STRENGTHENING LOCAL SOCIAL SYSTEMS AND
PEOPLE’S SELF-ORGANIZATIONAL CAPABILITIES
FOR LOCAL AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Patrick O. Alila

INTRODUCTION

Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), continues to suffer from a myriad of social, economic, and political problems such as regional and ethnic conflicts, escalating numbers of refugees, rapid population growth, AIDS, and environmental degradation, to name but a few. In short, the continent is experiencing rampant poverty, ill health, and an overall wide-ranging underdevelopment. This is the rationale for directing efforts towards poverty alleviation, gender equity issues, human resource development, and conservation as well as environmental protection. The underlying broad objective is to try and find ways and means out of these problems that have in the 1990s acquired crisis proportions, so that sustainable human development can be realized within the African continent.

This article addresses an increasingly important aspect of this objective, namely, the strengthening of local social systems and people’s self-organizational capabilities for local and regional development. In the first instance, some background on the thinking and practices of local and regional development is provided. The idea is to capture the origins of local social organizations’ concerns and underscore the significance of local social systems for local and regional development policy and practice. Second, the emergence of institutions as a key factor in the development process is discussed as a pointer to the critical role of local social systems for a sustainable human development process, to provide a premise for understanding this process, and to look at the failure of the economic growth focus, devoid of human sociocultural considerations. This also helps put the African crises in a proper development theory perspective. Third, the nature and scope of local social development is analysed, specifying the meaning and strategy for local-level development, and the organizational basis and demarcation principles of local social systems, followed by case studies. Fourth is an examination of issues and requirements for enhancing people’s self-organizational capabilities for local and regional development. Finally, lessons and conclusions are drawn.

LOCAL AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY AND PRACTICE IN THE 1960s — LOCAL SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS: A HIDDEN FACTOR

The policy and practice of local and regional development in the African context can be traced back to the 1950s and subsumed, respectively, beneath two key concepts: community development (CD) and centre-periphery development. CD was, in fact, the initial major perception of development in the rural areas in both African and Asian countries. It was viewed by its proponents as a peaceful means for people to be mobilized to help themselves realize felt needs in the economic, social, and political spheres of their development.¹

The major shortcomings of CD, it seems, emanated from the fact that in its heyday, the “trickle-down” theory of economic development was in vogue. Thus, CD programmes were not intended to, and did not affect, the basic structural barriers of equity and growth in the rural communities. These programmes accepted the existing local power structure as given. In addition, CD village workers usually aligned themselves with traditional elites, thereby strengthening the economic and social positions of these elites. There was little attention given to assuring that benefits from CD programmes accrued to the rural poor who, upon realizing this, did not, for the most part, respond positively to this approach.

The fundamental critique of the approach, in brief, is that it was rendered ineffective politically because of basic conflicts that were too deep to be solved simply by the persuasive efforts of CD workers. The expected reconciliation and common participation for the sake of development occurred as an exception rather than as a rule. In economic terms, the shortcomings of the approach had to do with the fact that both aspects of rural poverty, i.e., low production and unfair distribution, were not changed to an appreciable extent by CD programmes. This calls for policies that address the major problem of poverty and appropriate institutional arrangements for conflict management and resolution.

As regards regional development, the centre-periphery notion is premised on the view that development is a process of interaction between areas and alternatively as unbalanced economic growth. It was argued that initially there would be a tendency for differences in prosperity among areas to increase, but that later, when economic development has reached a certain level, these differences would be equalized through “spread” effects, for instance, when a growing urban centre stimulates agricultural production in its vicinity. On the other hand, it was also recognized that there could be “backwash” effects; for example, the process of capital transfer from underdeveloped rural areas to relatively more developed rural and/or urban areas.²

In the unbalanced economic growth view, it is held that there are specific “growing points” resulting from new industries and other development activities being located near existing ones. Thus, regional polarization and uneven geographical spread of development occurs but, through a trickle-down process benefits of development are channelled to disadvantaged areas from initial points of concentration resulting in the imbalances being corrected.³

The findings from observations on the spread and trickle-down effects of development envisaged for disadvantaged areas is generally that there is little or no conformity with reality.⁴ The disadvantaged areas have continued to lag behind in development, receiving
scant investments/resources, and have for the most part been neglected. In the African situation, this is essentially because both political and economic power often coincide and tend to be concentrated in the relatively better developed areas or growth points. The resulting effect is increased socioeconomic inequalities compounding the initial geographical disparities. The implication is that there are polarizing forces, which Myrdal recognized, that are often stronger than spread mechanisms and consequently hinder the free dispersal of development. It thus becomes imperative for the spread mechanisms to be strengthened by deliberate policy measures at the very outset.⁹ The concerns to strengthen local social systems via appropriate policies can therefore be viewed in terms of activating the spread mechanisms.

