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“Feelings of Closeness” Public Opinion and its Implications for Decentralisation

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Decentralisation means that political power, administrative authority and human and financial resources will be devolved from the national level of government to the sub-national levels. This long and cumbersome process of institutional reform will impact on ordinary Namibians’ relations with public agencies. One commonly perceived outcome of the reform process is to bring government “closer to the people”. Here we have used survey data to assess the current feelings of “closeness to government”. Our main findings suggest that most Namibians feel themselves closer to the national level than sub-national levels of government. Added to this, few Namibians know their regional and local authority councillors and few Namibians actively seek contact with officials and representatives at these levels. Overall, we argue that the attitudinal aspects of the decentralisation reform process must not be forgotten. For decentralisation to succeed, these aspects must also be addressed.

1. Introduction

The decision to decentralise is based on the assumption that not all government functions can or should be handled at the central level. The objectives of decentralisation include:

“[...] political and administrative expedience (e.g. government closer to the people, grass roots empowerment, participative democracy, enhancement of accountability, adaptability in governance) and the promotion of economic efficiency through improved responsiveness to local and regional needs, improved utilisation of regional and local resources and building-up of local and regional institutional capacity”.¹

In this Briefing Paper the focus is on how close Namibians feel themselves to the various levels of government: national, regional and local. It is argued that the attitudinal aspect of reform is often forgotten. This has an impact on the relations between those that govern and those that are governed. It is our view that all too often reforms are undertaken based on untested assumptions. Here we focus on one such reform: decentralisation. For decentralisation to succeed the attitudes of the population must be acknowledged, evaluated and addressed.

One way to gauge feelings of closeness, public opinion and attitudes in general is through opinion polls. In this briefing paper data from two recent opinion polls conducted by the IPPR is employed to provide some base-line information. The aim of this Briefing Paper is to test the assumption that sub-national levels of government are “closer” to the people by looking, not at the spatial aspects of closeness, but the attitudinal aspects. Thus, of interest here is how close do people feel themselves to sub-national levels of government. Given the limited space available here, only

aggregated (national-level) data is provided. In future editions of this Briefing Paper series the data will be disaggregated to provide a more detailed socio-biographical analysis of these attitudes.

Data for this analysis is drawn from two surveys. The Southern African Democracy Barometer (SADB-1999) conducted towards the end of 1999 forms the basis for the analysis. This data is supplemented by responses from the IPPR Youth and Politics Survey (YPS-2000) conducted towards the end of 2000.²

2. The three components of closeness to government

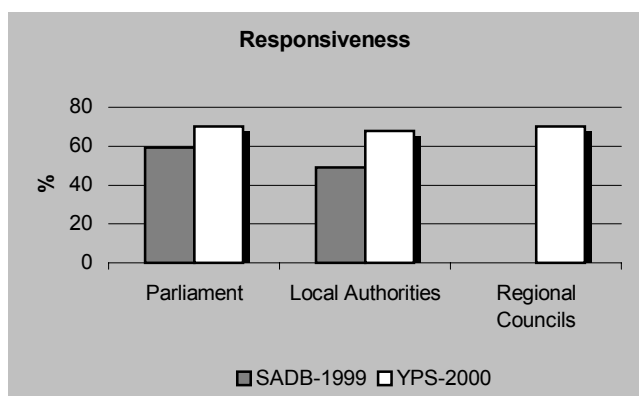
One of the key assumptions in the debate on decentralisation is that sub-national agencies (regional councils and local authorities) are “closer” to the people than national agencies, i.e. they are more in touch with the needs and wants of their constituencies. Sub-national levels of government are commonly perceived to be more **responsive**.

Secondly, it is often assumed that constituencies assign more **trust** to sub-national levels of government. This is due to their close proximity to the constituencies and also due to the fact that these representatives are part of the daily lives of the local communities. The local representatives live and work on a daily basis in their constituencies.

Thirdly, it is often assumed that sub-national agencies will **perform** better because of their close relationship with the local community. They are better equipped to understand the particular needs of the community.³ Sub-national agencies are smaller and hence, less bureaucratised and better equipped to prioritise and deal with local problems than national government agencies that are often far away and operating with different priorities. In short, because of their proximity to the people, sub-national levels of government will out-perform national government on local issues.

In this section we use survey data to assess the accuracy of these assumptions. We measure feelings of closeness to sub-national agencies and compare it with feelings of closeness to the central level. The feelings of closeness are measured through three perception-items: responsiveness, trust and performance. Specific questions on regional councils were not included in the SADB-1999.

