

# The interface between the role and significance of the Rwanda Association of Local Government Authorities (RALGA) and Rwanda's decentralisation mandate

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## ABSTRACT

*Decentralisation is considered as one of the most effective ways to ensure good local governance. This is despite the fact that the process has been unsuccessful in a number of countries. National associations of local authorities have claimed to play a role in facilitating decentralisation processes. This article aims to contextualise the decentralisation process in Rwanda. It discusses the role of local government associations in general before singling out the case of the Rwandese Association of Local Government Authorities (RALGA), in particular. To provide insight, its origin, evolution, functioning and significance in facilitating the decentralisation process in Rwanda is explored. The article concludes that RALGA has played a positive role in the effective implementation of Rwanda's decentralisation process. The association has played a key role in creating a conducive environment for its members to accomplish their responsibilities towards the decentralisation mandate. According to the mandate, local authorities are accountable to the state and the local communities they serve. In conclusion, the article proposes a review of the interface between the role and significance of RALGA and Rwandan decentralisation.*

## INTRODUCTION

Globally, many countries have embraced decentralisation, According to Manor (1999:1) it "has quietly become a fashion of our time". However, the author points out that the pace of implementing the required reforms has not led to the expected increased efficiency, effective community participation and private sector contribution (Manor 1999:1).



Although the decentralisation process involves a variety of stakeholders, local authorities are key actors and beneficiaries to a certain extent. Local authorities often operate within a complex, fragmented broader governmental framework. As such, they need to create a well-coordinated, inclusive channel to express their views. For this purpose, local authorities in many countries have set up national associations as platforms to facilitate inter-authority communication, but mostly to speak as a uniform voice. RALGA was established within this context.

RALGA has initiated concrete interventions – especially in the areas of advocacy and capacity building – to fulfill its mandate and to facilitate a strong support network for its members and partners based on a high level of ownership, trust and credibility. However, the association has admitted that much still needs to be done to further sustain the decentralisation process according to generally accepted decentralisation theories. Further improvement is still needed to streamline sectoral decentralisation, increase technical competence, provide the required tools, as well as to strengthen fiscal decentralisation and financial autonomy to execute the assigned functions effectively.

This article explores the interface between RALGA's role and decentralisation mandate within the Rwandan local governance context. Furthermore, it contextualises the decentralisation process in Rwanda and discusses the role of local government associations (LGA) in general, and RALGA in particular. RALGA's origin, evolution, functioning and significance in facilitating the decentralisation process in Rwanda are also discussed.

The methodology entails a desktop analysis of literature and official documents to conceptualise the area of investigation. For Babbie and Mouton (2005 in Auriacombe 2006:632), conceptualisation refers to “the process of specifying the vague and mental imagery of our concepts (and) sorting out the kinds of observations and measurements that will be appropriate for our research”. At this level, the focus is shifted from a conceptual paradigm to earmarking different variables and indicators (Auriacombe 2006:632). A variable refers to descriptive or analytical attributes that can take on various values under different conditions. In turn, an indicator provides a concrete, measurable, indirect value to an otherwise immeasurable concept (Auriacombe 2006:632).

The article has certain limitations, and, as such, additional systematic empirical research needs to be conducted with regard to streamlining sectoral decentralisation, increasing technical competencies, providing the needed tools, as well as strengthening fiscal decentralisation and financial autonomy to execute the assigned functions effectively.

## **CONTEXTUALISING THE DECENTRALISATION PROCESS IN RWANDA**

After the genocide against the Tutsis in 1994, Rwanda's transitional government carried out extensive consultations with citizens, all categories of development stakeholders including society opinion leaders and experts. The aim was to understand the reasons for the genocide against the Tutsis, as well as how this page could be turned permanently. Poor governance was identified as one of the root causes. Subsequently, it was decided that decentralisation would be the best way to instil good governance, as it would give Rwandans full control of their destiny.

This resulted in the country's Decentralisation Policy, which was formulated in May 2000. The aim was to make the districts and City of Kigali autonomous local governments with their own set functions. Furthermore, the policy aimed to delegate as many functions as possible to the lowest administrative entities. In 2003, this was entrenched in the Rwandan Constitution under Article 167 (Government of Rwanda 2003:167).

The first pillar of Rwanda's Vision 2020 titled "Good governance and a capable state" highlights that the state is responsible for ensuring good governance. Notably, this includes accountability, transparency and efficiency in deploying scarce resources. According to Vision 2020, the state should also respect democratic structures and processes, adhere to the rule of law and protect human rights. Grassroots-level participation will continue to be promoted through the decentralisation process. Through their involvement in the decision-making process, local communities are able to address the issues that affect them (Government of Rwanda 2012:10).

The revised National Decentralisation Policy states that, "Rwanda's Decentralisation Policy was inspired by the fundamental principles of human rights, dignity, freedom and development that had been violated until 1994" (Ministry of Local Government 2012:10). This focus on fundamental human rights is enshrined in the National Constitution of 2003 (as amended to date) and operationalised through national legislation and several policies. Key aspects include:

- respect for, and upholding of human rights and equality;
- spearheading a spirit of national unity and reconciliation;
- eliminating all forms of discrimination;
- upholding individuals' right to participate in government and development through community involvement and democratic, free and fair elections and adhering to the rule of law;
- seeking solutions to all problems through dialogue and consensus; and
- upholding and promoting positive traditional values of the Rwandan society (Ministry of Local Government 2012:10).

