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URGENT LOCAL GOVERNMENT PROBLEMS IN AFRICA^{1/}

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Paragraphs</u>
Introduction	1 - 6
Present Problems	7 - 13
Present Tendencies	14 - 15
Identified Needs	16 - 17
Difficulties confronting proposals for major changes and improvements	18 - 21
In what fields of work, and how can the Public Administration Section of ECA best assist in developing suitable local government systems in Africa	22 - 26

Introduction

1. It is understood that this Second Conference on Urgent Administrative Problems of African Governments is intended, inter alia, to enable, through its deliberations and recommendations, a report to be submitted to the IXth Session of the Economic Commission for Africa which will form the basis for a resolution to be adopted shaping the Commission's programme in the field of Public Administration for some time to come. This background paper is intended to provide a means of introducing the present day problems of local government to the Conference and suggest how the Economic Commission for Africa can assist in solving them.

2. This being so, it may perhaps be worthwhile to first of all look at the recommendations made by Committee IV set up by the first ECA Urgent Administrative Problems Conference held in 1962 to consider and recommend upon Problems of Local Government, for it was largely upon these recommendations that the programme of the ECA Public Administration Section in the field of local government was based during the succeeding six years. Do these recommendations and the work programme which stemmed from them have any relevance to the local government situation in Africa to-day, and can any lessons be learnt from experience gained in this field during the past six years?

3. Committee IV, in framing its recommendations assumed that there existed in African countries a system of local self-administration, in the English language called "local government" and in the French language "administration locale", the essential characteristics of which were : "that the unit of local self-administration firstly must consist of a representative council on the one hand and an executive element on the other. Secondly the area of its jurisdiction, in terms of both area and population, must be based upon a reasonable balance between smallness, to ensure its accessibility to the people, and largeness, to ensure that it has

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sufficient administrative, technical and financial capacity to carry out its functions." 1/ The Committee further assumed that the local government systems introduced into African countries by the colonial powers "had gained widespread and intellectual acceptance, even if popular acceptance is still sporadic or somewhat less than enthusiastic." 2/ Further.. "that the experience of local government in Africa... has been such that efforts should continue to be made to intensify and extend it." 3/

4. As a result of accepting the principles involved in these assumptions, the Committee, recognizing that many problems existed, identified three as major administrative problems affecting local government which required attention by national and international bodies, both governmental and non-governmental, viz :-

- (a) Public Enlightenment
- (b) Staff Development
- (c) Finance

1/ Report of the ECA 1962 Seminar on Urgent Administrative Problems of African Governments, E/CN 14/180 p.p. 47 and 48

2/ Ibid, page 48

3/ Ibid, page 49

5. They thereupon made recommendations as to how these problems should be treated. In respect of the first, Public Enlightenment, the Committee recommended African Governments to restate to their peoples the principles of their countries' local government systems as they saw them in national terms, so that they ceased to be regarded as imported from abroad, but be thought of as home-grown institutions. In regard to the second problem, Staff Development, the Committee recognized the importance to the efficient working of any local government system of a well trained, efficient and loyal career staff and recommended: (i) that in order to secure this state of affairs studies be made of the efficacy of instituting the device of a Local Government Service Commission to recruit, supervise and train local government staffs, and that research be carried out to enable comparisons to be made between the staffing systems evolved or evolving in countries with traditions of the British local government system and the more centralized staffing system found in French speaking countries; (ii) practical work oriented pre-entry and post-entry training of staff is of paramount importance and must be accepted as a responsibility of the central government; and (iii) senior local government officials should be sent abroad for in-service training. In the matter of Finance, both of paramount importance and intractable difficulty, the Committee emphasized that financial responsibility is at the heart of administrative responsibility, and central governments should review their countries' sources of taxation and re-allocate them in such a way as to ensure that those available to local government authorities conform with the obligations placed upon them. It was also recommended that in this subject: (i) studies be made of the fields and methods of collection of local taxes; (ii) financial help from central governments should follow an agreed pattern and formula, so that local authorities could estimate their budgets with certainty; and (iii) central

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government grants should include an element to bring the less favoured areas of countries up to an average level.

6. The Committee added a final recommendation embracing the use of technical assistance from multi- and bi-lateral sources, also pointing out the benefits which would be gained if African countries were enabled to utilize each others' experience in the fields mentioned above, as well as in all spheres touching upon the development of local government systems suited to an African environment.

