

Amadou Toumani Touré

President of the Republic of Mali

Allow me first of all, to sincerely thank the Swiss authorities and the organisers of this conference for the kind invitation extended to me, to share with you some thoughts inspired by the Malian experience in the field of decentralisation and good governance.

The choice of St Gallen and Switzerland as host the International Conference on Federalism 2002 is not fortuitous. Actually, Switzerland is among the most ancient federations in the world, and its cultural and linguistic diversity is universally recognised.

Decentralisation, governance, and federalism constitute major issues in this dawning century, because they convey a message of democracy, peaceful coexistence, and stability. They also represent a strategy and an opportunity for conflict management and resolution in our modern states which are unfortunately facing many conflicts with causes more or less linked with issues of governance.

Decentralisation, currently implemented with determination in Mali, is part of a process to which all the political authorities of the country since independence have been striving to contribute. And to go back further, before colonisation, we have to renew an administrative practice, which in every respect, could be considered as largely decentralised.

The Federation of Mali created by Sudan and Senegal (1959-1969) proves this constant will to unity. The early collapse of this entity, made Sudan

declare its independence on 22 September 1960, under the name of Republic of Mali (in memory of this vast Empire of twelfth and sixteenth centuries).

From independence until the present day, the different constitutions of the Republic of Mali have promoted the concept of decentralisation.

This declared will to see populations take their fate into their own hands is inextricably linked with the permanent commitment to work towards the realisation of African unity.

The Constitution of 25 February 1992, in Chapter XV on the African Union, states in Article 17: "The Republic of Mali may conclude with any African state association of Community agreements, comprising total or partial renunciation to the sovereignty in view of realising the African unity."

The signing of the National Pact on 11 April 1992, which put an end to the Arab-Tuareg rebellion in the north of Mali and strengthened our democratic achievement, was a key factor accelerating the process of decentralisation in our country.

Mali's choice of decentralisation as mode of administrative organisation and development strategy is justified by our conviction that development is not the business of the state alone.

It should mobilise all the populations in an organisational framework which respects and increases the value of local specialities, and which grants them means to participate in decisions that daily concern them and to control those who implement them.

Actually the state, having neither the capacities nor the means to ensure the monopoly of economic and social development of the nation that it took upon itself long ago, is withdrawing to give the space for initiatives to decentralised communities and to private individuals and legal entities.

So, we should no longer ask the question: “Why decentralisation?” But rather: “How decentralise?”

How do we decentralise to respond to the concerns of the populations? At present, there are 703 Communes of Mali, most of them are rural with an average 10 to 15 villages governed by elected councils through universal suffrage. They are responsible, under the control of state trusteeship and with its support, for the organisation and management of several services of proximity.

This reform is not an end in itself. Its goal is to contribute to the improvement of the living conditions of Malian citizens mainly in rural areas. That is why we directed our first efforts towards essential services such as hygiene, elementary care, basic education, drinkable water supply, protection of natural resources, all of which are henceforth greatly decentralised in their organisation. These services have a fundamental importance in our country because they are at the heart of our strategy in the fight against poverty.

Decentralisation constitutes a first important step, but it is not enough. For us, it simply covers the most important site of more profound and global institutional reforms, which remain a requirement for a sustainable development.

What result and what longevity can decentralisation have if it is not accompanied by a reorganisation of state administration and a transfer of resources, which give to local collectivities the appropriate means to offer better services to users? What credibility does decentralisation limited to transfer of state power have, for local communities without any window of opportunity on what we commonly call civil society? What legitimacy can decentralisation have without a competent local elite to implement transparent management?

These are some of the questions raised by the Malian experience which may provide food for thought during the debates.

Decentralisation produces an effect only when accompanied by its essential corollary, devolution, which presupposes a significant reallocation of powers between the different levels of state administration.

The issue of financial resources has arisen in more difficult terms for our country. In fact, decentralisation is taking place in a context of poor financial resources, which limits the possibilities of state budget transfers to local communities. Indeed, it is a constraint; but we also consider it as a challenge for which decentralisation proves to be an efficient strategy for mobilisation of local resources.

To improve the financial capacity of local collectivities, the Malian state established the National Agencies for Investment in Territorial Communities, which is supported by several friendly countries and partners to whom I take this opportunity to express all my gratitude. It is for me the appropriate place

to invite each of your countries to examine methods of decentralised cooperation.

As regards the case of Mali, the opening towards civil society is necessary and indeed essential. In fact, Mali gets strength from traditional powers and wealth from multiple initiatives as well as from the community and socio-professional organisations that grew out of the democratic advent.

Decentralisation requires a better integration and participation for all these actors in the management of local affairs.

That is why the division into communes has been the subject of an innovative strategy that has granted a significant role to inter-community concentration in Mali.

Without conferring a legal entity on the basic community that comprises the villages, decentralisation in Mali is giving an important place to them in the process of decision making at the local level. They are consulted about the organisation of local economic activities, the establishment and management of equipment, as well as land management.

Lastly, the issue of local capacities and good governance is at the heart of decentralisation and permeates the whole field of local governance. With this framework the state is implementing an extensive training program targeting the local representatives.

This issue of governance reaches beyond the local communities to the administration and state as a whole.

Reforms of such scope are not implemented without difficulties. Among those difficulties I would like to emphasise the support capacity of the federal

administration, which has been built through a long process and by poor means. On one hand it hinders the effective realisation of competencies and means transfer, on the other hand it enables the monitoring function of legality which is crucial for the confidence of the citizens in the elected representatives.

Moreover, territorial reorganisation has indeed been the occasion for greater mobilisation and concentration. But it has also caused the resurgence of certain local conflicts which if they are not settled by means of dialogue, risk jeopardising development efforts and even local social cohesion.

This type of difficulty is inherent in the process of decentralisation which must itself establish settlement mechanisms for conflicts. We are fully aware that it is a long-term process.