The national Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy 2 (EDPRS 2), discusses decentralisation under "Foundational and Cross-cutting Issues" (Rwanda Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning 2012:89). According to the strategy, the decentralisation process resulted in the creation of districts. Subsequently, districts are responsible for a range of services and they have committed to ensuring quality services. Through their involvement, these districts will continue to play an integral role in Rwanda's development process moving forward. Furthermore, districts play a key role in deepening and sustaining grassroots-based democratic governance and promoting equitable local development (Rwanda Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning 2012:89).

The EDPRS 2 stresses that, "This will be done by enhancing citizen participation and strengthening the local government system, while maintaining effective functional and mutually accountable linkages between central and local government entities, thereby forming an important element of Accountable Governance" (Rwanda Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning 2012:89). As such, the EDPRS 2 focuses on the following strategic areas:

- implementing local economic development (LED) strategies to ensure that municipalities are financially strong;

- focusing on participatory, democratic and accountable local governance systems;
- building capacity to facilitate effective local service delivery;
- ensuring efficient services delivery through further sectoral decentralisation;
- leveraging regional integration to expand opportunities, local economic empowerment, as well as cross-border trade and security;
- facilitating national unity, cohesion and peace through well-planned and successfully implemented local systems
- using information and communication technology (ICT) to deliver efficient and effective services;
- empowering citizens through participation; and
- promoting transparency and accountability (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning 2013:89).

As the decentralisation process continued to focus on empowering its citizens, it has proved to be the most effective mechanism for improving Rwanda's status quo. According to the Rwandan government, decentralisation is an appropriate platform to mobilise citizens, nurture leadership and eradicate poverty. The government hopes to use decentralisation as an avenue to transform Rwanda into a wealthier, healthier and happier nation. Furthermore, it is seen as a tool to facilitate unity and social cohesion. Importantly, decentralisation is used to bolster socio-economic transformation, as envisaged in Vision 2020 and beyond, by mobilising its citizens to use their own potential, as well as the natural and socio-cultural resources that are at their disposal (MINALOC 2012:23).

Rwanda adopted a phased approach process to implement its decentralisation policy. The first phase focused on ensuring democratic leadership and creating a platform to nurture leaders, including women, the youth and previously marginalised groups.

The second phase focused on strengthening local government structures by implementing both minor tweaks and major reforms, such as the 2006 territorial reforms. This focus on continuous improvements provided an opportunity to create accountable service delivery structures – especially for the poor and vulnerable. The roles and responsibilities at all levels were streamlined, especially with regard to local governments (districts, sectors, cells), while more adequate financing and staffing arrangements were operationalised (Ministry of Local (MINALOC) Government 2006:1–2).

The third phase concentrated on sustaining the momentum and ensuring sustainable development. This phase also focused on creating stronger, more autonomous local governments that are capable of sustaining the democratisation process and fast-tracking socio-economic transformation. During this phase, there was a strong focus on harnessing people's creative potential and optimising resources. The structures, systems and mechanisms put in place were reinforced further, as Rwanda had not yet achieved the level of citizen empowerment that was envisaged. Undeniably, citizen involvement still needs to be improved in many regions, while new challenges emerge on a continuous basis.

Firstly, the strategic plan for Rwanda's decentralisation (Ministry of Local Government (MINALOC) 2012:24) needs to be used as a framework to promote good governance and service delivery. The higher-level echelons of government have a subsidiary function. As such, it only performs tasks that cannot be undertaken effectively at the lower level. Secondly, there is a strong focus on respecting, preserving and upholding the principle of

national unity and equitable development to avoid discriminative development at a national level. The aforementioned principle is linked to a focus on promoting, adhering to and respecting the separation of power between political and administrative/technical authority. Importantly, this should be reflected in the structures and functional linkages. With regard to roles and responsibilities, actors should help avoid duplication, overlaps and conflicts that undermine good governance and development. Rwanda's Decentralisation Strategic Plan has the following objectives:

- To enhance and sustain citizens' participation in initiating, making, implementing, monitoring and evaluating decisions and plans that affect them by transferring power, authority and resources from central to local government and lower levels. This entails ensuring that all levels have adequate capacity and are motivated to promote genuine participation.
- To promote and entrench a culture of accountability and transparency in governance and service delivery. This includes strengthening national and local accountability mechanisms to make them more relevant, credible, conducive, supportive/attractive to all citizens, leaders and non-state entities.
- To fast-track and sustain equitable LED in order to improve fiscal autonomy and employment levels, as well as reduce poverty, by empowering local communities and governments to explore and utilise local potentials, prioritise and proactively engage in economic transformation activities at local, national and regional levels, as well as ensure fiscal discipline.
- To enhance effectiveness in the planning, monitoring, and delivery of services by promoting joint development planning between central and local governments. In addition, to ensure that lowest levels possible are responsible for service delivery and corresponding public expenditure.
- To consolidate national unity and identity (*Ubunyarwanda*) by fostering, enhancing and sustaining the spirit of reconciliation, social cohesion and common belonging as a nation. Hence, to ensure lasting peace and security as well as a purpose-driven community.
- To build a spirit of volunteering, community work and self-reliance that is based on cultural and other values of collective responsibility, personal worth and productive involvement.
- To fast-track the regional integration agenda into a politically and economically meaningful endeavour.
- To build and consolidate volunteerism, community work and self-reliance based on cultural and other values, such as collective responsibility, personal worth and productive involvement.
- To fast-track and translate the regional integration agenda into a politically meaningful, economically fruitful venture for Rwandans from all corners of the country, and as an anchor for national stability, peace and unity (Ministry of Local Government 2013:23–24).