Present Problems

7. If the problems identified by Committee IV and its recommendations were valid in 1962, can it be said that since then the Governments of African countries have been able to modify and expand their systems of local government, as suggested by the Committee, to make them efficient instruments of government policy in the economic and social fields and form a stable base for national unity? Experience would appear to prove that in fact, whilst much has been attempted in the way of broadening popular participation in the membership of local authorities through universal elections, or other selective means, increasing the functions and responsibilities of these bodies, and instituting training schemes for local government officials, the response of most local authorities to the challenges put to them have not been so whole-hearted and successful as to enable governments to place complete confidence in their systems of decentralized local administration. Indeed it is clear to most observers that many governments are questioning the validity and desirability of permitting too much decentralization and are either thinking of or actually reverting to closer supervision and instruction.

8. Apart from the failure of local authorities to effectively act^{as} suppliers of public services, there also seems to have been a lack of ability for them to participate as instruments of economic development. In very few Development Plans are local authorities directly involved as part of the administrative machinery for implementing government policies, nor is it common to find them being requested to participate in the drafting of development plans, or for their own development schemes, if they have them, to be integrated into the central development plan.

9. At many international and African regional and sub-regional meetings the causes of the failure of local government systems to match up to the demands of both governments and populations have many times been listed. These include :

- (a) lack of experience on the part of councillors and in particular their failure to understand the division of responsibility between the policy-making body and its executive staff;
- (b) severe shortage of trained staff at both senior and intermediate levels;
- (c) failure amongst the populace to develop a sense of civic responsibility for the payment of taxes;
- (d) lack of adequate finances and gradual financial weakening of local authorities;
- (e) unwillingness on the part of central governments to accord to the Ministry responsible for local government the status and prestige needed to inspire the local organs to efforts commensurate with a really important and vital part of the countries' political and administrative machinery;
- (f) failure on the part of many central political authorities to spell out the exact role of local government in the economic and social development of the countries;

- (g) the maintenance of "parallel" or "dual" systems of administration often represented by, on the one side, central government officials exercising in the areas of local authorities the same powers and functions of former colonial administrations, with duties which cut across or hinder the development of local councils, and on the other the local officials of the ruling party also exercising administrative control in certain functions, such as those development efforts known as self-help or national building schemes.

10. It is often this type of imprecise situation described at (e)(f) and (g) above which exacerbates the weaknesses described at (a)-(d), and in the present state of development of local government systems contributes to their failure.

11. What this situation can mean, is that not only do the local population become dissatisfied with the performance of their local authorities and offer them little or no support, but there results misunderstandings between local authorities and central government ministries. Not only does this inhibit the proper functioning of the local government system, but such a situation also can, and has meant wasting of scarce manpower and fiscal resources, and lack of co-ordinated programmes.

12. There is also one further phenomenon which can be found in a number of states in which the one party system is paramount. This is the fact that there exists virtually no distinction between the institutions of Government and those of the Party. This can have a most significant effect upon local government institutions, where often there has, in any event, been a confusion in the minds of the citizens between the role of the Party and that of the local authorities. Where this situation becomes formalized, e.g. by members

/of the local

of the local party executive, becoming ex-officio members of the local authority and/or the local district party chairman being the chairman of the local authority, it can have a beneficial effect. It clarifies in the minds of the public what was a previously confusing situation, enables party policies to be integrated into the policies and activities of the local authorities, makes for better co-ordination of effort and also enhances the understanding by local politicians of the limitations imposed upon local authorities by law, government regulations and control measures, finance, (or lack of it), and the shortage of trained and experienced staff.

13. If one analyses the situation as described in the above paragraphs and compares the problems listed with the major problems identified in 1962 by Committee IV of the first Conference, it will be seen that most of the current problems are identical with those then described. There is an additional emphasis apparent to-day, however, which was barely touched upon by the 1962 Conference. This has to do with the role which local government should play, even if it so far has not done so, in national development. The vary nature of many national development schemes, particularly in rural areas, calls for local leadership, as well as participation. The local authorities should be the medium through which such "grass roots" development is initiated and implemented. However, as already mentioned, many governments are reluctant, because of their poor performance and lack of technical ability, to embfoil local authorities in a meaningful way in the administrative machinery for development. This is, however, a matter of such vital importance that ways and means should be found of integrating national development into the functioning of local government. The question is, "How and by what means can this be done?"

Present Tendencies

14. It is significant that the first problems identified by Committee IV of the 1962 Conference was that concerning the need to enlighten the public concerning the role it was intended local government should play in the post independence era and the place within the governmental machinery which should be given to it. It is perhaps also significant that the least attention has been paid to this problem and its concomittant one, which is "what exactly is the role which we want our local government system to play in our schemes for national development?"