**Economic Growth Focus in the 1960s and 1970s: African Crises in Perspective**

The decade of the 1960s has been labelled the golden age of development, and the experiences with development thinking and practice from that time are useful pointers to the origins and gravity of the African crises.⁹ These experiences should also serve as significant reminders to academics, policymakers, and practitioners contemplating and/or undertaking any development initiative, more so the design of solution(s), for addressing the African crises.

It had been hoped, with a great deal of enthusiasm in the 1960s, that by placing the main emphasis on channelling large amounts of aid and technical assistance from the North to the South, the countries of the South would develop. There were strong expectations placed specifically on large-scale industrial projects to promote rapid economic growth. The underlying belief was that if the so-called underdeveloped countries could be given enough (a) resources, along with (b) Western scientific and technological expertise, and were (c) efficiently administered by government with the guidance of intergovernmental organizations, they would rapidly catch up with the North and, in the process, poverty and injustice would disappear. Thus, the major themes of development formulated were based on either a growth concept emphasizing changes in production increase per se or development emphasizing changes through growth, but accompanied by changes in production systems as well.

From this perspective, development was tantamount to modernization, epitomized by industrialization, education, and provision of the social welfare amenities of modern life. The government, charged with responsibility for full employment and social security, was assigned a key role. The major consequence of this enhanced role was that both public policy and public management were made active forces in national economic management. This was evidenced by high levels of public investment channelled into such sectors as manufacturing (import substitution), education, health, water, and physical infrastructure (chiefly roads).⁹

The perspective is significant for the African context in three important respects with far-reaching implications into the 1990s. First, the perspective of assigning the state a key role was in conformity with the thinking of African leadership, especially at a time of liberation from colonialism and the subsequent onset of the forces of neocolonialism. The leaders hoped that the state could be used as a means to: (a) eradicate poverty; (b) redress imbalances caused by colonial policy; and (c) serve as the engine of growth — since
indigenous private sectors are weak and underdeveloped. In other words, the expansion of state activity, particularly in the economy, was necessary because of the weakness of the indigenous private sectors in most African countries. The state itself therefore became the main agent of economic development which, in turn, stimulated the creation of new public enterprises.9

Second, in terms of investments, the big push was to target only certain groups that would make a difference, for instance, progressive farmers and business entrepreneurs. It was envisaged that through the demonstration effect, the benefits of development would ultimately trickle down to the lower-level groups.

Third, the method of financing development, it was mutually agreed, should be through foreign aid involving mainly a partnership with the former colonial power. This meant a convergence of ideas and priorities between donors and recipients. It was reflected in the policies that were cast in the language of growth, notably, increased crop outputs, especially for export, and ignoring the problems of growing inequalities. Thus, donors acquired legitimacy in designing the necessary strategies and eventually imposing policy prescriptions.9

A False Start in Local Institution-Building: The Integrated Rural Development Experience

Integrated rural development (IRD) was a major concept of development in the rural areas which was very much in vogue in the 1970s. An important assumption of IRD was that a critical minimum effort, essentially through intervention, was necessary to have a noticeable impact on target populations in a short time. The projects were therefore concentrated in a limited area and were administered through semiautonomous agencies which paralleled other government agencies. The focus of these projects conceived under IRD was on small-scale farmers and attempted promotion of improvements in the quality of rural life and increases in off-farm opportunities.