The next principle focuses on local autonomy, which goes hand-in-hand with local identity, interests and diversity. This focus helps ensure that decentralisation champions community participation to identify local needs and interests, seeking solutions for problems, mobilising resources and committing to implementing plans. In addition, the aforementioned principle helps ensure that the government system is maintained as a single entity. As such,



decentralisation does not imply fragmentation. Rather, central and local governments have clearly defined roles and support each other where needed. Importantly, there is no such thing as a 'one size fits all' approach. Therefore, different sectors approach decentralisation in different ways, depending on their structures and the services they provide.

Every country has limitations in implementing its decentralisation policy. According to the United Nations Central Development Fund (UNCDF) (1999:167), "There is no simple one-dimensional, quantifiable index of the degree of decentralisation in a given country. Similarly, the devolution and deconcentration distinction is too blunt to be helpful – almost every country exhibits some sort of mix at each level". As such, it is difficult to assess a country's political commitment to decentralisation objectively, as the formal institutional setup and the policy differences within government are not measured (UNCDF 1999:167). Subsequently, Rwanda has opted to implement all forms of decentralisation concurrently, from 'deconcentration' to delegation and devolution of responsibilities depending on the nature, sensitivity and complexity of the function. With this approach, Rwanda succeeded in developing a fairly strong local governance system with capable local leadership, functioning district councils and well-equipped administrative structures (MINALOC 2012:12–20).

However, the policy shows that sectoral decentralisation is undertaken differently depending on the sector and specific service or function. Some sectoral agencies, such as education, health, agriculture and infrastructure, have established a direct presence at provincial and district levels. However, many sectoral service functions are parallel and have not integrated with local government systems. Nonetheless, they recognise the importance of local government, as well as its ability to deliver services – especially through *Imihigo* (MINALOC 2012:12–20). Therefore, sector-based ministries need to receive sufficient guidance on decentralisation. More specifically, they need viable information on how to become part of the local government system to ensure more cost-effective service delivery.

In a bid to develop the capacity for local governments to deliver decentralised services and responsibilities, Rwanda has undertaken a range of policy and institutional reforms to bridge any potential gap, as well as to cope with the changing internal and external environment. Such changes are articulated in the recently formulated Local Government Capacity Development Strategy.

## **THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATIONS IN GENERAL**

According to the Council of Europe (CoE), LGAs play a crucial role in building a strong local government system. LGAs focus on developing good governance by promoting decentralisation. This is done by strengthening local authorities and building well-functioning local government institutions. However, in many countries, LGAs do not have the capacity to provide comprehensive support to their local authorities and the local government system at large (Council of Europe [www.coe.int/t/dgap/localdemocracy/centre\\_expertise/tools/Strength](http://www.coe.int/t/dgap/localdemocracy/centre_expertise/tools/Strength)). These institutions are non-governmental organisations (NGOs), yet they have public authority. As such, it is important to understand how hybrid institutions function, and to what extent they contribute to the decentralisation process. To answer these questions, some examples are provided below.

*Firstly*, the United Kingdom Local Government Association (UKLGA) defines itself as a “national voice of local government, working with councils to support, promote and improve local government”. The UKLGA is defined as a cross-party organisation that represents local councils to ensure local government has a strong, credible voice within national government. The UKLGA aspires to “influence and set the political agenda on the issues that matter to councils so they are able to deliver local solutions to national problems”. As such, their vision is to enhance the quality of life for everyone in the UK by rejuvenating democracy and enabling citizens to participate in community matters (Local Government Association. [www.local.gov.uk/about](http://www.local.gov.uk/about)).

*Secondly*, the South African Local Government Association’s (SALGA) role consists of six components. This includes representing, promoting and protecting local government’s interests; transforming local government, so that it is able to fulfill its developmental role; raising local government’s profile; ensuring that women participate fully in local government; perform its role as an employer body; and developing capacity within municipalities.

SALGA has four key tasks, namely to provide advice and support in terms of policy analysis, research and monitoring, knowledge exchange and support to members; to ensure representation, which includes stakeholder engagement and lobbying on behalf of local government with regard to national policies and legislation; to act as an employer body, which entails collective bargaining on behalf of the members and capacity building; and strategically building the profile and image of local government locally and internationally (SALGA: [www.salga.org.za/pages/About-SALGA/Welcome-to-SALGA](http://www.salga.org.za/pages/About-SALGA/Welcome-to-SALGA)).

The third example is the Association of Local Authorities of Tanzania (ALAT). It was established in 1984 as the Association of Local Government Authorities in Tanzania, in accordance with the Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania Act 15 of 1984. Members include chairpersons of district and town councils, mayors of city and municipal councils, directors of urban councils and districts, members of parliament and the secretary-general, who is secretary of the annual general assembly.

