GOVERNANCE OF LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA:
WHO ARE THE DANCERS AND DO THEY ACT ‘IN CONCERT’?

A.H.J. (Bert) Helmsing

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a critical reflection on recent theories of local and regional economic development.¹ One of the central messages of this growing literature concerns a positive sum game of the governance of local economic development. That is to say, that actors such as entrepreneurs and their associations, communities and their organisations and local government agencies have an interest and an ability to work together, to undertake public, collective and joint action, to generate synergies and to commit resources through partnerships in order to promote local economic development.

In this paper we will argue that the local governance problem in Sub Saharan Africa may be more complicated that this literature suggests. If we present the governance problem as a dance, then not all dancers may be present on the dance floor and the ones who are there may not be dancing the same dance.

The paper examines i) the position and strengths of local governments which received important impulses through decentralisation policies, ii) the roles of business associations which in Africa have been growing in recent years, and, iii) community associational activity which is widespread in Sub Saharan Africa.

The paper concludes that there are relatively few actors ‘on the dance floor’ and that they are dancing according to their own scripts or rhythms. There is as yet little ‘acting in concert’. Growth coalitions between local governments and private sector or between government and community associations, as they have been found elsewhere, may not yet exist in Africa. The paper calls for more empirical work on case studies of the governance of local economic development in Africa.

¹An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Second RLDS International Policy Research Workshop on Local Economic Development and Globalisation, organised by the Regional & Local Development Studies Programme, Addis Ababa University, in Addis Ababa, 28-29 April 2003.
CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................... 1

2 LOCALISED NATURE OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ................................ 3
   Local capabilities of an area ..................................................................................... 8

3 CONDITIONS FOR LED IN AFRICA ..................................................................... 9

4 DECENTRALISATION, LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND GOVERNANCE .... 13
   Decentralisation, local government and governance in SSA .............................. 15
   Local governments and local economic development ..................................... 19

5 ENTREPRENEURS AND BUSINESS ASSOCIATIONS ................................. 21
   Entrepreneurial groups ......................................................................................... 23
   Degree of associability .......................................................................................... 25
   BAs and (de)centralisation of state structures .................................................... 26

6 COMMUNITIES AND COMMUNITY BASED ASSOCIATIONS .................... 28

7 BRINGING LINES TOGETHER: COMPETENCE FOR LED POLICY OR
   ACTING ‘IN CONCERT’ ...................................................................................... 37

REFERENCES .............................................................................................................. 41

APPENDICES ............................................................................................................... 46