



## **Presidentialism In Decentralized Governance: More Local Leadership But At What Cost?**

### **THE PROPOSITION**

The modality for electing local leaders is a crucial feature in the design of local governance structures which has a direct impact on local democracy and the management of local affairs for achieving the MDGs. As part of a recent trend, more countries are making the selection of the heads of local governments subject to direct popular choice, which has resulted in an increased need for new accountability mechanisms. UNDP believes that directly elected local leaders can potentially improve local democratic governance and service delivery by strengthening leadership and making local governments more legitimate and accountable. However, the combined effect of more power vested directly in the people, more control given to the elected heads (e.g., over the administration), and councils exerting their influence on local governance in new ways, has resulted in the need for new forms of checks and balances. UNDP works to develop context specific knowledge among our partners to allow for informed design choices and to strengthen the capacity for implementation.

### **THE CONTEXT**

How the heads (chairs, executives or mayors) and deputy heads of local councils are elected varies from country to country (in federal states such as India, also even from state to state) and in many cases also between the different levels of local government within a country. The fundamental difference between electoral systems is the whether the leader is elected subject to direct popular choice or indirectly, as elected by the members of the local councils. In the variations of indirect election, council leaders can be elected based on which party has the most votes/seats and it is not uncommon to see some central government or royal prerogative in selection ranging from endorsement to actual selection. The rationale put forward in favour of direct elections forms the basis of argument for a presidential system. Such a system lends greater *legitimacy* for the local leader – a head who is directly elected is more clearly the preferred individual choice of local citizens than one who has been indirectly elected by a limited number of councillors. It provides for clearer *separation of powers* and functions between executive and the legislative branches at the local level – enabling heads to operate more independently of the partisan interests of their councils. It strengthens *accountability* – indirectly elected council leaders may be more accountable to their immediate constituency (i.e. the electoral college or council members that have selected them) than to local citizens at large. Last, but not least, it allows for local *leadership* and a more effective local government allowing the heads to ‘get on with their jobs’. In this sense recent trends were to some extent foreseeable; as decentralization has moved ahead and more resources have been assigned to local governments, more focus has been given to what is perceived as the disadvantages of indirect elections.

### **THE EVIDENCE**

Change in governance, including change of electoral systems, is arguably more common at the local level than at the national level since the ultimate decision-makers are most often not stakeholders themselves. Relatively speaking, there is a trend at this level toward the direct election of chairs. This is the general development in [Europe](#) and [Asia](#), for example. Direct election is already a common system in many – in particular urban – local governments in [Japan](#), [the U.S.A.](#) and [Latin America](#). Whereas little conclusive evidence exists, an emerging consensus (see e.g. [UNDP Background Paper on Representation in Decentralized Governance \(2005\)](#) and [Congress of the Council of Europe Recommendation 151 \(2004\)](#)) suggests that direct election has its drawbacks as well. For example, it can provide the opportunity for excessive power to be wielded by the directly elected heads who may see themselves (and be seen) as much more than a *primus inter pares*. Such a powerful influence over local affairs may alienate other council members, and lead to political stalemates in decision-making and thus local service delivery. Initial lessons from [Thailand and Pakistan](#), e.g., where direct election was implemented in 2004 and 2005, seem to reconfirm the need for systems to ensure checks and balances. With the power to recall transferred from the councils to the people in Thailand, more participatory monitoring mechanisms are needed. In both countries more power has been vested in the upwards accountability structures to governors/ministers at provincial level. In the context of tsunami relief and recovery, the local executives in Thailand were empowered to move ahead rapidly but in the words of critics ‘going it alone’. Not unlike their national equivalents, local ‘presidentialism’ is more dependent on the character of the individual leader than are indirectly elected heads. Overall it seems, a ‘good’ directly elected chair is likely to be more effective than a ‘good’ indirectly elected chair but a ‘bad’ directly elected chair is likely to be much ‘worse’ than their indirectly elected predecessors – implying that identifying and establishing appropriate new forms of accountability mechanisms and checks and balances will be even more crucial.

*\*This HDV summarizes findings from the regional initiative on Local Democracy in Asia: Representation in Decentralized Governance*

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