ALAT is responsible for representing the interests, demands, expectations of local government authorities; negotiating and facilitating local government authorities in any law-setting procedure; enabling and strengthening local government authorities’ service delivering capacity; as well as collecting, analysing and disseminating information to members and other stakeholders. The organisation has a dual role, as it provides members with services and represents them with regard to local government issues (ALAT [www.alat.or.tz/StrategicPlan.pdf](http://www.alat.or.tz/StrategicPlan.pdf)).

According to its constitution, ALAT aims: “(a) To act as a forum for exchanging views and experiences among its members (b) To lobby and advocate for policies and legislative matters which are likely to affect local government authorities (c) To disseminate information and expert advice to its members (d) To represent Local Government Authorities and their views in international forums” (Sida 2013:10).

## **THE RWANDA ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES (RALGA)**

RALGA is a registered non-profit organisation (NPO), which was established legally in 2003. The association was founded after Rwanda adopted its decentralisation policy in 2000,





whereafter autonomous districts were entrusted with new responsibilities. The Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda, of 4 June 2003, with specific reference to Articles 35 and 167, laid the foundation for LGAs such as RALGA. Later on, Law No 08/2006 of 24/02/2006, with specific reference to Articles 158 and 159, determined the organisation and functioning of districts. Law No 10/2006 of 03/03/2006, with specific reference to Article 247, determined the structure, organisation and functioning of the City of Kigali. In turn, Law No 04/2012 of 17/02/2012 governs the organisation and functioning of national NGOs, which constitutes the legal basis for the existence of RALGA.

According to RALGA's articles of association, or statutes, the association is a "national non-governmental organisation with the objective of promoting local government entities". In turn, its vision is to facilitate "efficient local government entities where people and stakeholders are involved in development, by assisting these entities in achieving their mission, complying with principles of good governance and decentralisation" (RALGA 2013:3).

## Origin and development of RALGA

RALGA's origin can be traced back to a meeting that Rwanda's MINALOC and the Ministry of Justice organised. After the local elections in March 2001, all district and town mayors were called in for a meeting in July 2001. Although this item was not on the agenda, participants talked about establishing a platform that would facilitate local authorities to come together, discuss common challenges, share experiences and convey their opinions as a single voice. Subsequently, an ad hoc committee consisting of 24 members was formed with the mandate to carry out consultations with concerned institutions and come up with a proposal on the nature, constitution and functioning of such a platform.

The ad hoc committee toured the country to meet the major stakeholders at local level, and drafted statutes to be proposed to the General Assembly. In addition, the committee also mobilised partners to gain both moral support and resources to establish a representative organisation. The task was concluded in May 2002 and the ad hoc committee reported back to the General Assembly on 29 July 2002. On this day, draft statutes were discussed and adopted, and the first executive committee was elected. The committee consisted of five members of the bureau, seven commissioners, as well as three members of the control committee.

On 27 March 2003, RALGA was legalised formally and registered as an NPO by Ministerial Decree No 34/11. All 92 districts, 14 municipalities, as well as the City of Kigali had become members of the association. RALGA was officially launched on 21 May 2003.

Thanks to MINALOC's support, RALGA received financial funding from Sida through the Swedish Association of Local Authorities' (SALA-IDA) cooperation arm, and received regular consultations from VNG international, the International Cooperation Agency of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities. One of the issues debated was whether there should be two associations: one for urban entities (towns and the City of Kigali) and another for rural districts. The other debate was on whether it should be an association of mayors or an association of districts. Ultimately, it was decided that there would be only one association representing local governments (the districts and the City of Kigali).

By 31 December 2005, RALGA had 107 members, which included 92 rural districts, 14 towns and the City of Kigali. Since 2006 the number of the members of RALGA decreased



after the administrative reform. Currently, RALGA consists of 30 districts and the City of Kigali. Membership is voluntary and any member can pull out if so decided by their council. The current articles of association stipulate that each district has eight representatives to RALGA's General Assembly, while the City of Kigali has four. All representatives were chosen and mandated by their respective councils.

RALGA was restructured after administrative and territorial reforms that took place in Rwanda in 2005. Thereafter the number of the executive committee members was reduced to three members of the bureau and four commissioners. During this restructuring, the member representation changed from one person (the mayor) to 8 delegates. As the chief executive of the association, the secretary-general is responsible for the daily management and functioning of the Secretariat, executing decisions made by the General Assembly under the guidance of the Executive Committee.

From the legal perspective, Law No 04/2001 of 13/01/2001 stipulates the organisation and functioning of districts and makes provision for associations such as RALGA in Articles 149 and 150. This law was modified by Law No 08/2006 of 24/02/2006, which established the organisation and functioning of districts. Articles 158 and 159 make provision for these associations. On 11 September 2013, Law No 87/2013 was ratified, which outlines the organisation and functioning of decentralised administrative entities. Articles 41 and 42 enable local governments to enter into mutual partnerships, as highlighted in Article 41: "The City of Kigali and the Districts have the right to engage in partnership and pull together their resources for the conduct of activities of common interest. For this objective to be achieved, the administrative entities provided under paragraph one of this article may establish joint institutions and departments" (Law No 87/2013 of 11 September 2013).