Analyses of IRD experience have revealed basic shortcomings running contrary to sustainable development emanating from people’s participation, and therefore of interest in a discussion of initiatives to strengthen local social systems’ capabilities for local and regional development.10 To begin with, the projects were based on inadequate knowledge of technical possibilities and small farm conditions. In particular, they exhibited little understanding of the local institutional environment by, for instance, ignoring local knowledge and indigenous organizations. Second, the administrators of these projects tended to regard rural communities as undifferentiated masses, and therefore frequently ignored social structures and economic and political hierarchies. A major consequence was that the local elite became the main participants, and thereby reaped disproportionately larger benefits than the target poorest 40 per cent. Third, the increased scope of rural development activities meant that most could not possibly be sustained. This was simply because they exceeded the design, implementation, and evaluation capacities of central governments and donor agencies.
Sustainable Development: A Focus on Local Institutions for People-Centred Development
The critical look at basic human needs in the context of the political, as well as institutional, relations that decide how they are to be met was precipitated by the dismal development performance globally, and in Africa, by the endless crises. It is the increasingly apparent catastrophic development trend that gave rise to a novel perception of development that resulted in the formulation of the concept of sustainable development. The concept has subsequently been refined, particularly in the 1990s, to become the now familiar globally-embraced sustainable human development. The key elements include sustainability that implies development in which there is an optimal balance between the cycle of production of goods and reproduction of human life, without causing and degrading available resources for the use of future generations. The human dimension aspect refers to the nature and extent to which development is people-centred in terms of their taking initiative, managing and taking control of their own affairs, and not being trapped in a dependency syndrome.

The increasing levels of dependency were due to negative development experiences manifested by growing poverty, inequality, and unemployment. The basic underlying reason for these outcomes was the focus on technological and economic issues, with little or no attention being paid to sociological issues or, more broadly, the human dimension of development. There was consequently a mismatch between people's needs and services/programmes, wrong selection of beneficiaries, gender neutrality, and programmes which were rarely, if at all, sustainable. The cumulative result over the years has been that government and donors have acquired low credibility in the eyes of the people, and thereby development initiative and support from the local population has been negated.

Similarly, there has been over the years, for the most part, little or no attention given to local institution-building. This is of major concern to sustainable human development efforts as it is basic and essentially subsumes the above concern of the people's lack of involvement in their own development. The explanation is that institutions are the mechanisms for local participation in development in terms of decision making, support, assuming control of, and maintaining, projects — and thereby ensuring sustainability. It is thus logical to view sound institution-building as the route to empowering people to make their own choices in all spheres of life such that sustainable development can ultimately be realized.

The diverse concerns of sustainable human development to include even local institution-building should make it apparent that the link with economic growth is not automatic. There is no dispute being raised over the fact that economic growth is a means to achieve human and social development. It is of critical importance however, that attention is paid to the structure and quality of that growth, in terms of job creation, equity of incomes, gender, and efficient and effective use of resources to avoid waste and environmental degradation. In the case of Africa, the challenge is not only to maintain the growth process, but also to translate this growth into human and social development. To meet this challenge, building local institutions to ensure a people-centred development process is imperative.
Local Social Development

Local-level development is the more current perception of rural development, which means essentially broad-based socioeconomic development, induced and managed locally. This conforms to the view of development as a transformation process characterized by two main features, namely, change and values, and therefore involving changes in structure, attitudes, and institutions, as well as the acceleration of economic growth and the reduction of poverty. Furthermore, the process is human- or people-centred and should be sustainable — hence, the notion of sustainable human development already elaborated in the preceding section.

It is this perspective of development from the standpoint of people expanding their capabilities, and their quality of life improving over time, that facilitates the more accurate perception of social development. Social development, it has come to be realized, due to the flawed development efforts leading to crises in Africa, is not just provision of welfare services such as education, health care, water, and housing, and arrangements for social safety-net handouts. Rather, social development meets people’s needs by improving their living conditions and enhancing human dignity. At the same time, essentially through institution-building, people’s capacity, notably to make choices, grows — thereby enabling them to gradually become self-reliant.

This high priority accorded specifically to local social development, and generally to rural development in recent years, is not just because African countries have experienced major crises resulting in decay and decline over the last two decades. It is fundamentally a response to the imperatives of local development for overall national development in the African situation. In the first instance, Africa is likely to remain more agricultural and rural-based than any other continent for the foreseeable future. Glaring evidence of this is that 75 per cent of the African population still lives in the rural areas. Moreover, agriculture is the most important source of employment and income for a disproportionately large majority. At the same time, prospects of urban industrial sectors providing dynamic growth do not seem to hold much promise.

