

Decentralization and Local Economic Development in Four Southern African Countries

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ABSTRACT This paper examines the process of decentralization and its link with local economic development (LED) like Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The paper reviews literature on decentralization, local economic development and the experience of the four countries using the lenses of participatory development. Most countries have decentralized as a way of democratizing governance and local development. Regrettably, in some cases decentralization has not been embraced voluntarily because of its promises of better governance but as a prescriptive measure to meet the demands of the donor community. This has resulted in decentralization in form but not in substance. This paper discusses the trends in restructuring and the alternatives that can ensure that policy intentions are realized. The paper concludes that constitutional provisions for the authority and functions of decentralized structures are key to the realization of local economic development. Despite associated challenges, decentralization provides better room for local economic development than a centralized government.