In addition, provision has been made for specific partnerships between districts. Upon mutual consultation, various Councils of the City of Kigali or districts decide to engage in a partnership to establish, organise or supervise activities of common interest. These partnerships are referred to as 'associations'. As these associations are legally binding, they are governed by an Order of the Minister in charge of local government. In accordance with Article 42, council members who wish to form an association can approve associations by specifying activities to be carried out, as well as each party's rights and obligations (Law No 87/2013 of 11 September 2013).

As it is an NPO, RALGA is subject to Law No 20/2000 of 26/07/2000. As such, its functions and structures had to be renewed in 2013 to conform to Law No 04/2012 of 17/02/2012, which governs the organisation and functioning of national NGOs.

## **RALGA's stakeholders**

### ***Local authorities***

After the decentralisation process was set in motion, representatives of the created districts would have meetings organised by government institutions. These discussions led to the ad hoc committee that investigated the possibility of a representative body, as discussed earlier in the article. In addition, the ad hoc committee was responsible for a constitution after reflecting on the nature, vision, mission and mandate of such a body, as well as discussing a possible structure, identifying potential stakeholders and investigating financing opportunities.



### ***The Ministry of Local Government***

MINALOC played a paramount role in creating RALGA by supporting the initiative, advising and even inspiring the ad hoc committee. Above all, the ministry facilitated the first financial support, which formed part of a project to support decentralisation under the funding of SALA-IDA. Recognising the body's importance, the ministry prompted other stakeholders to follow suit, which added more credibility and subsequent trust that had lacked at the beginning. Also, necessary administrative requirements were granted as it had not gained legal status yet.

### ***The Ministry of Justice***

Importantly, the ministry provided the needed guidance so that RALGA could obtain a legal personality.

### ***Development partners***

RALGA's performance required considerable mobilisation of resources at different stages. After its inception, SALA-IDA provided considerable support while other donors also played a role by assisting in supportive projects. In 2006, a basket fund was used to initiate the organisation's first strategic plan. Three donors; the Canadian International Cooperation Agency (CIDA), the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) and the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (EKN), jointly funded the strategic plan. Through lobbying and advocacy, RALGA gradually gained new partnerships, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through the Intrahealth/ Twubakane Programme, Women Waging Peace, the German development organisations, DED/GTZ, and later the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SADC), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Global Fund, Africa Local Government Action Forum (ALGAF), the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) and the Eastern African Community Secretariat, etc. RALGA was technically coached by VNG-International in its initial years by Mr Jacques Jobin, consultant, who used to visit the association regularly for back stopping assignments.