The second, even more important, imperative is that further decay and decline in the rural economies and the concomitant drift of rural population to cities lacking productive work and income opportunities pose grave threats to the very basis of some, if not all, of these societies. It should therefore be obvious that there is a pressing need for local-level development strategies that form the basis for a major departure from the hitherto prevalent urban-biased, bureaucratic, and highly centralized systems of development for the rural regions. The two quotations below, one from a multilateral aid and development agency and the other from a former African head of state, succinctly highlight the significance of local-level development and the critical importance of local organizations:

The efficient delivery of services to rural communities must depend on effective organizations at the community level in order to have meaningful interaction with the delivery agencies in the establishment of priorities....Moreover communities must be able to mobilise political resources to be able to provide incentive for efficient bureaucratic performance....the poorest in developing countries cannot rely on the central government to meet their needs.
There are certain things I would not do if I were to start again. One of them is abolition of local government, and the other is disbanding of cooperatives....We had these two useful instruments of participation, and we got rid of them.\textsuperscript{129}

**Local Social Systems**

As the mechanisms for local participation in development, institutions have been well recognized for the initiation, design, and running of projects on a sustainable basis not just for the people, but by the people themselves. These institutions constitute the local social development systems at the local level. They are, in essence, organizational setups for purposes of increasing people's capacity to meet their basic needs and improve their quality of life.

The key feature of a sound local-level development strategy with a social dimension is a focus on the local population and its potential. The emphasis in the strategy is on mobilizing and improving local capacity, in particular, experience and local knowledge, and entrepreneurship and human capital. The people organize themselves and form most of the organizations which enable them to have access to their basic needs. In some instances, however, organizations are introduced by external actors like the government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to create avenues for the local population to have better access to basic needs or development resources.

A critical requirement in local-level social development would therefore be strong local-level development organizations comprising both government organizations and NGOs, cooperatives, credit and savings groups, community-based organizations (CBOs), self-help groups, and church groups. The essential roles of these various organizations would encompass:

- Acting as catalysts for local development initiatives and projects;
- Disseminating new ideas and innovations;
- Providing critical information; and most importantly,
- Playing the role of intermediaries between the people and government. In other words, development at the local community level requires the presence of strong local institutions.\textsuperscript{129}

**Local Social Systems — Organizational Centres and Demarcation Principles**

Local social systems are generally comprised of four major components, namely, households, the local community, the state, and the market.\textsuperscript{127} Each has varying levels of interlinkages and interacts with the others in the process of social development in which the community plays a key role. This is mainly because the community as a social unit constitutes the basis for forming household organizations. These organizations are necessary for interactions among households, but more so between them, the state, and the market.

The organizations are diverse depending on the wide-ranging household needs of a particular community. In essence, however, these organizations are formed firstly to enable households to accommodate one another in the process of utilizing resources in their possession, and secondly to increase individual households' access to opportunities made available by market arrangements and through services provided by the government.
Determining the nature and extent of organization in a local community is therefore a useful principle to employ for demarcating local social systems. There will be organizations to a greater extent, including social and development organizations, if there is a high level of household interaction with the government and market resulting in strong external linkages. To the contrary, if interactions with the government and market are limited, the linkages will be largely internal to the community and its interactions.

The sociopolitical and economic factors which influence the formation of organizations by households in various communities include social ties, resources, infrastructure, and government services.

Social ties. In most SSA countries, this means basically kinship and clan networks. The underlying group principle for social, and to a large extent development, organizations, is patrilineage of kinsmen and women belonging to various clans or equivalent levels of grouping of kin. It also determines settlement patterns.

Resources. The availability and ownership of resources greatly influence the nature and scope of interactions among households within and beyond community boundaries. The key resource in rural Africa is land, used mainly for agricultural production.

Infrastructure. This comprises roads, bridges, irrigation works, markets, and postal and telecommunications systems. The key consideration is the extent to which the local community is accessible to outsiders and the households have access to the outside world. The formation of household organizations and interactions between households and the outside world hinges on the level of development of infrastructure for production, communication, commerce, and trade.

Government services. These include such services as education, health, water, electricity, and extension services. The provision of these services is determined by government policy priorities and programming which result in differences in access by households among regions, among local communities, and even within households due to differences in gender, age, or education. As a general rule, in local communities at higher levels of socioeconomic development, households have greater access to these services, as a pointer to a relatively greater concentration of government functionaries. At the opposite end of the spectrum, low-income communities have poor access to these services.

