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DECENTRALISATION POLICY IN THE INCREMENTAL PROCESS OF INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING OF RESPONSIBILITY CENTERS

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ABSTRACT

Decentralisation policy bears the concept of empowerment as a recourse to overcome some limitations of a centralised system. The policy was implemented in a public university in 1995 and yet, after five years of its commencement, several problems emerged. This envisaged that the policy did not seem to achieve its objectives. The study was an attempt to identify the constraints faced by Responsibility Centers (RCs) in administering and managing academic and support functions under the decentralised policy. The model of public policy, administration and finance by Rondinelli et al. (1989; 1984) was employed to guide the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 informants and Ethnograph ver 5 was used to analyse the data. Under the decentralised system, the study revealed that the RCs encountered several constraints related to bureaucratic, organisational and resource factors. The central authority has assigned insufficient empowerment to RCs incommensurate with the increased workload and responsibilities under the system. The problem was aggravated by inadequate documentation on policy, regulations, procedures and strategies to guide RCs in operating as decentralised entities. The central authority seemed unable to provide adequate and necessary resources to support RCs' operations. Despite problems and constraints faced, the study showed that, to some extent, the empowerment developed viability among RCs to seize opportunities in mitigating the constraints. The decentralised policy, thus, had potentials to enhance the institutional capacity building of university governance. There is a need for the university to review the factors related to bureaucratic, organisational and resources to ensure that the policy would achieve its objective and to support the RCs to function as decentralised entities. The central authority should strongly support and give full commitment in empowering the RCs adequately. Sufficient policy documents with concepts and principles of decentralisation should be in place as an effective monitoring system; and provision of adequate resources to RCs is needed to support operations.

Keywords: Decentralisation, institutional capacity building, empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Institutional capacity building (ICB) is recognised by USAID (2000) and News TransCentury Foundation (1996) for its potential in addressing the issues of improving the organisational performance and viability to perform its mandate. In the long run ICB ensures the organisation not only to become programmatically sustainable but also organisationally sustainable within the environment it operates. Decentralisation is one of the various ICB mechanisms pursued by central authorities in various sectors such as agriculture, education, development, health and government reforms (Hirschmann, 1999). Based on definitions by Johnson (1995), Rondinelli (1987) and Conyers (1986), decentralisation involved transferring or sharing of authority and responsibility in decision-making from a higher level of central authority to any local units at the operational level. The common areas involved are the decision making related to planning, managing, implementing, and mobilizing resources (Mills, 1994; Ragoonath, 1993). Thus, the shared authority empowers the locals. Empowerment is a concept institutionalise within decentralisation that envisage the removing of bureaucratic boundaries which endow the locals with greater control of broader responsibility. In the process, a sense of ownership and accountability are developed. This enhances their independent functionality (Lowenthal, 1996; Peppard and Rowland, 1995; Linden, 1994).

Decentralisation efforts are pursued for many reasons which could be classified into political, administrative and economic objectives (Manor, 1997; Rahman, and Khan, 1997). Based on the degree of empowerment, scope of functions of local jurisdiction, matrix of accountability, four major forms of decentralisation are identified. They are deconcentration, delegation, devolution and privatisation (Mills,

1994; Rondinelli *et al.*, 1984). Rivera (1996) noted that different forms have different implications on organisational structure, numbers of organisation and resources involved, preconditions of implementation, and the different benefits. Interestingly, decentralisation imperatives are rarely pursued with one objective or one form. Yet, they are usually identified in combination (Malmberg Calvo, 1998; Uphoff, 1997; Parker, 1995). Decentralisation efforts which pursued with appropriate balance and a mix of objectives and its forms were likely to arrive at significant policy benefits (Wunsch, 2001; Manor, 1997; Uphoff, 1997; Gilson *et al.*, 1994).

Factors Influencing the Degree of Success of Decentralisation Effort:

The literatures disclosed that there were three most significant factors complementarily affecting the decentralisation success. They were factors related to bureaucratic, organisational and resources.