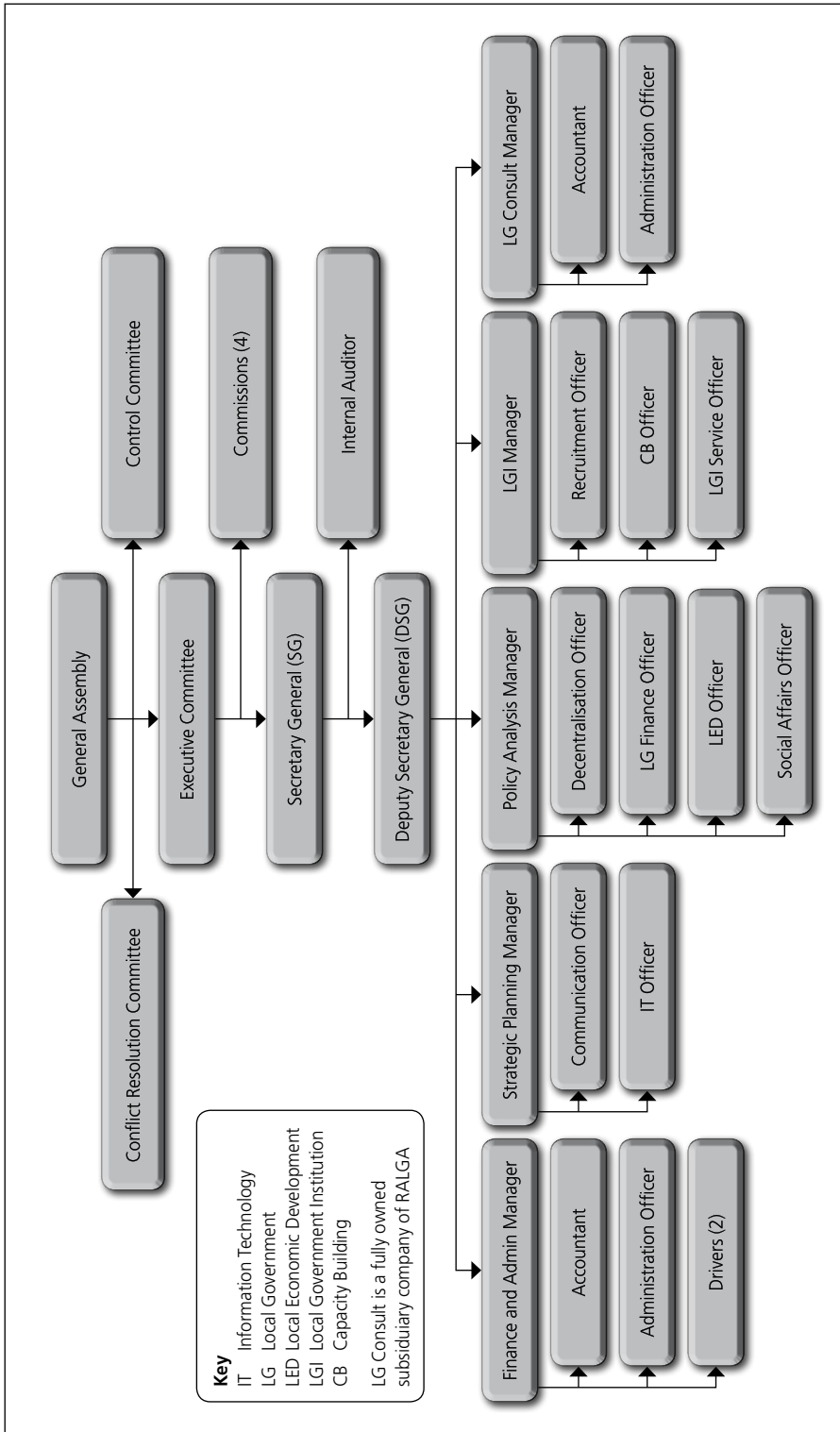
## **RALGA's roles and functions**

RALGA's roles and functions are outlined in the statutes that define its vision, mission and goals. Article 4 of the association's current statutes states that its vision "is to have efficient local government entities where people and stakeholders are involved in development". Article 5 states that its objective "is to assist local government entities in achieving their mission, complying with principles of good governance and decentralisation". Article 6 makes this vision and objective more concrete by highlighting RALGA's responsibilities as "representing local government entities, ensuring advocacy and capacity building with regard to capacity building, ensuring that local government entities receive adequate financing, facilitating LED, increasing social welfare, as well as strengthening collaboration between Rwanda's local government entities and foreign governments" (RALGA 2013:3–4).

### ***Organisation and structural functional framework***

RALGA's organisation and functioning are delineated in Chapter 4 of its statutes, and Article 9 specifies its organs, namely the general assembly and secretariat, as well as the control

Figure 1: RALGA's organisational structure



**Key**  
 IT Information Technology  
 LG Local Government  
 LED Local Economic Development  
 LGI Local Government Institution  
 CB Capacity Building  
 LG Consult is a fully owned subsidiary company of RALGA

Source: (RALGA Operational Procedures Manual 2015:93)

and conflict resolution committees. The office bearers are elected for a term of office of five years, renewable only once. Leaving functions in local government automatically leads to losing the post occupied in RALGA organs.

In terms of responsibilities the General Assembly mostly makes decisions on the organisation's functions and general direction, while the Executive Committee is responsible for decisions regarding execution. In turn, the General Secretariat assists the Executive Committee in the implementing of programmes from a technical and practical perspective. The Executive Committee is assisted by four commissions that are in charge of decentralisation, local government entities' finances, LED and social welfare development. Each commission comprises of a head, who is a member of the Executive Committee, as well as four additional members.

RALGA's General Assembly ensures that different levels and organs of Rwandan Local Government are represented. This includes both politicians and technicians from district to village level. The idea is to build an opinion based on the varied dimensions and perspectives within local government. Although all of them constitute the same system, each organ and category of employee has specific concerns, challenges and opinions. Through the composition of the delegation that represents a member (District) to the General Assembly, RALGA's statutes address these different realities.

The eight delegates from each member district include the mayor who represents the Executive Committee, the chairperson of the District Council that represents the councillors and the Executive Secretary that represents the technical arm. Each Sector and Cell Council is represented by one of their chairpersons. A similar formula applies for the Sector and Cell Executive Secretaries. On *Umudugudu* (village) level, which is the lowest level of administration, one village head per district represents their peers. The City of Kigali is represented by its Mayor, the Council chair and the executive secretary.

### ***Challenges while establishing RALGA***

Some of the major challenges RALGA had to address during the process were:

- As Rwanda was new to the concept of decentralisation, it was not understood clearly.
- Rwandans who were not familiar with the philosophy behind a local government association confused it with a union, which raised suspicion and poor cooperation.
- It was challenging to be recognised and become relevant within a national context.
- Confusing the association as a platform to protect personal interests. This was especially the case with mayors who represented districts at the start of the process.
- It took time to build RALGA's institutional capacity, values and culture.
- There was poor knowledge and inadequate skills with regard to lobby techniques.
- It was difficult to demarcate RALGA's role in capacity building in general.
- Members and development partners had a low level of trust and confidence in the fledgling organisation, and as such they did not take ownership.

RALGA succeeded in overcoming or mitigating these challenges through various measures. Some challenges necessitated appropriate strategies to engage key stakeholders. Others were dealt with through lobbying and advocacy, achieving tangible results, or showing resilience over time. The aim was to highlight RALGA's relevance and added value through its role and functions.

## ***RALGA's role as facilitator in the decentralisation process***

Decentralisation implies two major relationships: between the central government and local governments, as well as local government and local communities (Barnett, Minis and Van Sant 1997). As an LGA RALGA plays a key role in the decentralisation process. Firstly, the relationship between its members and Central Government calls for advocacy with regard to local governments. Secondly, the relationship between local authorities and citizens necessitates needs to be built and strengthened. Building the capacity of districts, subsidiary entities (sector, cell and village), as well as other actors helps ensure quality service delivery. To facilitate decentralisation, RALGA has a three-fold mandate: to advocate and represent local governments while also building their capacity.