The various sociopolitical and economic factors influencing the formation of household organizations are found in different combinations in various communities resulting in differences in types of local social systems across supranational regions, nations, subnational regions, and communities. These local social systems can be viewed as being in a continuum with those still dominated by subsistence production being at one end, and those more fully integrated into the cash economy being at the opposite end of the continuum. As a matter of fact, virtually all local social systems across the African continent would be located between these two extremes as no community can be said to be still operating in a purely subsistence economy or totally integrated into the cash economy. The systems can also be viewed as transitional in terms of undergoing change, but not in a linear, deterministic sense of unidirectional transformation resulting in systems identical to those of the cash economies of the industrialized nations.
**Local Social Systems: Case Studies**

To highlight the reality, in concrete terms, of local organization in the evolution of local social development systems, it is instructive to look briefly at two case studies comprising a self-help group and a fuelwood stove project. The basic consideration is to portray local people’s initiatives to solve community problems of which the overarching one is poverty. Thus, these and other similar organizations in the local social systems address problems of low incomes, unemployment, inequality, inappropriate technology, and lack of welfare services, to name a few. An increasingly common phenomenon in African local social systems’ evolution in both rural and urban areas is the proliferation of income-generation groups whose membership is exclusively women.

The cases are Kopeya Self-Help Group (in Nyanza, Kenya) based on lineage membership and addressing problems of water and low incomes to meet basic needs, and the Morogoro Fuelwood Stove Project (Tanzania) which originated from donor funding but came under the control of the local population, including women, engaged in the manufacture of clay stoves.

**CASE 1: KOPEYA SELF-HELP GROUP**

Kopeya Self-Help Group, formed in 1992, is in Southwest Gem Siaya district. The name of the group is derived from that of the original founder, Opeya. Membership in Kopeya Self-Help Group is restricted to members of the lineage. There are other conditions of membership which include payment of a registration or membership fee, annual share contributions, and the requirement to make contributions towards all self-help activities of the group.

Meetings are held once a month. At such meetings, discussions are based on the status of members’ contributions, contributions towards members’ welfare needs, the status of the development projects, and plans to initiate more income-generating activities.

Kopeya was essentially a response to the activities of the other organizations in the locality. Thus, it responded similarly to a pressing problem by initiating a water supply project, given that water is one of the main problems in the area that has therefore become a preoccupation of many groups. The group sells water to nonmembers within the locality from its protected well. The well is thus a source of income and safe drinking water for its members who identify the well as being the most significant achievement of the group.

The group’s other activity is vegetable farming. It has leased land surrounding the well on which vegetables are grown for sale. Members pool their labour for farm work. During the dry season, the group irrigates the farm with water from its well. The vegetables form a major source of income during the dry season as prices increase due to scarcity of supplies.

The group also lends money to its members. The money that is lent is obtained from members’ share contributions, and the sale of water and vegetables. The interest that accrues on the loans is usually deposited in the group’s account.

Though a self-help group meant to initiate development activities, Kopeya also meets social welfare needs, particularly when a member is bereaved. Members donate foodstuffs and money to assist in meeting the funeral expenses.
Members do not lose sight of the fact that the group stimulated self-help (or Konyri Kendi in Luo) initiatives within the village and more so in the lineage. They pointed out that increasingly “individualism” was being replaced by “communalism” largely due to the activities of the group in the village. The emerging communalism is slowly proving to be an effective approach to solving some of their problems, especially when they meet as a group and “think together” about their pressing needs. The group members argue that they could embark on small-scale business ventures to generate more funds to “help themselves” if only they had the necessary starting capital.18

CASE 2: MOROGORO FUELWOOD STOVE PROJECT

The Morogoro Fuelwood Stove Project in Tanzania began by being foreign funded but gradually it turned into a significant grass-roots organization.19 The project developed clay stove prototypes which reduced fuelwood consumption and cooking time, and could be manufactured by women potters using local resources. Originally the target consumers were village women, but the greatest market expansion was in Morogoro, Dar es Salaam, and smaller rural towns nearby. Of equal significance, however, was the breakdown in the division between mental and manual work which occurred within the project itself. Young village potters began to teach stove manufacture at the Christian women’s training college where the project was located. They participated in “grass roots-to-governments” encounter sessions in which local-level pottery groups visited each other across the country, exchanging ideas and learning about women’s issues in different localities.