Bureaucratic Factors: The central authorities initiated and implemented the policy (Rondinelli *et al.*, 1984). Thus, their persistent and consistent commitment and administrative supports to decentralised entities as well as willingness to share the authority and accept local participation would sustain the effort. Policy instruction, facilitation, professional advice and technical assistance would guide the locals in the decision-making process. These above elements are crucial to support the design of decentralised system (Gideon, 2001; Wunsch, 2001; Zanariah and Rahim, 2001; Gabriele, 1999; Hudson, 1999; Takao, 1999; Waridin, 1999; Ott, 1997; Nsaliwa, 1996).

Organisational Factors: Clear, consistent and realistically constructed policy based on available resources and development concerns would establish compatible organisational structures of decentralisation (Waridin, 1999; Emerson, 1996; Conyer and Kaul, 1990; Rondinelli *et al.* 1989). Adequate authority conversed with clearly defined decentralised responsibility; and commensurate with current and potential managerial capacity and incrementally increased it; would substantiate local capacity building (Charlick, 2001; Gideon, 2001; Wunsch, 2001; Litvak and Seddon, 1999; LomØs, 1997; Mohanty, 1995). The organisational structure also requires laws, procedures and regulations that are simple and flexible; and accountability mechanism that is transparent and clearly defined. This is to encourage and sustain local participation (Gideon, 2001; Robinson and Stiedl, 2001, Sheshadri and Shaukath, 2001; Wunsch, 2001, Rondinelli *et al.* 1984). Weak local administrative capacity could be strengthened with supporting linkages, coordination of functions, and feasible interventions (Wunsch, 2001; 1991; Olowu and Smoke, 1992; Rondinelli *et al.* 1989; Leonard, 1983; Conyers, 1981). Communication among the different entities would facilitate mutual interaction within the decentralised system (Takao, 1999; McGrath, 1997). Consistent and continuous monitoring and evaluation are crucial for feedback, corrective measures and realignment actions. This will ascertain that the policy objectives are achieved (Robinson and Stiedl, 2001; Ingham and Kalam, 1992).

Resource Factors: Sufficient and timely supply of resources such as financial, human resources and equipment, facilities and physical facilities are important inputs for institutional capacity building of decentralised units (Wunsch, 2001; Zanariah and Rahim, 2001; Hudson, 1999; Waridin, 1999; Rondinelli *et al.* 1989). Effective and efficient systems of administering and managing these resources would ensure its efficient mobilisation and usage in line with the policy objectives (Batkin, 2001; Gideon, 2001; Robinson and Stiedl, 2001; Sheshadri and Shaukath, 2001; Wunsch, 2001; Rondinelli *et al.*, 1984).

THE STUDY AND ITS CONTEXT

In 1995, the growth of the university, and the complex programmes and activities; demanded the top management to emanate decentralisation policy to improve performance and services. Empowerment of Responsibility Centers (RCs) through "Let Managers Manage" is seen as panacea to overcome some limitations and weaknesses of the preceding centralised system. However, several problems emerged after five years of policy implementation. They were incompetent decentralised administrators and empowerment incommensurate with assigned functions. Small operational budget to accommodate the voluminous numbers of students at the RC level further deteriorate the policy success. The shortcomings envisaged that there are gaps between the policy objectives and the implementation which are not fully achieved and thus there is a need to urgently address these gaps.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objective of the study was to identify constraints related to bureaucratic, organisational and resource factors faced by RCs in becoming functional units under the implementation of decentralisation policy.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The mode of data collection was semi-structured interviews. Based on the model of public policy, administration and finance by Rondinelli *et al.* (1989; 1984), pre-determined factors (bureaucratic, organisational and resource factors) were used to construct questions in the instrument. The instrument was used to gain insights and to understand the nature of constraints faced by RCs in implementing decentralised policy. Purposive sampling was employed to identify 16 informants comprising of academic administrators of RCs. The unit of analysis was the academic RC. The semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The content analysis was adopted to analyse the data and the Ethnograph ver 5.0 was used to facilitate the process (Seidel, 1998). The findings were presented with frequency of occurrences or verbatim quotations retrieved from the interviews.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Bureaucratic Related Factors

Leadership Commitment: At the university level, 14 informants noted that the top management showed a strong commitment and interest towards the implementation of decentralisation policy. If the top management is persistent, they are confident that the policy implementation will be successful. This finding supported the studies by Charlick (2001), Nsaliwa (1996), Smith (1997), Ragoonath (1993) and Bienen *et al.* (1990) that persistent commitment and attention of top management officials contributed to the success of policy implementation.