### ***Advocacy and representation***

Undeniably, advocacy and representation are linked. Advocacy involves promoting local governments' interests within the broader governmental institutional framework to improve their position. Furthermore, its actions broaden local government's influence with regard to political decision-making processes. Common challenges that members encounter are identified, analysed and advocated within the broader national framework.

RALGA's advocacy role is either on an ad hoc basis or structured. In both cases, the process and role-players are outlined in an advocacy and partnerships strategy. This important tool serves as a guideline for the complex and sensitive nature of advocacy. Notably, RALGA only commits to evidence-based advocacy. In addition, the process needs to be participatory and collaborative, not adversarial.

The strategy underlines a set of guiding principles and values that must be followed when advocating a specific cause. This includes autonomy, partnership, legitimacy, credibility, pro-activeness, confidentiality, advocacy as everyone's business and accountability. Regarding the levels and roles of engagement, RALGA distinguishes between technical and political advocacy. Importantly, there is a distinction between personal views and RALGA's official opinion. The advocacy work has to be well coordinated across planning, implementation, feedback and evaluating results. Advocacy issues are identified from various sources. This includes mailing lists, specialised forums, official meetings, and informal interactions, such as phone calls, individual or group discussions and public opinion.

A set of agreed-upon mechanisms helps identify whether the subject warrants this specific course of action. Thus, it is important to prioritise and group advocacy issues. Importantly, the following factors need to be considered: availability of expertise; time and resources (both human and financial); nature of the issue, such as its degree of complexity and sensitivity; and the prevailing environment. The grouping usually follows the four thematic areas, as specified in the statutes and corresponding commissions.

After the grouping process a research-based situation analysis is conducted to gather evidence on the background, evolution, root cause, intended and unintended consequences of the issue, as well as the desirable solution or change. Hereafter, stakeholder analysis earmarks role-players who can help facilitate this change. This analysis focuses on the stakeholders' power relationships, influence and importance, interest in the issue, as well as support or opposition to the issue.

The next phase focuses on developing an evidence-based advocacy message. Tailor-made messages are formulated that convey how the issue affects local governments and what can be done to create a sustainable solution. After this, a mode of conveying the message

has to be selected. This strategic choice needs to ensure credibility, clarity and empathy with regard to both the issue at hand and the advocacy message that is presented to the target audience. When communicating the advocacy message, various communication media/tools can be used. This includes interpersonal communication, print media and electronic platforms. The process can vary from lobbying, negotiation, representation, accompaniment or mediation. Lastly, a monitoring system needs to be implemented that measures progress against pre-defined implementation-based indicators. As such, there is a strong focus on whether planned activities achieve the desired outcomes of the specific advocacy strategy.

### ***Capacity building***

After its inception, RALGA wrongly considered itself as a service provider to facilitate capacity building within local governments. Stakeholders also misunderstood RALGA's role. Fortunately, its first strategic plan (2006–2009) mitigated this danger by focusing on RALGA's brokering role, while remaining involved in specific interventions in areas that require better expertise, or where other institutions are not engaged. This is the case with newly elected grassroots leaders, where RALGA facilitates experience sharing through benchmarking, study visits, innovation, competition, and specialised forums. Today, RALGA has a clearly defined role, which is to facilitate capacity building within local governments. The association has established its role as broker between the needs expressed by members and service provision. In addition, RALGA has started coordinating and harmonising all initiatives that focus on capacity building within local governments.

With regard to decentralised governance, the national Five-Year Capacity Building Strategy for Local Governments 2011–2015 confirms that capacity building initiatives have benefited local administrations. However, the strategy points out that it remains difficult to establish the quality of the products delivered, as well as their impact and consistency with regard to both national orientations and local needs. This situation can be ascribed to weak monitoring, coordination and harmonisation.

According to the strategy, "Most capacity-building interventions have been delivered in an un-coordinated manner, supply driven, reactive and sometimes not in line with the recipients' needs. Cases are apparent where one capacity-building intervention is delivered, and within a week, another provider comes to a district to deliver a capacity-building package that is not very different from the one delivered in a week gone by" (MINALOC 2010:iii). In addition, the strategy highlights that most capacity building interventions have been based on the opinions of service providers, such as central institutions, NGOs and projects. Another negative consequence is that different service providers' training initiatives in the same field do not necessarily send the same message. The strategy ascribes this to a lack of minimum standards for preparing modules and training sessions. In addition there are no guidelines available for selecting capable, qualified trainers (MINALOC 2010:11).

Individual districts often organise training, but few have the capacity to produce training modules and training instruments. In addition, they do not report on training initiatives, and therefore it goes unnoticed. As such, insufficient coordination and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) leads to a misappropriation of resources (funds, time and energy), as people receive repeated training on the same issues. Training is seen as 'everyone's business' but no one takes responsibility or is held accountable. Human resource (HR) officers are usually charged with so many activities to the extent that CB is given only little consideration (MINALOC 2010:9).

The Local Governance Institute (LGI) was formed to address these challenges. Importantly, it is dedicated to building capacity within local government. The LGI addresses the need for a coordinated approach to capacity building after the National Local Government Capacity Building Strategy conducted a needs assessment and implemented plans that contribute to the National Decentralisation Sector strategic plan's outcomes.