Responsiveness



Responsiveness is defined here to mean *the perception that a public agency has the ability to stay in touch with the needs and wants of its clients*. This means that the agency’s programmes are perceived as being based on the needs and wants of its clients. We measured public opinion by means of a question about how interested people think their representatives are in their well-being.⁴

Overall most Namibians view their institutions as responsive. Secondly, SADB-1999 respondents generally regard parliament as more responsive than local authorities. The same pattern is not present among the YPS-2000 respondents. In fact, the YPS-2000 respondents view



all three levels of government as almost equally responsive. Thirdly, the youth collectively perceive all levels of government as more responsive than does the general population.

The YPS-2000 data shows that the opinions on the various levels of government are related. The correlations between the levels are quite strong and positive. This means that respondents who perceive local authorities as responsive are also likely to see regional councils⁵ and parliament as responsive⁶. This suggests that the youth do not really distinguish between and separate the levels of government when they evaluate them, but rather that they are expressing a general belief about the system as a whole.

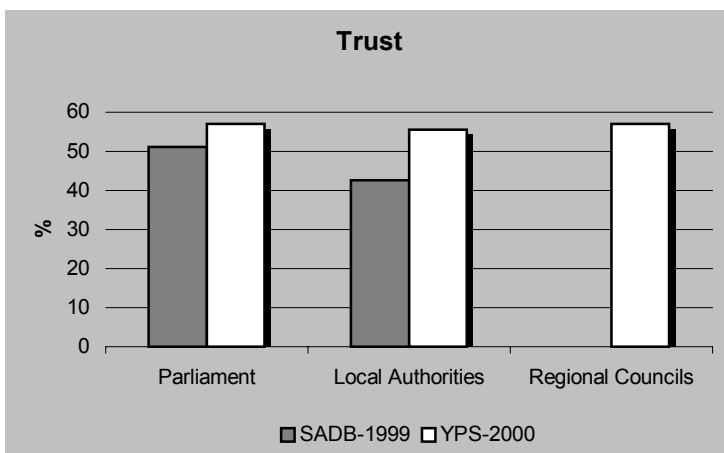
Trust

Trust refers to people's belief that their representatives and agencies truly act on their behalf and do what is right for them, the people.⁷ This means that ordinary citizens believe that they do not have to watch their representatives all day and every day. In a democracy public agencies and institutions cannot function without trust but there is also the danger that too much trust can lead to complacency among the citizenry. Complacency and specifically the belief that 'all is well and taken care of' can lead to apathy and lower participation.

Trust in the political system overall is high in both samples with the exception of local authorities in the SADB-1999 sample. Overall, the opinions in the YPS-2000 are far more positive than those in the SADB-1999 sample. This suggests that the youth are more positive in their assessment of trust than the population at large.

A second trend is that the youth express almost equal levels of trust in all levels of government. As is the case with responsiveness, they do not seem to distinguish between the various levels of government. Hence, their feelings in this regard are likely to be a general expression of trust in the political system as whole, rather than specific feelings toward each of the various levels.

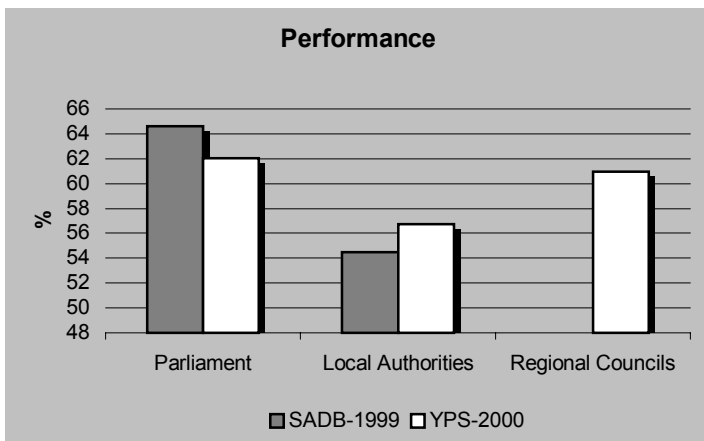
There are strong positive correlations between the attitudes of trust in the various levels of government in the YPS-2000. This means that those who trust local authorities are also likely to trust regional councils⁸ and parliament⁹. This also supports the proposition that opinions are general rather than specific, and secondly that they are geared toward the political system as a whole rather than specific levels of government.



Performance

We asked Namibians how well they thought the various levels of government have performed their tasks and duties over the past year.¹⁰ This question is, therefore, aimed at measuring perceptions on the quality of service delivery.