The project had to negotiate the different goals and methods of organization found in donor agencies, government, and its own organization. The slower, more flexible time frame and democratic structure did not fit in the fast pace and bureaucratic hierarchy of government and donors. Donors insisted on rapid signs of adoption of stoves by villagers, but it was the townspeople who adopted the stoves more quickly although there were many other positive outcomes for village women. The leaders had to defend their right to be an autonomous, women-led organization against donor efforts to incorporate it within a university or government department. This reflected the prevailing donor “fad” for an integrated approach to women’s programmes. Laudable as the aim and strategy of integration might be, the project would have been undermined or destroyed by such restructuring. Its ability to be democratic, dynamic, and responsive to local needs and interests was partly because of its location outside the male-dominated bureaucratic hierarchy.20

The cases raise issues pertaining to evolution of local social development systems as determined by the four major centres, viz., households, local communities, state, and market, in terms of their interlinkages and interactions with each other in the process of social development. The cases indicate the fact that local organizations are formed to enable households to accommodate one another in the process of utilizing resources and increase individual household’s access to opportunities made available by market arrangements and through government services. It is in this light that differences in social development systems among countries and among regions within a single country can be understood.

There are also issues regarding sociopolitical and economic factors that influence the formation of local organizations, viz., social ties, resources, infrastructure, and government services. The underlying considerations are: (a) the extent to which there is local people's initiative which ensures participation over time and results in their empowerment; (b) the extent of reliance on local people's resources, both materially and in management and leadership skills and capabilities leading to self-reliance; and (c) linkages with intermediary organizations for purposes of receiving critical inputs such as information, credit, and welfare services, and institution-building efforts for purposes of sustainable development.

Local Social Systems: Issues of Evolution and Operation in an African Context

The enormous diversity in rural Africa in sociological, political, economic, and ecological terms has the implication that development can only be addressed effectively at the local level through an understanding and awareness of local social systems which mirror the community's response to its own socioeconomic and environmental situation, and therefore constitute a critical factor. In any discussion of steps to strengthen local social systems in the African context, it is therefore important to recognize and bear in mind the specificity of any local situation to come up with appropriate intervention.

There are in any case common features of the African situation, showing similarities and differences within and among regions and countries, that can serve as useful premises for intervention strategies which are worth noting. The key feature is the prevalence and persistence of African traditional society values and norms. In this connection, the point worth reiterating is that kinship and clan networks have remained an underlying group principle and also a major determining factor for settlement patterns. However, in an effort to improve access to basic needs and/or development resources, development organizations have emerged that may or may not be based on principles of kinship or class ties and are prevalent at the local community level.

The colonial legacy of a bureaucratic state manifested in the dominant presence of government, at the national and subnational levels, has continued to be a major feature in institution-building at the local and regional levels. There has generally been a strong centralized bureaucracy and the committees created at the regional and local levels have been denied executive powers and remained subject to tight central bureaucratic control.

Through government policy determining allocation of resources, services and infrastructure have been set up in different regions at various levels, which has resulted in inequality among regions. This underlines the issue of unequal access to government services that positively or negatively influences local organization.

Although it is true that government has historically been a powerful organization in the development process generally, due to its command over allocation of resources for development, these resources have declined in recent years. African countries are facing worsening debt crises and have been forced to succumb to structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) resulting in a greatly weakened state.

Under the circumstances, it has been possible for governments to grant political space for NGOs that have resources and wish to channel them into development programmes, preferably in partnership with the government. It is in the adoption of this new approach to institutional arrangements for development that indigenous local organizations are
assigned an active role in development.

As regards livelihood, African people have historically depended on agricultural production, pastoralism, and fishing as their main economic activities. The key resource therefore continues to be land. However, the climatic conditions, especially unreliable rainfall, have made the population particularly vulnerable to frequent drought, alternating with floods, that have resulted in major famines. In addition, other social ills including civil wars and epidemics are rampant in many parts of the continent.

