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The role of national parliaments in successful decentralisation processes²

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Preliminary draft report

1. Focus, topicality and guiding questions of the report

1. Public service, whether provided at national, regional or local level, is the foundation of our societies. It allows for our everyday needs to be met, tensions and conflicts to be resolved and the wellbeing of all to be improved. Every state needs to ensure that the public service meets its objectives effectively and that it makes the best possible use of available resources. While local authorities that are in direct contact with people and are well placed to understand their needs and to respond to them efficiently, national authorities have a comprehensive overview of the situation in the country and a responsibility to ensure the balance between different regions and municipalities. Thus, a complex array of responsibilities needs to be assigned in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, to ensure that problems are resolved at the most immediate level that is consistent with their resolution. This principle lies at the foundation of the decentralisation, and parliaments play an important role in the setting up, putting into practice and further developing relevant arrangements.

2. Successful decentralisation processes imply that responsibilities are assigned in a clear way, relevant agencies have sufficient resources and public servants have the necessary competences. Furthermore, they require that balance is established between stability, continuity and predictability within the state administration on one hand, and flexibility of its institutional arrangements, on the other hand. Such flexibility allows for the necessary adjustment to the changing needs of the population. It is therefore crucial that the decentralisation process is not conceived as a one off top down action, but rather as an ongoing negotiation process, bringing together key partners and public actors.

3. Ideally, the decentralisation of administrative competences consolidates democratic systems, strengthens local governance, promotes inclusive growth and local economic development, and makes public services more effective in responding to local needs, for example when it comes to protecting and promoting the rights of minorities and marginalised communities. Decentralisation is regularly considered a way of promoting a more-accountable exercise of power, the principle of subsidiarity and the right of local communities to manage their own affairs in an autonomous way, as

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² New title proposed by the Rapporteur, approved by Committee.

promoted by the European Charter of Local Self-Government of the Council of Europe (CETS No. 122).

4. However, recent studies have shown that some decentralisation processes have failed to achieve the desired effects. It is often pointed out that decentralisation is not an end in itself, but rather a means to develop an effective public service. Whether decentralisation succeeds or fails in this undertaking depends on how it is designed and put into practice. When major decisions about decentralisation are made in a top-down manner, with little consideration of the views of the people concerned, this tends to result in frustration and resentment. When substantial responsibilities given to local authorities are not accompanied with sufficient financial resources or fiscal autonomy, this tends to lead to a decline in the quality and reliability of public services. When local authorities do not get the training that is needed to fulfil new tasks, this tends to weaken motivation and undermine the efficiency of the public administration.

5. To shed some light on the challenges of successful decentralisation processes and to support co-operation in this area, I wished to explore the following questions in particular: (1) Which are the overall trends of decentralisation observed across Europe over the past years?; (2) What are the determinants of successful decentralisation processes?; (3) What is the particular role of national parliaments in decentralisation processes?; and (4) What lessons can we draw from previous experiences in different countries and what are, consequently, the recommendations for upcoming decentralisation processes?

6. In July 2017, an external expert was mandated to explore these matters; her research results, which were presented to the Committee at its meeting on 6 December 2017 in Paris, are reflected in this text, next to the findings and recommendations of the Monitoring Committee of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, the European Committee on Democracy and Governance (CDDG), and the Council of Europe Centre of Expertise for Local Government Reform, as well as those of the OECD, which I discovered through meetings with relevant officials in the Council of Europe and during a fact-finding visit to the OECD on 20 September 2017.

2. Overall trends of decentralisation in Europe

2.1. Content and dimensions of decentralisation

7. The decentralisation of administrative powers and responsibilities has been carried out in many member States of the Council of Europe, closely linked to territorial reforms (changes to the territorial structures of sub-national governments), institutional reforms (i.e. the re-organisation of powers, responsibilities and resources) and public-management reforms redefining administrative procedures.³ Further countries are currently preparing or implementing such reforms in order to adapt socio-economic policies and structures to new institutional frameworks and societal trends, such as demographic, economic or technological developments.

