget lines of the Delegation for the External Action of Local Government and the former unit for state reform of the Democratic Governance Department, as well as the positions of ITEs and policy advisors;

- a central credit envelope for supporting international partners, one-time support and covering operational team costs;

- a mission credit envelope enabling the operational team to play its part, particularly as regards the dissemination of returns on experience between the local, national and international levels;

- strengthening the operational team by providing steering committee members with additional posts.
# List of acronyms

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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFD</td>
<td>Agence française de développement (French Development Agency)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ARGÁ</td>
<td>Alliance for Rebuilding Governance in Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>C2D</td>
<td>Debt reduction and development contract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CICID</td>
<td>Interministerial International Co-operation and Development Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>CNFPT</td>
<td>National Training Centre of Local Civil Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>CUF</td>
<td>Cités Unies France</td>
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<tr>
<td>DGM</td>
<td>Directorate-General of Global Affairs, Development and Partnerships</td>
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<tr>
<td>ENA</td>
<td>École Nationale d’Administration</td>
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<tr>
<td>ITE</td>
<td>International technical expert</td>
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<tr>
<td>MAEDI</td>
<td>Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non governmental organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>ODA</td>
<td>Official development assistance</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>PFVT</td>
<td>French Alliance for Cities and Territorial Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>pS-Eau</td>
<td>Water Solidarity Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSF</td>
<td>Priority Solidarity Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>SDG</td>
<td>Sustainable development goal</td>
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<td>UCLGA</td>
<td>United Cities and Local Governments of Africa</td>
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OF FRANCE’S SUPPORT FOR DECENTRALIZATION AND TERRITORIAL GOVERNANCE

As part of its official development assistance policy, France has been supporting decentralization and territorial governance processes in its partner countries for over twenty years. It has in fact been established that the stability and harmonious development of territories partly depends on the success of these processes.

Through a thematic evaluation of its actions, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development (MAEDI) wished to start a global reflection in a context in which decentralization has slowed down or stalled even for some years now in many partner countries.

The evaluation’s objective was twofold:
– to report on more than 20 Priority Solidarity Fund (PSF) projects implemented between the early 2000s and mid-2014;
– to flesh out the definition of an interministerial and multi-stakeholder French strategy on support for decentralization and territorial governance with a view to helping restart these policies.

The survey chiefly concentrated on the geographical scope of the focus of French aid as defined during the last meeting of the Interministerial International Co-operation and Development Committee (CICID) on 31 July 2013, namely the priority poor countries, southern and eastern Mediterranean countries and countries in crisis.

This document summarizes the principal analyses and recommendations made by the evaluators.