RALGA was at the forefront of conceptualising this strategy as a mechanism to fulfil its mandate of building the capacity of its members. On 10 December 2011, RALGA's General Assembly meeting first formally approved the mandate of building the capacity of local leaders, staff and councillors in a coordinated manner through training, research, consulting services, coaching, etc. Since then, RALGA has played a central role in establishing the LGI. This was in collaboration with MINALOC, Rwanda Governance Board, the University of Rwanda, the National Capacity Building Secretariat and GIZ. The LGI is not only expected to build the capacity of employees serving within local governments, but also as a mechanism to retain employees and prevent the high turnover observed, and to serve as a documentation and research centre with regard to local governance and decentralisation in Rwanda.

The LGI aspires to be a legally accredited higher learning institute that offers postgraduate and master's programmes, short-courses and various organisational and institutional services to local government and to the nation and the region in general. Meanwhile, the institute has started master's programmes in local governance studies, in collaboration with the University of Rwanda. It also seeks research collaboration with other universities and research institutions.

The short-courses' content will come from master's programme modules, which are already in use for the Master's Programme in Local Governance Studies. Given the nature of local governments, LGI hopes to create continuous, flexible conditions to accommodate work responsibilities and to integrate training into an awards-based programme. The LGI is also expected to encourage innovation in the area of local governance, with a specific focus on creating home-grown local governance solutions within the Rwandan context. In addition, the LGI aims to play an important role in research, disseminating information and providing training with regard to these unique products.

The learning approach will combine class attendance and distance learning to reach employees who work in remote areas. LGI will also combine theory and practice, so that experienced practitioners from local government can become lecturers in their respective fields of expertise. This will allow students to obtain first-hand experience and information on best practice.

## **RALGA's role in Rwanda's decentralisation process**

RALGA's strategic plan for 2015–2020 makes it clear that the organisation seeks to protect the local authorities' interests through advocacy and representation. In addition, the strategy aims to improve local authorities' position within the country's overall institutional framework by influencing decision-making processes that affect these entities. There is also a renewed focus advocacy. As such, data on members' challenges is collected, analysed and packaged as advocacy-based information. "This ability to formulate a common opinion on behalf of the members, coupled with the independence character of the association underpins RALGA's uniqueness in serving as a single voice for local authorities to express their opinion" (RALGA 2014:7).





RALGA has contributed significantly to specific areas, such as strengthening local governments' capacity and advocating on behalf of these entities. As such, RALGA plays a significant role in the decentralisation process, as well as towards attaining the country's objectives. RALGA aims to address the challenge of creating an incentive-based decentralisation process that will hold each entity accountable for its responsibilities, as well as facilitating institutional relations between each entity (Litvack, Junaid and Bird 1999:85–89).

RALGA's role in promoting decentralisation and local governance is recognised in the Governance and Decentralisation Sector Strategic Plan 2013–2018. It states that, "RALGA promotes development and good governance of districts and towns including [the] City of Kigali. The association promotes transparency, accountability and democracy, which are all central to sustainable development" (MINECOFIN 2013:22) Therefore, the strategic plan for decentralisation reinforces RALGA's mandate to implement programmes to mobilise communities in developing and supporting activities that focus on good governance.

RALGA sits on different steering committees and sector working groups, especially those involved in governance and fiscal decentralisation. RALGA works with the ministries of finance, labour, agriculture, infrastructure, education, health, trade and industry, as well as civil society organisations, development partners and the private sector. In addition, RALGA is an active member of the Decentralisation Programme Steering Committee, which oversees and supervises the implementation of the decentralisation plan. This plan is implemented under MINALOC's chairmanship and is supported by the Rwanda Governance Board, the department in charge of decentralisation (MINECOFIN 2013:55).

The members' annual subscription finances 45% of RALGA's total budget. It covers the organisation's core functions, which include statutory meetings, advocacy activities and costly staff recruitment on behalf of the districts. Thanks to its research-based advocacy strategy and its good relationship with key partners, RALGA also manages to play a key role in various laws and policies. In addition, RALGA also was at the forefront of establishing an LGI revamping the *Association pour l'Execution des Travaux d'Interet Public* (ASSETIP) to ensure the design of effective infrastructure projects, supervising and evaluating initiatives related to promoting LED.

## CONCLUSION

Today, RALGA is held in high regard by its members and partners. This is thanks to its achievements in fulfilling its mandate and facilitating decentralisation. As such, it continues to become more involved in members' activities. Members' sense of ownership is reflected in the USD30 000 membership fee they pay annually, which is among the highest in Africa. Strong, transparent financial management is reflected in clean audit reports, which ensures trust and credibility among members and partners.

However, RALGA and the country in general still have a considerable task ahead of them to instill a culture of decentralisation and implementing the theories that were discussed in the article. For instance, the sectoral assignment of functions across different levels of government still needs to be clarified to ensure that each level is not only aware of its task, but also has the technical competencies and tools to execute the assigned functions effectively. Importantly, there is a need to indicate what is decentralised to a specific level and what

is retained by the central government across all sectors. In addition, fiscal decentralisation needs to be strengthened, as the income from local sources is still marginal. A number of districts generate less than 20% of their budgets. As such, districts need to be empowered to mobilise their own resources to ensure fiscal and financial autonomy. Undeniably, this will require considerable input, given the districts' low tax base.

## NOTE

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