15. Most African governments have accepted that the fundamental changes in the functions of post independent governments as compared to those of the static era of pre-independence, bring about the need to re-orient inherited central administrative structures and procedures so as to enable them to meet the requirements of a dynamic era geared to development. This is a problem of some magnitude, but many governments have faced up to it, particularly in the area of economic planning and implementation, undertaking government-wide programmes of administrative improvement and reform. But in so doing, not many of these governments have been able, because of pressures to tackle other high priority problems, to take a long hard look at their inherited local government systems and institute really wide-ranging re-structuring of the whole system, so that it conforms to the requirements of the post-independence era. There is no doubt that in a number of countries, despite all other preoccupations, many adjustments to the inherited systems have been made, more in fact in the countries which had inherited the British concept of local government than have proved necessary in those countries with a French background, whose system is better suited to the realities of Africa.

Some reforms have also been carried out in the French-expression countries, and particularly in those of West Africa where, as more trained administrators have come from the countries' Ecoles d'Administration, the "cercles" inherited from the colonial administration have been broken down into smaller divisions called "circonscriptions" or "sous-prefectures" and these divisions have been grouped for administrative convenience into departments or regions under prefects or regional governors appointed by and responsible to the President of each Republic, who is usually the executive Head of State. Generally speaking, the tendency of these adjustments or reforms has been to bring the local authorities under direct supervision at either district or regional levels, make them subject to ministerial regulation and reduce their autonomous powers.

Identified Needs

16. But is what has been done enough to "not just make local government a device for the provision of local services, but a vital force in the task of nation building, an important factor in social, educational and economic advancement, and also an instrument for unity"? ^{4/} If the reported frustrations which exist within the local government systems of a number of African countries are correct, the level of efficiency is inadequate to enable them to carry out their allotted tasks, or they are not the vital force for advancement that they should be, then indeed it is still necessary to search for a system which will combine the traditional, ethnic and administratively possible means of the countries into a system which will suit each countries local circumstances.

^{4/} Report of ECA Seminar on Central Services to Local Authorities, 1964. E/CN.14/VAP/37, page 3.

17. This, it would seem, is a task of urgent priority which, coupled to those other problems previously listed, requires to be tackled with all the resources at the command of the countries themselves, and of international bodies, both governmental and non-governmental. In other words, the tasks identified by the 1962 Conference have not been by any means completed, but there has arisen an even more significant and complex element to be added to the problems requiring attention.

Difficulties confronting proposals for major changes and improvements

18. It could well be that the feeling of most governments to the proposal that there should be made a determined effort to re-structure and re-organize their existing local government systems, as well as maintaining efforts to solve the other additional problems mentioned, would take up too much time and too many resources. However, although one of the most difficult things to achieve is the injection into people's minds of new ideas and concepts, in the development by governments of new political constitutions, central government institutions and machinery, surely the work necessary to the introduction of a stable and effective local government can be given some priority. It is useless, however, to attempt to introduce new concepts and ideas unless they are consistently and firmly supported by the political authority. This failure to acknowledge the importance to the general welfare of an accepted and efficient local government system and lack of perception of what it can achieve is one of the major reasons why its hierarchical status is invariably low in most African countries.

19. It is acknowledged that any attempt to achieve fundamental, wholesale administrative reforms in local government, as in any field of activity is likely to be self-defeating. The "wholistic" approach is not advocated. There is no reason, however, why a programme of carefully chosen and suitable partial reforms should not be undertaken, particularly if these are part of a larger scheme for, say, achieving improvements in development planning and implementation. Any such scheme must be within the capacity of the units concerned, and it is for this reason that a gradual change in the evolution of local authorities is advocated.

Ways and means of achieving gradual major reforms and improvements

20. This approach was the recommendation of a Working Group composed mainly of French speaking officials at a CAFRAD Seminar held in November, 1966, which considered the following factors should influence the evolution of a local government system, where the final aim was to eventually grant a measure of real autonomy to the various levels of local administration:

- (i) The central government must maintain stability and political unity; without these two important requirements, no proper growth in either the social or economic fields can be sustained.
- (ii) The government must concentrate its efforts on fostering nationhood and unity by eradicating tendencies towards tribal, ethnic or religious grouping; it should also take action to stimulate the interest of the people towards helping to solve the problems of their own localities by concerted efforts.

