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RETURN SCHOOLS TO LOCAL COMMUNITIES : AGENDA FOR DECENTRALISATION PART II

by

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Implications of Full Decentralisation of Education

Full decentralisation of education would restore ownership of schools to local communities and churches as was the case before state take-over. The government's role would then be to mobilise financial resources from state coffers, allocate them appropriately, and set the standards of teaching, learning and assessment, while transferring the business of procurement to private sector operators. This would leave the district assemblies and the local communities in control of basic education in their respective areas of jurisdiction.

The advantages of local, rather than state control and management of education include the following:

- a. Districts which experience difficulty in attracting qualified teachers would be compelled to institute incentive packages.
- b. Districts and communities would have the freedom to mobilise the extra resources that they would require to supplement the overstretched state budget for education. Levies, endowment funds, scholarship schemes, contributions from local entrepreneurs, churches and community-based youth organisations, would be mobilised to support local schools.
- c. Instead of community participation which implies involvement in a government activity, the government may wish to provide matching funds to supplement the resources of struggling communities.
- d. Instead of central posting of teachers, districts would have the responsibility to advertise for teachers and be assisted by the Ghana Education Service (GES) to recruit them by mechanisms to be devised.

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- e. With recruitment being done at the local and district levels, newly qualified teachers would not have to wait for months to receive their first pay packet.
 - f. Districts may sponsor candidates for teacher training. Pupil teachers who show promise would be the most likely persons to qualify for this privilege. Districts which lack enough teachers who are competent in the local language to teach lower primary classes, may wish to sponsor more local candidates for teacher training.
 - g. Districts and communities which recruit their teachers, will be better placed than others to monitor their performance, and reward or sanction them appropriately.
 - h. The business of procurement, which unduly becomes the focus of attention of the GES and the Ministry of Education, would be transferred to the private sector.

Would new legislation and new administrative structures be required?

Observers point to contradictions between the Local Government Act 462 of 1993, and the Ghana Education Service Act 506 of 1995 in the matter of control and management of schools. The Local Government Act requires that branches of state agencies, like the GES, in the districts must be absorbed by the District Assembly. Thus the District Director of Education would report to the District Chief Executive and be accountable to the District Assembly.

The GES Act has maintained the status quo. Currently, education in the district is controlled by a *District Education Oversight Committee (DEOC)*, a statutory committee set up by the GES Act. The membership of this committee includes the *District Chief Executive*, who is the chairman, as well as two other members of the District Assembly. Amendments in the law will be required to make the DEOC, a committee of the District Assembly, and the District Directorate of Education, a department of the District Assembly.

What remains of the GES with full decentralisation?

The experts refer to the present system of devolution of authority from the centre as *deconcentration* and not decentralisation. With full decentralisation, the District Director of Education would directly report to the District Assembly, on whose behalf he or she performs assigned duties.

The functions of the GES as stipulated in the GES Act are:

- i. to provide and oversee basic education, senior secondary education, technical and special education;
- ii. to register, supervise and inspect private pre-tertiary educational institutions;
- iii. to submit to the Minister recommendations for educational policies and programmes;
- iv. to promote the efficiency and the full development of talents among its members;
- v. to register teachers and keep an up-to-date register of all teachers in the public system;
- vi. to carry out such other functions as are incidental to the attainment of the functions specified above; and to maintain professional standards and the conduct of its personnel.

With the district assemblies assuming greater responsibility for education, the functions of GES should be reviewed to enable it develop into a more professionally-oriented state agency which would monitor teaching and learning standards at the district level.

In a decentralised system, the GES could consist of the divisions at the headquarters in Accra, as well as the regional directorates of education. The draft Local Government Service Act, yet to go before parliament, however, puts the Regional Co-ordinating Councils (RCCs), and presumably the Regional Directorates of Education, into the Local Government Service.

There is a clear need for more thorough discussion of the draft Local Government Service Act and reconsideration of this issue. Some top administrators and a regional minister have intimated that putting all RCCs under the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development would transform it into a super-ministry which would be too unwieldy. Uneasiness about this possibility explains in part the resistance to decentralisation.

What would be the Role of the Ministry of Education under Decentralisation?

Decentralisation would not change the responsibility of the sector minister with respect to policy formulation, monitoring of policy implementation, and mobilisation of resources. Currently the Ministry of Education does not exist in the formal sense at the district level. The District Education Office is the district branch office of the GES.

Who gains under Decentralisation?