Willingness in Transferring and Accepting Participation of Decentralised Entities: According to all informants, the central authority was not fully prepared to share the power with RCs. At the RC level, the central authority frequently intervened in decision-making process and imposing control such as overruling and questioning the decisions, making decisions without consulting RCs and reluctant to accept full participation of RCs in policy making. More frequently than not as reported by Robinson and Stiedl (2001) and Ingham and Kalam (1992) the RCs failed to reject the central decisions. The 13 informants believed that the top management should learn to trust, to share the authority and to accept participation of RCs with confidence. As expressed by one informant:

...I am not sure whether it is fully running or it is just only trial and error. There are lack of trust and confidence of the central to delegate the power and authority to RCs. There should be no suspicious among us or on us but there should be a good relationship with the top management. I believe the priority is to be able to trust each other. (Informant 3).

They also believed that participative management would likely to support the decentralised system compared to rigid control of top management. As mentioned by one informant "decision-making should be made in consensus and bottom-up rather than one-man show or top-down which seldom last". Many unsuccessful efforts of decentralisation policy also showed that the commitment and interest of central authorities were not accompanied with the commitment to devolve real power and to sustain locals' decisions. They tend to retain the power by imposing controls (Charlick, 2001; Gideon, 2001; Robinson and Steidl, 2001; Hudson, 1999; Takao, 1999; Ott, 1997; Smith and Shapiro, 1997; Smoke and Lewis, 1996).

Supervision and Technical Assistance: The central authority noted by 13 informants provided RCs with inadequate and ambiguous supervision and technical assistance to guide the RCs in adhering to procedures and guidelines. Decision-making process was not guided by consistent direction and focus. All informants stressed that the central tends to dictate rather than facilitate. This finding further reinforced the importance of adequate supervision and technical assistance provided to decentralised entities to facilitate and to direct the decision-making process under the decentralised system (Wunsch, 2001; Hudson, 1999; Cheema and Rondinelli, 1983).

Organisational Related Factors

Policy and Objectives of Decentralisation: All informants noted that the documentation on decentralisation policy and objectives were absent. The top management also failed to articulate their expectation clearly, accurately and consistently. The RCs were imparted with only general direction on the concepts, principles and benefits of the policy. The drastic and poorly justified changes and focus further reduced their clarity towards the policy and the objectives. As outlined by one of the administrators:

I know and aware of the policy but it is not stated. The staff do not know about the decentralisation and we can simply lie to them about how things should be handled I started to be aware of the policy implementation since the VC started its initial stage. Not in written but it was in informal way like through meetings. You are reminded to do this and that, and the areas that you can practice flexibility are highlighted during the meetings. So he mentioned informally what he expected you to do, yet nothing in written. (Informant 16).

All informants also informed that the objectives were not constructed realistically according to the available resources and the managerial assistance. Many researchers offered similar findings that clear, consistent and documentation of the policy and objectives as well as constructed realistically with the available resources and development concern were crucial to ensure compatibility of organisational structures to support the decentralised system. The finding also corroborated that the policy changes should be justified with the original objectives to facilitate the implementation process (Waridin, 1999; Emerson, 1996; Conyer and Kaul, 1990; Rondinelli *et al.*, 1989; Khan, 1989).