- ~~(iii)~~ The participation of the people in the running of their own local affairs and helping to formulate and implement the National Development Plan is a basic factor without which no country can hope to develop; however, this participation must fit into the existing stage of national development insofar as political unity, social stability and economic growth are concerned; dissipation of the central power to lower levels of government, must never have a divisive effect upon the political and governmental structure.
- (iv) Any system of devolution of powers from the centre to partially autonomous bodies infers that the country has progressed to the point where both the social and economic advancement of the people has reached a stage which guarantees their ability to effectively take charge of their own local affairs and accept the responsibilities which automatically go with the assumption of powers; this stage of development then, appears to be a pre-condition necessary prior to any devolution of powers to local administration units.
- (v) Devolution also assumes that no wastage of national resources will result from this transfer of powers and resource from the centre to the periphery and this requires that there are available to the local units a sufficiency of qualified and experienced staff to ensure efficient administration of the functions allocated.
- (vi) A gradual process of the decentralization of powers to bodies at the local level upon which the people are represented appears to be the only method whereby the state can preserve stability and ensure economic advancement; such stages can be many or few in number depending upon the particular circumstances of

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a country, but the process must be national in character, suited to the temperament and cultural and historical backgrounds of the people, as well as suited to its African setting. 5/

21. The main point about this approach is that effective changes need not be haphazard, piece-meal and ineffectual, but they must be carefully conceived and planned and have the whole-hearted and continuous support of the political authorities. Above all, structural reorganization, including political and organizational changes, must be related to programmes in the staffing, training and financial fields. Even though the recommendations made at the 1962 Conference have been followed in a number of countries, work still requires to be undertaken in these major fields.

In what fields of work and how can the Public Administration Section of ECA best assist in developing suitable local government systems in African countries.

22. It is obvious that with the limited resources at its disposal, the ECA Public Administration Section cannot make objective studies of local government systems in all African states, even if they were required to do so, nor can they do more than act as a catalyst in initiating necessary reforms. However, its record in the field of local government since the first Regional Adviser in Local Government was appointed in August, 1963 is by no means contemptible, even though its approach has been conventional. It was, and in all

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5/ CAFRAD Seminar on the Administrative Problems of Development at the Regional and Local Levels, November, 1966, report of Working Group No.2.

probability will be in future necessary for the Section to be selective in its work range and, therefore, the programme in local government has in the past five years embraced :-

- (a) Local Government Study Tours for officials from English and French speaking African countries;
- (b) a Seminar on Central Services to Local Authorities
- (c) an Orientation Course in Local Government Training;
- (d) a Seminar on Personnel Administration for Central and Local Authorities;
- (e) a Seminar on Local Government Finance; and
- (f) a Training Course in Local Government Personnel Systems.

23. All the above regional projects stemmed from the 1962 Conference and have resulted in the issuing of documentation which has been circulated to African countries. This has been further supplemented by that issued from United Nations Headquarters, in the production of which the Regional Local Government Adviser has also participated, e.g. a Handbook on Local Government Personnel Systems and a Handbook on Local Government Training.

24. The Regional Adviser in Local Government has also carried out advisory assignments in individual countries on request, and has acted as consultant or lecturer at seminars and workshops organized by ministries or training institutions in various African countries.

25. What should be the pattern for the future programme of activities? What is the most effective method of granting assistance to countries in this important field of administration, and towards what area should efforts be directed? Indications have been given that many countries are interested in work being undertaken to enable comparative study to be made of the "new" element mentioned above, i.e. a study of the
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structure and organization of African systems of local administration with a view to their evolution as instruments of development administration in addition to their undertaking traditional functions. If this is indeed a needed activity, should it be organized in the usual way as a regional seminar, and if so what means can be suggested of "follow-up" in the various interested countries, so that if a seminar is held it can be of the greatest use and have the largest impact? It is in the practical application of findings and recommendations of regional projects that the Public Administration Section finds the most difficulty, and it is for this reason that it is considered this aspect of its work, as well as the contents of the work programme, should receive consideration.

26. Some other matters, although this list is not exhaustive, which have been mentioned as of current urgent interest to various African countries, are :- the application of correspondence course training and programmed learning as mass methods of training local government officials; manpower planning and utilization in local government; credit institutions for local authorities; an examination of the varying systems of central government grants to local authorities; a study of the administrative problems of large urban centres and capital cities; the need to evolve acceptable African oriented professional and technical qualifications for local government officials. There are many other subjects in this vast and complicated field of local government which require attention, but it is for the African countries themselves to indicate what, in their opinion, are the most urgent matters requiring attention, what priorities need to be allocated and how best the limited amount of technical assistance available to the Economic Commission for Africa in this field can be utilized to the greatest benefit.