Subsistence production is still widespread and the majority of people remain in the rural areas — as has already been pointed out. There is however a growing cash economy even in the agricultural sector due to increasing production for local and external markets, so that it is more accurate to talk of a dual economy. Furthermore, the growth of a cash economy has resulted in regional disparities at two levels — the urban-rural disparity evidenced by a concentration of social welfare amenities, e.g., education, health, water, and electricity, and rural-rural disparity due to the growing of cash crops in a particular locality, while subsistence production remains dominant in other areas.

The emergent trends of democracy and policy reforms across the African continent in the 1990s have made the political environment an increasingly important, if not the most significant, feature for any intervention strategy to strengthen local social systems. This is mainly due to the newly emerging relationships and roles of the community and government — the principal actors in the political arena. The two major patterns of relevance here are first, the shrinking public sector coupled with transfer of responsibilities to local government; and second, the pattern whereby government is moving towards providing the environment in which NGOs, the private sector, and community organizations can operate and be relied upon for development initiatives and services provision. An important consequence of both trends has been the resurgence of human activity organized on its own for the wider public good, a pointer to the enhanced role of local social systems.

**Strengthening Local Social Systems: Policy Considerations**

The rationale for strengthening local social systems is essentially to empower people to initiate and manage their own development locally and on a sustainable basis. In terms of policy, there are four key areas that should therefore be the focus of attention. First is formulation of effective policies aimed at enhancing sustainable development. The main aspects of such policies should include decentralization to empower local organizations to participate in decision making and ensure sustainable resource management. Second, infrastructure development problems, if addressed, will improve linkages with the external economy and society and, in turn, lead to the growth of local organizations. Third, policies aimed at improvement of the resource base of the local community by way of facilitating access to land, capital, education, and training result not only in strengthening existing groups but also in the formation of new groups. A closely related policy area is addressing the issue of increasing income-diversification opportunities that entails acquisition of additional resources and also skills. Fourth, there should be a deliberate effort to ensure integration of local-level development strategies with traditional systems and the issue should be addressed at the policy level.

The foregoing policy considerations arise due to limitations experienced in the organization of local development initiatives best exemplified by flaws in the IRD efforts.
already discussed. In brief, there are social forces, both local and external, which are strong barriers to change in the interest of the poor and disadvantaged, and therefore against people-centred organization for sustainable development. There are limitations of resources including land, capital, and skills. Also, sustainable human development will be greatly constrained by local social welfare actions rooted in traditional systems, mainly geared to survival and not long-term development.22

The call for strong people’s organization is simply because local organizations have generally remained weak and in some localities are virtually nonexistent. This problem of weak local organization in the African context is directly linked to the issues of evolution and operation discussed in the preceding section. Issues such as strong centralized bureaucracy, subsistence production, the debt crisis, and urban-rural and rural-rural disparities, for the most part, are in effect obstacles or constraints to the emergence and proper functioning of strong local people’s organization. However, issues such as democratization of the political process and the granting of political space to NGOs, can be viewed as positive developments contributing to the rise and growth of local social systems. The issues therefore are important as a basis for understanding the weaknesses of African local social systems. At the same time, they constitute a useful premise for intervention strategies to strengthen local organizations, as already indicated.

Lessons from Local Organizational Efforts and the Advantages of People’s Organizations

There are cumulative lessons emanating from case studies of local development efforts worth taking note of that also give credence to the policy areas of focus already outlined. The two case studies included in this article are pertinent in highlighting the lessons and should be viewed in conjunction with other cases that refer specifically to organization for self-reliance.23 The lessons in broad terms include the following:

1. Local communities often have the capabilities to organize themselves on their own behalf and to develop cooperative structures of organization;

2. Local communities are often endowed with substantial resilience when faced with deprivation and disasters;

3. In many situations, local initiatives constitute the only means of survival for the poor and disadvantaged, highlighting the importance of increasing local control over local resources;

4. People’s willingness to contribute resources for the development of their own communities or localities contradicts the generally-held belief that rural people depend on the government for “free” social services;

5. It is recognized that women play an indispensable role in local self-reliance initiatives; and

6. The dynamic and divergent nature of local initiatives points to the invalidity of a long-held view that rural African societies are “traditional,” “backward-looking,” or opposed to change and resistant to “modern” development.