Transferred Authority and Assigned Functions: Comparing with the preceding governance system, all informants agreed that they were more responsible and accountability to perform the academic and support functions. Different informants however offered different definitions on empowerment that spelt out the different degree of empowerment that they have exercised. The degree of empowerment, however, was not clearly defined and incommensurate with assigned functions. Inconsistent facilitation and frequent interventions when exercising empowerment restricted the functionality of RCs. Consequently, they became less responsive and less proactive in discharging functions. All informants suggested that an accountability mechanism is required as a measure to check and balance on RCs in exercising their power. Yet, the mechanism was absent. Robinson and Stiedl (2001), Wunsch (2001), Crook and Manor (1998), Gordon (1995) and Gilson *et al.* (1994) offered consistent findings on the importance of accountability mechanism in ensuring the decentralised and central authority officials exercising their power appropriately. Adequate authority and control conversed with the transferred responsibility were reported in decentralisation studies as critical factor to ensure the functionality and sustainability of locals. This finding also reinforced the requirement of clearly defined empowerment to support the RCs' operation (Charlick, 2001; Gideon, 2001; Wunsch, 2001; Litvak and Seddon, 1999; LomØs, 1997; Ott, 1997).

Administrative Capacity: All informants expressed that weak administrative capacity of RCs hindered them to operate efficiently. The central authority did not supplement them with administrative and managerial assistance to support the weak administrative capacity. Besides that, 14 informants stated that the central authority persistently imposed high expectation on RCs to operate under constraints. Under this context, they perceived that transferring functions and increasing workloads and decentralising more complex functions when the RCs are yet to develop the capacity were impractical. The finding further ratified the need of the central authority to develop institutional capacity building by devolving functions commensurate with the managerial capacity to ensure the success of policy implementation (Ott, 1997; Smith, 1997; Smoke and Lewis, 1996; Crook and Manor, 1995).

Procedures, Regulations and Guidelines: All informants agreed that proper procedures, regulations and guidelines were essential and beneficial to assist and facilitate them in implementing the transferred functions. However, 14 informants reported that some of these elements were not formally stated or clearly defined, and changes were not made based on convincing justifications. The RCs also received poor supervision and technical assistance from the top management. A few procedures, regulations and guidelines were enforced inconsistently and at times, they created red tapes and causing bottlenecks within the system. These constraints reduced the responsiveness of RCs in administering and managing functions, attending contingency plan expeditiously, restraining them to grab more opportunities and in some cases demanding for higher cost. Several areas were related to fiscal and personnel management, physical and infrastructure management, and students' affairs. One of the informants described the constraint as a "clash

between the need and urgency to follow the procedures and regulations” All informants emphasised that to overcome these constraints, the central authority should play an active role to assist and facilitate RCs in adhering to the organisational arrangement. As mentioned by one informant “the central should facilitate us to use the regulations or how to follow procedures rather than solely a regulator”. Decentralisation studies showed that the decentralised systems were often failed when they are not supported with documentation of organisational arrangements such as law, procedures, regulations and guidelines. Concise, transparent and flexible arrangement also assisted the locals to undertake their functions well (Litvak and Seddon, 1999; Aye, 1997; Ott, 1997).

Communication System: The study discovered that, the communication system is another supportive element to decentralised system. The informants claimed that the empowerment have placed responsibility and authority closely to those who know most of the decisions. Thus, it resulted in making a smaller operational unit as a platform of “one-stop decision-making”. Reduction of red-tapes in decision-making process enable the RCs to be more accurate and more expeditious due to having access to the comprehensive and accurate information on RC operation. Similar benefits of improved quality of locals’ decisions were documented by several researchers in decentralisation studies (Litvak and Seddon, 1999; MacKintosh and Roy, 1999; Uphoff, 1997; Abdullah Abdul Rahman, 1995). Decentralised units are becoming more responsive and accurate in adjusting condition, priorities and anticipate problems arose (Slack, 1997; Antholt, 1991; Rondinelli, 1981). The policy, however, was unable to strengthen the quality of communication between the top management and the RCs. Poor communication between the top management and the decentralised units seemed to be the common findings (Gideon, 2001; Wunsch, 2001). The central is reluctant to use the channel in disseminating information and facilitate interaction for conflict resolutions and facilitation (Takao, 1999; McGrath, 1997; Anne Mai, 1996; Ingham and Kalam, 1992).

