

Four years on: Are Kenyans' dissatisfaction with devolution justified?



Roho ni ile ile, the people will say with a sigh as they brace to lower previously held high performance expectations of elected leaders. And in the context of public service, this will often mean that mwananchi expected better performance from leaders, but as it turned out, this was too much to expect. The disappointments come in thick and fast and hopes for better, changed governance are lost. With devolution, the excitement was that finally locals will have a say in the manner in which their local resources are managed and that the national cake will be better shared and managed to make a difference in their lives. A difference evident in the increased number of student enrolment in schools, especially primary and secondary. Perhaps to have better quality of classrooms, better healthcare facilities, with quality care; reduce long distances that women especially have to trek in such of water for domestic use. Improve the local business environment. The list of expectations go on and on. After all, this was the carrot during the campaign for the new constitution. After many years of public administration under the old constitutional dispensation that entrenched central government authority, the yearning has been there for the voice of the people to be listened to. The central government appeared very far off and could not clearly hear the voice of the citizen; and when it did, through the then provincial administration, it was often a one way conversation, top down monologue in which the citizen was expected receive instructions and to obey and act accordingly.



This governance style of top down, centralized management led to increased agitation for expanding the civil liberty space and the momentum built up throughout the 1990s by an increasingly confident political opposition. No wonder then that when the opposition finally ascended to top leadership in 2002, the process of decentralization begun in earnest. And finally the promulgation of the constitution 2010 provided the country with a supreme law that affirmed the people's decision. Free at last! Kenyans celebrated. Now they would have a significant say in the management of local affairs through voting in of their preferred local leader not an administrator sent down from central government. They would participate in determining their development priorities and take part in monitoring implementation of the budget. Or so it seemed.

And for sure, devolution has ushered in a new dispensation. Even though the first crop of governors have not performed very well if the results of the recent political party primaries can be interpreted that way, we can cut them some slack. After all, they had the difficult task of cobbling together a county administration that just pre-April 2013, was part of a centralized structure, with systems that reflected central government bureaucracy. Those systems had the stamp and mark of central government leadership. The Governors had to now turn this around to be reflective of the local peoples' preference and reflect the new realities of chapter one of the constitution. They had to display good management skills to change the mind sets of local government staff from looking to headquarters for instructions to thinking seriously how about to resolve local problems. Local administrators now had a boss closer to them than was the case previously. And the infrastructure at county level was nothing much to speak of; urban, county and municipal council offices were often run-down buildings in urgent need of repairs and maintenance. The human resources management challenge that governors had to undertake just to bring together these workers into one focused mind for the county was enormous.

Hence in some ways, no other governors will really experience what the first governors had to go through. And they should be commended for getting the ship to where it is right now, albeit still in the rough high seas. But we must also ask whether they could not have done more with the resources at their disposal. They are in charge of a local budget funded largely by allocations from the national treasury. In addition, the constitution also put in place various structures to facilitate a smooth transition; a transitional authority, an empowered parliament and judiciary plus an executive whose powers had somehow been trimmed to ensure limited interference with local management. There was a lot of support and goodwill politically as well as morally from the people. And here is where the mwananchi's disappointment is justified; that with the support available, management of county affairs has not been as effective as it should be. Citizens feel and rightly so that more could have been achieved with the available resources had there been more prudent management. County after county reported misplaced priorities such as when governors started competing for power with the national government; whether to be called 'your excellency' and what kind of office and cars to acquire. The purpose of devolution was momentarily forgotten, which is the improvement of service delivery to mwananchi at the grassroots; the implementation of programs that really spoke to their priorities. Matters were not helped by the fact that other than the county executive that was mostly a trained lot, county assembly members got in more due to local popularity than their leadership experience; no wonder then that turf wars within the county became common, thus hampering program delivery. And then the free for all rush for personal enrichment with county resources, from travel expenses, various allowances to procurement irregularities. Schemes were just being hatched to convert public resources to personal use. We are yet to know the true situation of public assets handed over from the former local authorities and how safeguarded these have been; we should perhaps brace ourselves for unpleasant news once the current county assets verification exercise is over and audited.

In effect therefore we should never forget the reason for reforms. They are not just carried out for the sake of having reforms and new governance structures. The principal reason is to answer a public need for transparency and accountability in managing public resources; the main objective is to improve service delivery to locals; solve local problems, improve the quality of policy since the leaders are drawn from amongst the locals and understand the local situation and problems better. It is like a household situation where you choose one of you to manage your family affairs in the hope that they understand you best and will be good stewards only to be disappointed when they mismanage those resources for personal gain. The disappointment can be great.

For example, agriculture programs are devolved yet we are staring at a serious drought whose effects are likely to be felt for several months this year. What were the county leaders in the most affected areas doing during all this time? Might they have been more lost in 'power' games than in providing true leadership? Did they not receive early warning from relevant institutions? Even if the warnings did not come, surely it is not that difficult to see how the situation is unfolding on the ground since they are there 24/7. Holding big county investment forums is good, but is that a current priority? And what of areas where insecurity prevails. As a local leader who best understands the real reasons for 'cattle rustling', is there no better solution one can offer to address this problem and make a difference. What a fresh breath of air it would be to see that incidents of senseless killings of fellow citizens in the name of cattle raids is markedly reduced?

The next crop of governors must raise the bar even higher in terms of management. No political power games. If anything has been clear from the recent primaries, if you genuinely work and serve the people, they are intelligent enough to see the impact created. And they would rather elect someone making a real difference than someone who strives to be politically correct. Devolution is here with us to make a real difference mashinani. And leaders, both at county and national level should work tirelessly towards that goal. Public offices are for public service, not personal service.

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