Some of the trends here are quite different to the previous two cases. Firstly, overall Namibians are quite happy with the performance of government at all levels. More than one-in-every-two Namibians in both samples are either satisfied or very satisfied with the way parliament, regional councils and local authorities have performed.

Secondly, the SADB-1999 data shows quite a gap between the performance of parliament and the performance of local

authorities. Although generally good, local authorities have not matched the high performance levels of parliament.

Thirdly, the youth is generally more positive about performance at each of the three levels than the general population. However, having said that, they too feel that the local authorities have been out-performed by the other two levels.

Popular opinions on the performance of all three levels correlate strongly and positively in the YPS-2000 sample. This means that those who feel more positive about the performance of local authorities are also very likely to feel the same way about the performance of regional councils¹¹ and parliament.¹²

3. Knowledge of representatives

One argument favouring decentralisation is that local representatives live and work in their constituencies and, hence, that they will be better known in their constituencies. Here data from the SADB-1999 survey is used.¹³

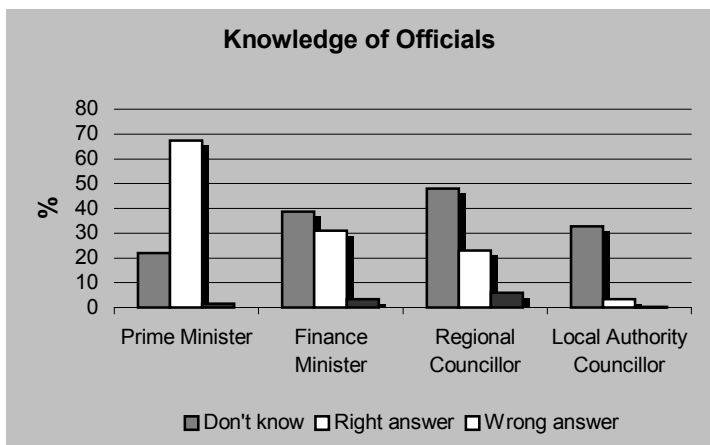
Local authority representatives are elected by means of a closed party-list¹⁴, Proportional Representation (PR) electoral system. Because voters play no formal part in the compilation of the lists, they have only one choice: vote for what the party has put together or don't vote at all.

Local authority areas do not contain clearly defined and demarcated constituencies and all are hence, multi-member constituencies.¹⁵ Such a system is often criticised for creating distance between representatives and voters. Representatives are not linked in any formal manner to a clearly defined constituency and his or her seat belongs to the party and not to him- or herself for the duration of the term in office. Party preferences are set above what might be unpopular requests for services from the community. This happens because representatives rely for re-election far more on the party than the constituency. Thus, despite the fact that local authority councillors live and work in closer proximity to their communities, one cannot assume that they will be better known than the relevant officials operating on a higher level who have had longer political lives and higher national and international profiles.

Regional council representatives, on the other hand, are elected by means of a simple plurality or first-past-the-post system (FPTP).¹⁶ They are elected from single-member constituencies¹⁷ that are clearly defined and demarcated. This type of system is associated with close contact between



representatives and voters because of its single-member constituencies. Both representatives and voters are clear on who represents whom and on what issues. Under this type of system one can assume that the representatives are well known, or at least better known, to voters.



Namibia presents a good case study to test these assumptions about the impact of the type of electoral system because it uses both the PR and FPTP systems. In this section, we will assess Namibians' knowledge of their office bearers at both local and regional level and compare these with knowledge of senior officials at the national level.

The SADB-1999 included four political office bearers in its section on political knowledge: the prime minister, the finance

minister, regional councillor and local authority councillor.¹⁸ The list is, hence, neither exhaustive nor can too strong conclusions be drawn given the fact that the names of so many officials are not tested for. The aim here is thus not to draw final conclusions of the level of political knowledge in the country, but only to provide an overview of how the various levels of government compare with each other.

It is clear that politicians at the national level are far better known than their counterparts at the sub-national levels. Also, the more senior politician at the national level, the prime minister, is best known of all. Local authority representatives are least known of all. This finding seems to support some credibility to the argument against PR systems, except that both the prime minister and the finance minister are also elected to the national assembly by means of a closed-list PR system. Therefore, the argument is not entirely conclusive. Instead, it seems as if, within Namibia, the level of seniority has much more of an impact than the type electoral system. The more senior a representative is, the more this person is likely to appear in the public limelight through the party structures, government gatherings, important occasions such as national celebrations and in the media. This seems to apply to the prime minister and to a lesser extent, the finance minister.