Resource Related Factors

Since the initial stage of policy implementation, all informants commented that the central authority failed to operationalise its commitment to provide adequate resources to RCs. The resources were scarce and incommensurate to cater the overburdened assignments. This constraint reduced their viability and becoming less functionally independent. The empowerment allowed the RCs to have some control over financial management but not in the management of personnel or facilities, equipment and infrastructure. Poor arrangement to hire staff contributed to the inadequacy of staff at the RCs. Majority of technical staff was reported to be at the central office. The shortage of personnel whether academic or support staff was acute. This is shown by the ratio of academician to students and support staff to students that could reach up to 1:162 and 1:180 respectively. Complex and confusing budgeting and accounting process compounded with lack of knowledge and competency causing urgent needs of financial officers and clerks. Furthermore, maintenance staff were urgently required to perform maintenance work. Deficiency of physical infrastructures to cater the needs of students and staff left the RCs with no options but to share the available infrastructures. With voluminous enrolment of students this strategy caused congestion in classes, lecture halls and laboratories. The problem augmented when the progress of constructions of buildings was slow and congestion of space in campus. Contrary to most of decentralisation studies, the central authorities always overlook the crucial requirement of providing adequate and timely resources to support the institutional capacity building of decentralised entities. Similar constraints were also captured in the literature due to the poor fulfilment of requirement and supportive administration and management system of the resources. The local entities were reported to be responsible for making up these resources shortfall (Charlick, 2001; Gideon, 2001; Robinson and Stield, 2001; Sheshadri and Shaukath, 2001; Hudson, 1999; Takao, 1999; Robinson *et al.* 1998; Ott, 1997)

Despite the constraints, the empowerment has made the RCs’ administrators more responsible and accountable to ensure that the RCs were able to perform their functions. Thus, they embarked on several coping strategies. They became proactive, innovative and creative in identifying various sources for raising revenues through activities such as consultancy services, franchise and executive programmes, strategic alliances and training. The efforts however have constrained on the RCs leadership, virtue of the RCs disciplines and the market and demands; and the willingness to put on extra effort despite excessive workloads and time constraint. The generated incomes became the prime sources to compensate the insufficient allocation of resources. The limitation to this agenda produced unequal capacity of RCs in raising revenues under the decentralised system. The poorly generated incomes RCs became very dependent on the limited grant and central authority for financial assistance. Coinciding efforts were also pursued by proactively seeking for technical support and assistance from external agencies through partnership and networking. The RCs also optimised and increased the capacity of the central and the RCs’

lecture halls, classes and laboratories at both prime and non-prime hours during weekdays and weekends. Correspondingly, many studies also showed different capacity of decentralised units in generating incomes. This further increased the gap of institutional capacity building among the entities when the unresourceful entities failed to respond to appropriate strategies to compensate the shortfalls of resources (Batkin, 2001; Gideon, 2001; Wunsch, 2001a; Livingstone and Charlton, 1998).

CONCLUSIONS

Several conclusions were drawn from the research findings. Referring to bureaucratic factors, the top management did not seem to operationalise their commitment and interest in empowering RCs adequately commensurate with the assigned functions and the overburdened workloads as well as accepting participation of RCs in the key areas of operation. The RCs were also poorly supervised and technically assisted. Based on the organisational factors, the governance system was not supported with adequate and proper documentation on policy, procedures, regulations and guidelines. In addition, absence of accountability measures, monitoring and evaluation of the progress of the policy implementation poorly supported and facilitated the implementation process. In strengthening the institutional capacity building of RCs to become functionally dependent units under the decentralised system, the top management failed in providing adequate resources. Despite of poor preparation of policy implementation, the empowerment has given strength to RCs in grabbing opportunities to buffer the constraints and performing their functions. Thus, despite the constraints, to some extent institutional capacity building are achieved within the RCs. In the long run, if the central authority wants to ensure the successful effort of empowering the RCs, they have to be committed in strengthening the decentralised system by supporting the system with appropriate conditions of bureaucratic, organisational and resources related factors.

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