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Local Governance Reform in Global Perspective

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Preface

With the latest waves of democratization, “new” democracies in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America had to rebuild their political systems. After the fall of communism in the beginning of the 1990s, new political regimes were installed. Democratization was not a one way road and in some regions there was a backlash and a revival of non-democratic regimes. Especially in Asia, authoritarian regimes in some cases prevailed with quite successful performance in terms of social welfare and economic development. This reinvigorated the question about the nexus between democracy and development. Despite the cynicism often surrounding purely “electoral liberal democracies”, the performance of most of these new democracies has been rather promising. However, there is still a need for sustaining and deepening the democratic momentum. Facing problems of political legitimacy, structural and procedural reforms are on the agenda in almost all countries.

Local government is regarded as the foundation stone of democracy and the first line of service delivery to the community. It is also seen as a laboratory for new trends and reforms. Here most new pilot projects and concepts are tested and implemented. Democratization brought with it the dominating concept of “good local governance” with its different connotations and definitions. This is defined here as the dual function of local government. On the one hand, democratic regimes gain acceptance by their responsiveness and by acting in accordance with the preferences of their citizens. On the other hand, legitimacy can be achieved by effectively delivering public services and promoting the common welfare, which is by increasing the output-legitimacy of the respective system. Although these two paths, the “local administrative reform” and the “parliamentary reform”, are often viewed as contradictory, neither of them can be neglected when seeking to promote the stability and survival of a democratic system.

The workshop on Local Government Reforms took place in April 2008 at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. It provided an overview of continental developments by comparing relevant country case studies. The comparative study focuses on “developing countries” in Asia, Africa and Latin America. European experiences were also presented. As a result, the analysis provides an overview of the local government reforms and strategies actually being carried out throughout the world. The workshop was organized by the International Political Science Association’s (IPSA) Research Committee 05 on “Comparative Studies on Local Government and Politics”, and the Department of Political Science at the Stellenbosch University. The workshop brought together academic experts on local government in different parts of the world. Each of them prepared a comparative study on local governance that focussed on intra-continental developments. All were interested in a systematical and comparative analysis of local government reform strategies. The ambitious objective was to

write a “homogeneous”, co-authored book that employed a systematic comparative research methodology.

The workshop highlighted similarities in the continental reform trajectories but also drew attention to variations in local government reform strategies. Path dependency was a perennial feature of the findings, as evidenced by the importance of different politico-cultural contexts and national administrative and legal systems.

My co-authors and I would like to thank the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for its financial support. Without this funding the workshop, which brought us together, would not have been possible. Thanks also go to Christian Rode, Patrick Dold, Daniel Hauptmann and my students at Stellenbosch for their support to the workshop, as well as to Melanie Bailey for her proofreading. On a personal note, I would like to thank my wife Bettina and my children Paulina Kersting and Ben Kersting who followed me to the Southern tip of the African continent. Intercultural discussions can sensitize us to multicultural understanding. This study offers one such step in the direction of more systematic comparative research.

Stellenbosch, April 2009

Norbert Kersting