The lessons from local development initiatives are pointers to gains from allowing and encouraging people at the local level to organize themselves freely and undertake activities for their own advancement as well as their communities. In other words, there are merits in the approach of solving local problems at the local level using local institutions. It will

be remembered that local institutions are the closest to the people who are, after all, the beneficiaries of all the various development activities. If, therefore, there is genuine decentralization that allows for greater representation of the different groups in development decision making, this could lead to greater equity in the allocation of government resources and investments.

In addition, to institutionalize participation of the local population in development planning and management, it is necessary to have a decentralized government structure. This will facilitate the exchange of information about local needs and channel political demands from the local community to the national level. The local communities will have a sense of self-respect if they can make decisions about their own community and about problems that affect them personally, resulting in the creation of a minimum level of trust between the people and government officials.

Local institutions, given the opportunity to develop their own strategies, will entail provision for greater clarity than simply implementing regulations imposed by the centre, and innovation is encouraged. In relation to entrenched local elites who are often insensitive to the needs of the poorer groups and unsympathetic to national development policies, the creation of alternative avenues of decision making will offset their influence, or control over, development activities. One possible consequence of empowering the disadvantaged groups to participate more directly in development decision making is increasing their stake in maintaining the political system which can result in an increase in political stability and national unity.

CONCLUSION

The main contention in this discussion is that institutions in African local societies are now well recognized for the initiation, design, and running of projects on a sustainable basis, not just for the people, but by the people themselves. This has come about after nearly three decades, as a result of revisions of the conceptualization and of the overall thinking on the development process, including local and regional development, that virtually the whole period hinged on economic growth, and for all practical purposes ignored noneconomic factors. Specifically, in such a conceptualization of development, local social organizations can be said to have remained a hidden factor.

It is the experience with development at the local level using the CD and IRD approaches, which revealed the crucial importance of the local social structure in the development process. The key result was local-level development formulation, essentially meaning broad-based socioeconomic development, induced and managed locally, in which a critical element is strong local development organization. This largely conforms to the current conceptualization of sustainable human development.

Institution-building is a fundamental consideration for sustainable human development because institutions are the local mechanisms for local participation in development in terms of decision making, support, and taking over and maintaining projects. In other words, this is the route to empowering people to make their own choices in all spheres of life such that sustainable development can be realized.
The evolution of local social systems and their operation within the African context shows that local institutions have remained weak. This is attributed to a variety of sociopolitical and economic factors, notably, strong centralized bureaucracy, kinship and clan bondage, and widespread subsistence production.

The strengthening of the local social systems including people’s self-organizational capabilities, is now a pressing need but is by no means a new idea. The various steps proposed for decentralization were generally intended to bring about delegation of power. However, these have mostly been half-hearted moves lacking commitment. The basic problem, which is the point of departure in the discussion here of strengthening local social systems, is the failure to appreciate the fact that for decentralization to work it is necessary to effect the delegation of both power and resources. It is therefore a much broader political and economic reform problem and not simply an administrative matter.

The thrust of the proposition to strengthen local social systems is therefore to address four policy areas, namely, formulation of effective policies aimed at enhancing sustainable development, infrastructure development, improvement of the resource base, and integration of local development strategies with traditional African systems. The lessons from the two case studies presented clearly show that local communities do have capabilities and great potential that can be put to good use for their own development. This calls for strong people-centred organizations that will ensure genuine participation and result in greater equity, self-respect, trust, poverty alleviation, and political stability.

NOTES

3/ Albert O. Hirschman, Journeys towards Progress (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Anchor, 1965).
5/ Myrdal, Economic Theory and Under-developed Regions; see also Z. Maleche and E. Ndegwa, “Concept of Region and Approaches to Regional Development: An Overview” (Lecture material for the Third Africa Training Course on Local and Regional Development and Planning, 8 October-19 November 1997, Nairobi, Kenya); and Peter M. Ngau, “Spatial Context of Regional Development” (Lecture material for the Third Africa Training Course on Local and Regional Development and Planning).
9/ Hyden, “Changing Ideological and Theoretical Perspectives.”
13/ Patrick O. Alila, “Kenya Rural Development Experience: Community Development and Local Govern-
ment Issues" and "Experiences in Rural Development in China, Kenya and Zimbabwe" (Harare, 1987).
18/ Aliina and Wanyama, "Local and Social Development in Kenya."
22/ Gooneratne and Mbilinyi, eds., Reviving Local Self-Reliance.
23/ Ibid.