If we compare the 'don't know' scores for both regional and local authority councillors, we find that regional councillors are less well known than local authority councillors. That raises a serious question about the validity of the electoral systems argument. If we compare the 'correct answer' scores of the same levels of government, we see that more people could correctly name their regional councillors than their local councillors. This maybe due to the fact that local authority areas are multi-member constituencies without clearly demarcated areas of representation.

Do these findings not contradict each other? The answer is not necessarily. 'Don't knows' represent total ignorance of the representative. Total ignorance is the result of a lack of contact and/or experience with the particular representative. 'Wrong answers' on the other hand points to being misinformed. This shows that although contact might have occurred, communities are still not accurately informed about their representatives. This, one could argue, still points to a negative relationship between the representative and the represented. If we collapse the two negatives (don't knows and wrong answers) and compare these with correct answers, we find that knowledge about regional councillors is still less than that about local authority councillors.¹⁹

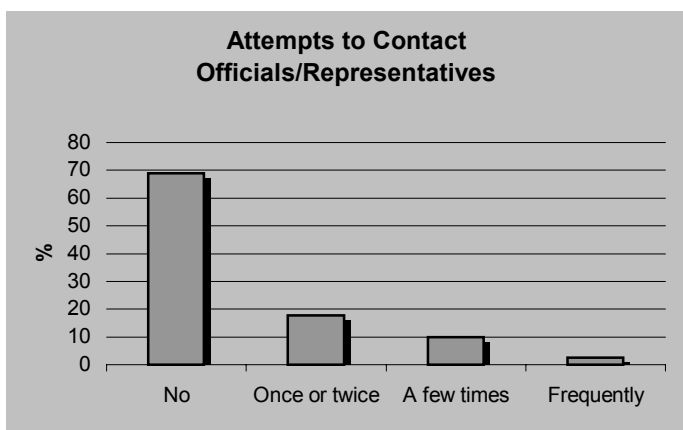
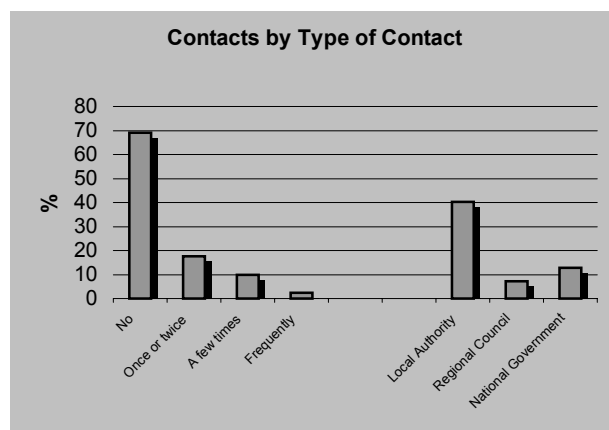


Perhaps a caveat is in order at this point. When respondents claim that they do not know the prime minister, the finance minister, their regional councillor etc. it does not necessarily mean that they do not know the individual. It is possible that the individuals are known but not their official positions or designations. But we would argue that those who know about Mr. Geingob or Mr. Mbumba, for example, but do not know that they are the prime minister and the finance minister respectively, couldn't be regarded as having high levels of political knowledge.

4. Contact with officials

The SADB-1999 also enquired about the frequency with which ordinary citizens seek contact with their various representatives: elected representatives (at all levels), government officials (at all levels), political parties, or attendance of a government or council meeting to help solve an important problem or give a personal view on something important. A second question probed for the target of the contact, i.e. the type of official contacted.

From the figure below some 70% of all Namibians have not sought any contact with any of the above-mentioned office bearers. Of those that did, the majority did so with local authority officials and representatives. Just more than 40% established contact with local authority officials and representatives. Local government, therefore, seems to be the preferred point of entry into the political system. One possible explanation is that contacts with local authorities are less costly than contacts with the other officials. What is perhaps more worrying is that regional councils are not approached that often; the second most popular point of entry is the national government although it is much less than local authorities. It is possible that regional councils' current lack of power contributes to this trend.



5. Conclusions

In this brief assessment of public opinion toward the three levels of government we have emphasised some of the attitudinal aspects relevant to the decentralisation process. This, we believe is the often forgotten component of state-building. Whereas the policy is clear on the institutional and resource components, it is not so clear about the attitudinal aspects. This requires further attention.