8. By means of decentralisation, administrative, legislative and fiscal autonomy is transferred to regional and local levels with the aim to increase accountability and efficiency of delivery of public services, to strengthen democratic government and ensure that decisions are made that correspond to the interests of the people, and/or to give recognition and self-government to distinct communities with a clear territorial base. Administrative decentralisation transfers responsibilities for the administration and delivery of social services to lower levels of government, legislative decentralisation leads to the creation of representative bodies and the transfer of legislative authority

³ Following the OECD definition of “multilevel governance reforms” as comprising these three dimensions.

and fiscal decentralisation includes the transfer of resources and the capacity to generate revenue to sub-state governments or local authorities.

9. The political reception of decentralisation processes seems to depend on the order in which powers are decentralised, and very often central governments and representatives of lower-level governments differ in their preferences and perceptions. Whilst central governments often favour the decentralisation of administration powers (over fiscal and legislative dimensions), sub-state representatives have a preference for the transfer of legislative powers. The transfer of administrative and political powers is regularly found to hinder the decentralisation process in cases where it is not accompanied by the transfer of fiscal resources matching legislative responsibilities with the necessary revenues.⁴

10. Decentralisation generally involves political processes by which new arrangements are negotiated, ratified and implemented in practice. They mainly aim at changing the allocation of powers and resources across different levels of government, and usually include a formal negotiation process involving representatives of different administrative levels and often a formal ratification involving national parliaments. Increasingly, public consultations are also used in this context.

2.2. Trends in decentralisation

11. Increasing the level of autonomy through legislation and revenue-raising powers for lower tiers of government has been a worldwide trend over the last decades. Of the 81 countries covered by the Regional Authority Index, 52 experienced a net increase in decentralisation and only nine experienced a net decline⁵. Until the 2008 financial crisis, many countries had used public-administration reforms to promote regionalisation, municipal reorganisation and decentralisation of powers.

12. However, the crisis and subsequent austerity policies have halted or even reversed some of the on-going or planned reforms, with a certain recentralisation in some countries, at least in the short term⁶. This is a growing concern for the Council of Europe. Already back in 2013 Herwig van Staa, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, pointed out that local and regional democracy “has reached a crossroads. Threats to democratic governance are on the rise, aggravated by the severity of the economic crisis, and undermining the very essence of true democracy that must be inclusive and based on participation and ownership [...] Today, governments are using economic arguments to recentralise and to claw back competences. Local budgets are being squeezed. The freedom of local authorities to raise income through taxation and to decide how to spend their resources is being restricted”⁷. In 2017, Thorbjørn Jagland, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, warned member states about the dangers of growing nationalism and populism and recalled that a “balanced distribution of powers throughout all levels of government is one of the main pillars of any democratic state. It represents an essential component of the necessary checks and balances [...]. Strong local and regional democracy brings democracy closer to the people, thereby enhancing democratic security”⁸.

⁴ Falleti, Tullia. 2005. A Sequential Theory of Decentralization: Latin American Cases in Comparative Perspective. *American Political Science Review* 99(3): 327-346.

⁵ Hooghe, Liesbet, Gary Marks, Arjan H. Schakel, Sara Niedzwiecki, Sandra Chapman Osterkat, Sarah Shair-Rosenfield (2016), *Measuring Regional Authority: A Postfunctionalist Theory of Governance*, Volume 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁶ OECD (2017): *Multilevel Governance Reforms – Overview of OECD Country Experiences*, Paris.

⁷ Closing statement by Herwig van Staa, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, at the Joint seminar between CEMR and the Congress on “1953-1988-2013: Decentralisation at a crossroads” (Strasbourg, 26 November 2013)

⁸ Council of Europe (2017), *Populism - How strong are Europe's checks and balances?* Report by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe on the State of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

13. In Western Europe, a trend has been identified towards greater jurisdictional asymmetry, in particular in countries where strong regionalist or nationalist parties demand recognition and autonomy of the distinct territories or communities they claim to represent.