The majority of Ghanaian children who attend public schools would gain from community ownership. When the several layers of management between Accra and the schools are thinned, heads of schools would have more opportunity to select the books they would use and the districts would have the freedom to choose between programmes. Thus a failed programme at Efutu-Awutu-Senya District, for example, would not necessarily hurt Dangme West.

The various interventions, eg., incentive packages for teachers, endowment funds, scholarship programmes, special programmes for girls, that are reported frequently in the media would have more opportunity to flourish if control and management of education was ceded to 110 fairly autonomous districts, each experimenting, and competing, learning and copying from each other. State control of schools reduces the scope for experimentation and therefore, for innovation.

Is the financial viability of the District Assemblies such that they can manage education?

The local authorities established by the Education Act of 1951 failed to manage the schools. Tolls from

the market, etc, could not build the schools, maintain them and provide them with furniture. The 1992 Constitution has secured the financial base of the District Assemblies by establishing the District Assemblies Common Fund (DACF). Article 252 of the 1992 Constitution mandated Parliament to allocate not less than 5% of total Ghana government revenue to the district fund on a quarterly basis for development projects. Substantial funds have gone to the District Assemblies since the DACF was set up in 1994. Some districts are known to spend more than 50% of the fund on education.

Concluding Remarks & Recommendations

The issues raised in this paper were discussed in December 1998 at an IEA Technical Workshop for members of the Parliamentary Committee on Education. Some members of the committee had been heads of schools, district secretaries, presiding members of district assemblies, and assemblymen. Also present at the workshop were representatives of the GES, a district chief executive, and experts from the University of Ghana. Many of the author's own ideas were formed at this workshop. Since then the author has led a discussion on decentralisation and education at an IEA round-table which attracted the Minister for Education and many very senior retired Ghanaian educationists.

Reactions to the issues raised, including reservations that were expressed about full decentralisation of education, allow the following conclusions and recommendations to government and parliament:

- (1) The capacity of district assemblies for planning and management is questioned by many. While this issue is being tackled by government, a great deal of attention must be given to it so as to build the confidence of personnel in the agencies which are to be decentralised. Teachers need assurance that some of the arbitrariness which had characterised relations between the Ministry of Education and the GES, would not be repeated at the district level.

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- (2) The GES has important monitoring and supervisory roles to play with respect to implementation of educational policy in the districts. It is recommended that the regional education offices remain as the regional arms of the GES, rather than making them part of the Local Government Service.
- (3) The Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT) would need to be convinced that the proposed Local Government Service Act would not abolish the GES. The GES came into being as the final act of a sustained campaign by teachers, which spanned over three decades, to have their own service just as the police and the army. They thought this would enhance the image of the teaching profession. The author respects this position but is of the view that at least teachers' remuneration would improve if districts were in competition to employ them.
- (4) Many Ghanaians have come to realise that government serves the people better if it creates the environment for the private sector to function. Procurement and distribution of educational supplies by either the Ministry of Education or the Ghana Education Service is not in keeping with the current economic climate. Government should contract private sector operators to procure and deliver books and other educational supplies. Booksellers, bookshops and libraries should be the landmarks in the educational landscape of our towns and villages in the next millennium.
- (5) State take-over of schools in 1951 was deemed appropriate at the time. It conformed to the prevailing philosophy of economic management. As in other sectors of national life, there were few professionally qualified and experienced people at the time. There was probably no national who was an expert in the science of management. Now many districts have their fair share of qualified personnel who can manage local schools. Forty-two years after independence, and after several changes of government, a major lesson to be learnt is that having all decisions made centrally is not as good as decentralising and dividing the power of decision-making.
- (6) Government would enhance the technical capacity of district assemblies if it chose to advance national, rather than partisan interests, in filling the 30% quota for non-elected members of the District Assemblies.
- (7) Government and parliament should remove the inconsistencies in the Local Government Act and the GES Act with respect to the management of education, as well as financial administration, to enable fiscal decentralisation to take place. A new educational Act would be required to do this.
- (8) There is a widespread perception that government and the national bureaucracy are reluctant to cede power to the district assemblies, and that government is more interested in the political advantages of decentralisation than in a genuine process to transfer decision making to the districts.
- (9) Realising the national goal of universal primary enrolment is a huge task which stands the best chance of success if the basic responsibility for achieving this goal goes to where it belongs, the local community. Capacities of district assemblies should be built to manage education and important aspects of the lives of communities locally as stated in articles 240 to 256 of the 1992 constitution.

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