

International Conference on Devolution in Kenya



Portraying Devolution

Coordinated by IFRA Nairobi

**12-13 June 2018,
Nairobi**



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Call for proposals
Deadline: 1st of March 2018

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PORTRAYING DEVOLUTION: LEADERS, POLICIES, IDENTITIES

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Historical Background

Since the 1960s, Kenya politics has been shaped in the by an original debate on the forms of the independent State and the idea of political devolution. In the late 1990s-early 2000s, this debate has been reactivated by the rewriting of the Constitution. Its mandate for national reconciliation, peace and cohesion was reinforced after the post-electoral violence of 2007-2008 that led to a call for nation-building from the international community, human rights organizations and activists (Maupeu 2013). This violence heavily influenced the provisions in the 2010 constitution (Kasfir 2015) with the implementation of devolution supposed to be at the core of democratization.

Political devolution of power to the country's new constituencies (regrouped in 47 Counties) has been promoted as a fair & balanced system that could enhance democratization and good governance in Kenya (World Bank 1999, 2015). On the positive side, funds have been devolved to the local governments, the money for development is available in faster and easier ways, participatory processes have been put in place, national and local governments are collaborating in implementing new policies and infrastructure projects in the regions. The 2013 and 2017 electoral campaigns have also shown that local election have mobilized people to vote: local leaders are very popular and their seats heavily contested, especially in the governor race (Cheeseman, Lynch & Willis 2016).

On the other hand, devolution has brought a lot of critics (for an overview: International Crisis Group 2016, 2017). First, the possibilities of corruption have multiplied by the new political seats and their respective funds. The public expenditure is high to manage this multi-layered administration (CIC 2014). These local bureaucracies are somehow blurry for its citizens: the colonial legacy as well as the ghost of the former provincial administration system are still haunted these (not so) new territorial agencies (Hassan, 2015). Moreover, the Counties seem to be at the very core of an open-ended process of ethnic construction and politicization of ethnic and subethnic groups (Lynch 2011). Since devolution was implemented, a broader reinvention of the identity of local communities by and with their local leaders is taking place, as well as a showcasing of the significance their county within the Kenyan nation. With the implementation of devolution, socio-economic negotiations and political claims at a county level are increasingly taking shape on an ethno-cultural basis, nurtured by communities' long-term narratives of historical injustices (Lynch 2011 & 2012). Many politicians and community leaders have become more and more vocal within the national political scene and make use of the devolved system to address land issues and inequalities affecting many Counties who were deprived from economic prosperity both by the colonial and post-colonial governments. There is an urgent need for academics and Kenyan citizens to understand the concrete role played by the new County positions under the new constitution. Indeed, the question of the making of ethnic identities is not new in Kenya, but the making of these ethnic identities within the Counties to benefit from the new devolved system is an issue that should be addressed here.

In that perspective, this conference will look at local leaders, their policies & projects put in place on the ground, as well as the political identity of these new electoral constituencies.

Conference rationale

A few reports and papers have been written on devolution since 2013 (see bibliography). These preliminary publications testify to the desire to build a broader knowledge of devolution, capable of offering rich insights to its concrete implementation and consequences on the ground. What will be at stake is questioning, with an empirical dimension, the administrative reformulation of the interface and the relationship between the State, its political elites and its citizens. Many questions need to be addressed: to what extent devolution is the cornerstone of local development, resources sharing and power redistribution? How is local development taking place on the ground? What are the new gains and losses within this new system? Has corruption been devolved? Are the local elites elected in the new devolved positions really “new”? Does devolution change or reinforces the traditional clientelist networking? To what extent does it affect the shaping of ethnic identity on the grassroots, the making of (land, social, economic, political) claims on the ground? How does it transform the political imaginaries and the relationship of the citizens to their local elite and to the State?

Panel Discussions

This conference aims at participating in engaging with the understanding of devolution by portraying:

1) The local Leaders

The Kenyan political sphere has been shaped by families, dynasties and networks of elites that belong to the upper social and economic class since independence. Nevertheless, the disillusionment with politicians and politics has always been confirmed by elections and operates in some ambivalent ways, since parliamentary candidates and county-level figures have been regularly “sent home” by the voters (Grignon 1999; Hornsby & Throup 1992). This conference aims at drawing portraits of the (new?) local elite, from the « cadet groups » (educated Youth and Women that accessed to power through the positions of MCAs, Senator, Women Representative, Governors) to the old and traditional « Big men ». The MP position, which used to be the only politician « on the ground », is now topped by the very attractive position of Governor (Cheeseman, Lynch & Willis 2016). The proposed contributions will have to pay a particular attention to Member of County Assembly (MCAs). The MCAs are proving to be one of the most attractive position within the devolved system, as a first link between the citizens and the State at the core of reframed localized patronage networks. A sociological portrait of these local leaders (their economic and social status, their political career, their (ethnic) identification and belonging to the local elite, their style of campaign, their electoral promises, their relationship with the State and government networks) will enlighten the changes or/and the continuities of the political elite (Connan 2014).

2) Public Policies.

There are a lot of good intentions in devolution, but it very much lacks concrete results of how the redistribution of resources and power is achieved (CIC 2014; report of the Attorney General 2015). The discussion should also address local governance through the projects of the leaders and the dynamics that shape the production of local policies & governance (Boone 2003). These projects they have (promised to) achieve through public policies range from public toilets, market places, boda-boda shelters to pay rises, title-deeds, improvement of local infrastructures such as hospital, roads, schools, and so on. At the same time, many “community” projects are at the centre of power-grab and power-play on the ground, which leads to the question of who really controls governance & the development money at county level.

3) Political Identities.

With the new deal of devolution, many politicians and community leaders have become more and more vocal within the national political scene. They make use of the devolved system to address by themselves land issues and inequalities affecting many Counties deprived from economic prosperity both by the colonial and post-colonial governments (Josse-Durand 2016). Socio-economic negotiations and political claims at a county level are increasingly taking shape on an ethno-cultural basis, nurtured by communities' long-term narratives of historical injustices (Lynch 2011 & 2012). In that perspective, the political (and/or ethnic) identity they inspire or invigorate to the County should be enlighten through the recognition of local heroes and heroines, hall of fames, naming of streets, parks, squares museums, touristic and historical sites, specific needs or strengths, armorial bearings, slogans, motto and guiding principles (Coombes, Hughes & Karega Munene 2013; Omenya & Larmont 2017).

This conference will bring together Kenyan and international researchers to conduct a necessary reflection on aspects of devolution in Kenya: aspects of continuity and change, such as the governance at a national and local level since the implementation of devolution, the nature of the relationship of the local elite with the citizens and the reframing of narratives of grievances at a county level.

This conference aims to go beyond this concrete presentation of who & what makes devolution in Kenya, to address deeper societal and academic issues and to engage with a debate on the models of devolution and the political and social impacts of devolved systems of governance. The political and historical background of devolution, the impact of devolution on corruption and patronage networks goes beyond Kenya since it engages with a broader analysis of the relationship between citizens, local elites and the State. Therefore, multi-site surveys or comparative approaches anchored in devolved systems of government in Kenya, (East-)Africa and/or Western countries are very welcomed.

Panel discussion will be shaped later on by these topics.

*Those interested in contributing should send **200 to 300 words** abstract to Chloe Josse-Durand, Deputy Director of IFRA, by **1st of March 2018**. IFRA will help in funding the flight tickets, transports and accommodation in Nairobi.*

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