14. Decentralisation reforms are normally initiated to address problems of performance or territorial integration. Performance problems concern the effectiveness of governance that may be reduced if (1) the distribution of responsibilities across different levels of government do not match the financial resources provided to authorities to implement legislation, or (2) if policy-making requires joint approval of different levels of government, or (3) if levels of government fail to coordinate activities and duplicate services. Recent examples of reforms tackling such issues were the ones in Switzerland (2004), meant to address the lack of efficiency in public service delivery and increasing inequalities between cantons (Swiss regions), and in Germany where the allocation of power was reformed separately from public finance and fiscal equalisation schemes (three reforms with implementation phases from 2004 to 2019).⁹

15. Integration problems are caused by territorially concentrated communities sharing distinct preferences related to the provision of public services. If these communities also distinguish themselves by language or national identity, territorial reforms are often pursued to gain symbolic recognition in addition to legislative and fiscal autonomy. Examples of reforms addressing such issues are the territorial reforms in Scotland and Wales (2011-2016) where demands for devolution and more autonomous decision-making have been raised with the aim of tailoring public policies better to their people and of creating more representative and more accountable government. However, in addition to integration problems and several successful reforms in this area, and in the absence of a coordinated effort for the entire country, issues of performance are regularly raised, including for England. According to these experiences, decentralisation reforms very often have a number of common characteristics.

16. In particular, reforms involve complex negotiation processes at higher thresholds of consent often required for constitutional reforms. Reform processes pass through multiple stages, including initiation and agenda-setting, deliberating and formulating principles and goals, drafting of details in smaller working groups, negotiating and agreeing on details amongst elected officials or parties and ratifying the agreement following the respective rules that apply in each context. Reform packages are generally very complex and require expert knowledge for the formulation of details while at the same time ensuring that solutions are within the range of political feasibility and acceptable for the public – it is important to achieve the right balance between party politics and effective solutions to ensure that the original issue will be addressed.

17. Furthermore, there is a complex relationship between legislative and fiscal decentralisation. While in some cases both have been combined (e.g. Switzerland), other cases have shown that separating fiscal arrangements from the decentralisation of legislative powers can create pressures for additional reforms (e.g. Germany or UK). For example, when the legislation and delivery of public goods is placed into the jurisdiction of regional levels of government without the negotiation of adequate funding arrangements this can result in a mismatch between legislative and financial powers and performance problems.

18. Finally, deadlock situations during negotiations are regularly overcome by excluding or postponing controversial issues and focussing on more consensual issues in order to move forward. The outstanding issues might get consequently resolved through fluctuations in public opinion,

⁹ For more details on shifting goals and results, see Kropp, Sabine and Nathalie Behnke. 2016. Marble cake dreaming of layer cake: the merits and pitfalls of disentanglement in German federalism reform. *Regional & Federal Studies* 26(5): 667-686. doi: 10.1080/13597566.2016.1236335.

changes in political majorities or other developments in the broader societal context. Nevertheless, there is also a risk that such postponement of controversial issues might result in a failure to address effectively the underlying performance or integration problems.

2.3. *Key challenges*

19. Based on the comprehensive data collected through the reporting mechanisms of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (the Congress), it appears that one of the core issues in many countries is the persistent failure of State authorities to effectively include local governments in decisions that directly affect them. More specifically, formal mechanisms of consultation are often lacking; and/or the existing consultation mechanisms are not sufficiently used; and/or the means of consultation are of a controversial nature and the time frame is excessively limited¹⁰. Quite often, initial input from local authorities is requested, but no or little feedback is provided on whether and how such input has been taken into account. In some cases parliaments have to endorse relevant legislation only after all the negotiations have taken place.

20. Limited definition, allocation and exercise of local competences were identified as another important recurrent issue by experts from the Congress and the OECD¹¹. This implies a lack of genuine local government functions, imprecise delimitation of competences and excessive government supervision over local governments, in law or in practice.

21. Another obstacle to successful reforms is the discrepancy between administrative and financial capacities on one hand and delegated or devolved responsibilities on the other. Fiscal reforms, which are considered to be key components of decentralisation processes, are difficult to design and implement, and therefore often become the “weak link” in reforms. The Congress came across intensified problems related to local government finance in recent years in many countries, as local governments have been among the primary targets for budget cutbacks.

22. According to the experts of the Council of Europe Centre of Expertise for Local Government Reform, capacity building is another crucial area for successful decentralisation reforms. It is particularly important in highly centralised countries initiating decentralisation. The Committee of Ministers, in its Recommendation (2007)12 on capacity building at local and regional level, recognises “that the capacity of local government hinges essentially on the skills of elected representatives, the corporate management capacity of the organisation, the workforce capacity and financial and project management skills”, and highlights “the importance of developing this capacity further.”

