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TASAF - a support or an obstacle to local government reform?

Introduction

In response to pressure in the Parliament, the Government has recently stated that it is considering extending the Tanzania Social Action Fund (TASAF) to all districts as from 2005. Since inception in 2000, only 40 out of 86 have benefited from the US\$ 60 million World Bank funded programme. With an extension of TASAF to all districts, there is clearly a need to ensure harmonisation with the Local Government Reform Programme and other aspects of the decentralisation policy. In this note I will review some of the experiences with TASAF at the district level, as observed during fieldwork in the formative process research project in 2003, in view of key objectives of the Reform - administrative efficiency, democratic decentralisation and poverty reduction.

Studies of social funds in other countries have concluded that they weaken the existing local government structures, and tend to support political favouritism by providing politicians with projects that feed their support bases. Do these conclusions apply also to TASAF?

Administrative efficiency

We find that TASAF looks administratively well integrated with the councils and seems not to weaken the administrative structure.

In terms of manpower, TASAF has an extensive corps of district-level officers. There is one TASAF accountant in each district. In addition, each TASAF district has a project coordinator and up to 40 staff hired on a part-time basis to facilitate participatory planning in the villages. It is an important feature of TASAF that the district project coordinator is selected among the council employees, appointed by the District Executive Director, and fully paid by the Council. TASAF equips the coordinator with a vehicle, a computer, a fax machine and a photo-copy machine.

In terms of project management and monitoring, the Council is fully involved. The TASAF District Steering Committee consists of the District Commissioner, the District Executive Director, plus a handful of councillors (council chairperson, women councillor, chairperson of standing committees, as well as councillors from the piloting projects/wards).

Democratic decentralisation

From our preliminary observations we find that political favouritism is a potential issue with TASAF. Hence, the effects on the efforts of the Local Government Reform to build more democratic and accountable councils need further attention. The way the TASAF District Steering Committee is organised may give local politicians undue influence over the selection of beneficiary communities. In a district there is usually not more than one project operating in each ward. However, we found in one district that the ward of the council chairperson was the only one that had received two projects. Moreover, the TASAF project in a ward was usually located to the village where the councillor comes from.



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Normally, people are informed that projects are gifts from the Government and not based on loans from the World Bank, as stated by a district council officer: "TASAF is only a funding mechanism, so we say it is not a donor agency project - it is part of the Government". A head teacher in a village benefiting from TASAF confirmed that people think TASAF is a CCM/government programme, and he argued that TASAF probably helps to increase people's support to the Government. A TASAF officer interviewed acknowledged that "the politicisation problem is there", but he added that "some opposition parties claim that TASAF builds popularity for the ruling party, but that is not true." Nonetheless, in some cases favouritism may influence TASAF's project selection.

Poverty reduction

Does TASAF help reduce poverty? We observed that there is clearly a social sector bias in TASAF with the main component being construction of social service facilities through the Community Development Initiative. The other main component is a Public Works Programme which appears to have been successful in involving the poorest-of-the poor and the women. Naturally, they are the targeted beneficiaries, but they are also actively co-managing projects. This was seen in one particular village visited where most of the people in the public works project were women - widows or single mothers. The chairman and members of the project committee were among those ranked as the poorest in the village.

In our view, social services and social security (e.g. public works) are more emphasised than 'economic' services. Although one of the aims of TASAF is to build private entrepreneurship at the community level, the scope for that seems limited.

One reason could be the planning methods applied, relying on 'Participatory Rural Appraisals' (PRA), which seems to reinforce a receiving mentality. A PRA team of 3-4 extension officers visits a village for five days, establishes focus groups and asks people to identify the needs of the community. There is a vote in the village assembly on what appears as a 'shopping-list'. A local government officer expressed concern with the quality of this type of exercise: "It is supposed to be bottom-up, but that is not the case. People at the grassroots level just list their problems, and want us deliver it".

Furthermore, the PRA teams use a rather narrow definition of 'poor', which subsequently is used as an eligibility criterion for public works. Local leaders are asked to make a ranking of all the people with a score of minimum 5 points for the poorest and 60 points for the wealthiest. Only those who receive 5 to 8 points are listed as 'poor'. One Village Chairman told us that he considered 75 per cent of the village population as poor, but that only half of them had been allowed to enrol in the public works project. Some raised the concern that this might affect the social and political unity of the village, not least because paid public works will undermine self-help activities based on non-paid community work.

Preliminary conclusions

There are indications that TASAF might promote political favouritism at the local level - i.e. that it may be used as a resource for re-election by local politicians, that it may favour certain villages against others, and may introduce non-inclusive arrangements of social assistance in the communities. However, there was little evidence that this was due to deliberate choices and actions by TASAF officers. To the contrary, the officers seem to favour political neutrality and inclusion of all citizens.

This points at a potential conflict between politicians and TASAF officers. The latter express the view that councillors are needed only at the early stages to give legitimacy to the selection of beneficiary communities and projects, which otherwise should follow 'technical' criteria. They want to be in the forefront of a reformed, people-oriented public service. This also means fighting a well-ingrained bureaucratic mentality, as stated by one TASAF officer: "Many district bureaucrats consider community people to be stupid. That leads to less transparency and more mismanagement of funds. Something you will not find in the TASAF projects".

It appears that TASAF will support the social objectives of the Local Government Reform. It may also push local governments into being better partners for the communities and becoming more effective in delivery of services and public works. However, TASAF may become an obstacle to the political objectives of the Reform. It does not seem to enhance democratic decentralisation, exemplified by officers' ambiguous relationships with the councillors. A final note should be made, however, that these are only preliminary observations. Review of many more cases and districts are needed before we can arrive at firm conclusions.

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