We showed that most people feel themselves closer to national government than to the two sub-national levels. Although all three levels score high on trust, responsiveness and performance, the opinions seem to be blanket-opinions. This means that all agencies are viewed much alike. This implies that sub-national agencies have some way to go before they will have established their own identities. We have also demonstrated that sub-national officials are not as well known to their communities, as one would have expected. Contacts with constituencies are low and sub-national



agencies and officials alike need to market themselves in order to make themselves known and promote closeness with their constituencies. It remains to be seen if increased functions and resources will provide sufficient incentives for these representatives to actively engage their constituencies.

Based on this we believe that more can be done about the attitudinal aspects of decentralisation. It is not enough to only involve the relevant sub-national agencies - sub-national communities must also be made aware of the Policy and its aims and objectives. As clients or service consumers the public has to be involved. New avenues for contact with their representatives have to be created and knowledge about sub-national agencies and representatives must be increased. Awareness levels must be raised. The outcome of these steps must promote "closeness to the people" to levels even higher than the existing ones.

This briefing paper should be seen as the first of a number of briefing papers that will deal with feelings of closeness. It raised several important questions that warrant follow investigations. These include:

- What is the impact of socio-biographical characteristics on the distribution of attitudes and opinions? The obvious and important influences to consider here include: region, gender, age, class, education and urban/rural location.
- Does political affiliation or partisanship have any effect of feelings of closeness?
- What is the relationship between feelings of closeness and the various aspects of political behaviour? Of particular importance are the possible links with political and civic participation, access to information and perceptions of political efficacy.

¹ MRLGH, 2001, **Decentralisation and Quality Governance: Issues Related to the Relationship between Regional and Local Authorities and Vice Versa**, MRLGH Discussion Document, April 3, Windhoek

² The SADB-1999 is based on a nationally representative, proportionally stratified, cluster sample and consists of 1 200 interviews from all thirteen administrative regions. Deep rural areas are represented in the sample. The YPS-2000 is based on a nationally representative, proportionally stratified, cluster sample of Namibians between the ages of 18 and 32 years. It consists of 1 200 personal interviews conducted in all thirteen administrative regions. Deep rural areas were included in the sample. Both samples were designed to produce equal male and female representation. All interviews were face-to-face interviews.

³ That is, assuming that they are properly equipped with resources and skills.

⁴ "How interested do you think _____ is in what happens to you or hearing what people like you think?"

⁵ Pearson's $r = 0.673^{**}$ Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

⁶ Pearson's $r = 0.578^{**}$ Significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed)

⁷ "How much of the time can you trust _____ to do what is right? Is it: never, some of the time, most of time, just about always or haven't you heard enough about _____ to know?"

⁸ Pearson's $r = 0.701^{**}$ Significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed)

⁹ Pearson's $r = 0.657^{**}$ Significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed)

¹⁰ "What about the way _____ has performed his/its/her job over the past twelve months? Do you: strongly disapprove, disapprove, approve, strongly approve, or haven't you heard enough about him/it/her to know?"

¹¹ Pearson's $r = 0.632^{**}$ Significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed)

¹² Pearson's $r = 0.644^{**}$ Significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed)

¹³ The YPS-2000 survey did not include political knowledge questions.

¹⁴ Closed-lists are party lists drawn up by the party or certain key officials within the party. Ordinary members and supporters of the party do not have a direct say in which candidates are listed or where they are placed on the list. Open-lists are the opposite: party members and supporters do have a direct influence on the nomination and placement of candidates on the party's list.

¹⁵ Multi-member constituencies are constituencies in which more than one representative are elected to represent each constituency. In the case of local authorities in Namibia, the entire local authority area is treated as a single constituency. All local authority councillors are elected to represent this (single) constituency.

¹⁶ The notion of first-past-the post is often used to describe simple plurality or majoritarian electoral systems. These are electoral systems that appoint winners on the basis of most votes achieved. Losing candidates or parties, even if they collectively share among them most votes cast in the constituency do not achieve any form of representation. Representation is reserved for only the



single candidate or party that wins by means of the simple plurality or majority of votes. Hence, the expression of ‘winner-takes-all’ that is associated with this type of electoral system.

¹⁷ Single-member constituencies are constituencies in which only the candidate or party with the most votes gets to represent the constituency. All others are considered losers and are eliminated from representation.

¹⁸ *“Let us speak about the political system in this country. First of all, can you tell me who presently holds the following offices: prime minister, minister of finance, your regional councillor, local councillor?”*

¹⁹ For regional councillors: Don’t knows and wrong answers combined = 53.7%. For local authority councillors: Don’t knows and wrong answers = 33.05%.

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