3. **Determinants of successful decentralisation processes**

3.1. *Definition of success of decentralisation*

23. A decentralisation reform is generally regarded to have had formal success if a legislative act altering the constitutional status quo has been passed and ratified successfully, based on a negotiated agreement between all partners, including potential veto-players. Such formal success, however, does not guarantee that the original, substantive demands for reform have been met or that the original performance or legitimacy problem has been addressed effectively. Substantive success of a reform can be measured by (1) the degree to which the initial agenda has been achieved and is reflected in the reform act (after the possible abandoning of agenda items in the

¹⁰ The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, Resolution CG32(2017)19final on “Recurring issues based on assessments resulting from Congress monitoring and election observation missions (reference period 2010-2016)”

¹¹ Allain-Dupré (2018 forthcoming), Assigning responsibilities across levels of government: Trends, challenges and guiding principles for policy-makers, OECD Working Paper, Fiscal Federalism Series

process of negotiation), and (2) the degree to which relevant stakeholders evaluate the reform as a contribution to an effective solution of the original problem, thus capturing the level of consensus and the reform's potential longevity.

24. In the framework of the political and legislative process involved in a decentralisation reform, one would generally expect members of governing parties, who have initiated, negotiated and ratified a reform, to claim it as a success because they have been in favour of it from the beginning. However, if opposition parties or minority leaders, representatives of sub-state units, experts or civil society organisations, also perceive a reform as an effective contribution towards a solution one would consider the substantive success of the reform to be higher. Furthermore, if a new proposal for changing the allocation of power is brought forward shortly after ratification of a reform, the latter would normally be regarded as having failed in substantive terms despite successfully passing ratification hurdles.¹²

3.2. *Factors influencing the success or failure of decentralisation reform*

25. The substantive success of decentralisation reforms mainly depends on several key determinants¹³. In particular the organisation of the negotiation process and the establishment of a separate arena for the reform negotiations (e.g. through a constitutional convention or special reform commissions for larger consultation) seem to have a positive effect on its effectiveness. Such an approach may lead to a more inclusive consultation process with business or civil society organisations thereby ensuring broader representation of interests and the reference to time frames which are independent of elections or political cycles (to avoid sheer replication of existing political conflicts between parties over the reform), and avoiding that controversial issues are being excluded or postponed thus reducing the substantial success.

26. Separating the agreement on principles from negotiations over details and organising the reform in sequences seems to be a factor contributing to the identification of effective solutions and increasing the substantive success of a reform, because all players involved will be likewise uncertain about the impact a reform will have on them. However, political arenas and reform sequences need to be sufficiently connected to achieve coherent and effective reform processes. Participants with overlapping membership in the constitutional and political arenas or civil servants of different levels who co-operate with each other can possibly bridge any gaps and ensure that reform players search for solutions that are politically feasible.

27. All negotiated agreements need to pass the ratification requirements as defined by the constitution or constitutional convention. Effective communication seems to be a key factor in ensuring a connection between negotiation and ratification stages, for example by including all veto players (all actors or institutions whose consent is required for passing the reform), even though the backlash could result in political bargains diminishing the substantive success.

28. Extending the time perspectives of negotiating actors increases the chances that long-term considerations are included into proposed solutions. Governments initiating reforms would often confine their objectives to electoral cycles, whilst to achieve more lasting reform outcomes different time horizons may be required; this can, for example, be achieved by creating inclusive reform

¹² Behnke, Nathalie, Bettina Petersohn, Andrea Fischer-Hotzel & Dominic Heinz. 2011. Measuring Success of Constitutional Reforms: Evidence from Territorial Reforms in Eight Western Democracies, *Regional & Federal Studies* 21(4-5): 447-477. doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2011.578935

¹³ The empirical evidence is drawn from a research project comparing territorial reform processes in Austria, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland and the UK. For more details, see Arthur Benz. 2016. Constitutional Policy in Multilevel Government. The Art of Keeping the Balance. In cooperation with Dominic Heinz, Eike-Christian Hornig, Andrea Fischer-Hotzel, Jörg Kemmerzell and Bettina Petersohn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

commissions gathering representatives of various backgrounds including representatives from all parties, civil servants, civil society organisations, experts and randomly selected members of the wider public.

29. Clear and coherent assignment of responsibilities among administrative levels and entities allows avoiding duplication and loss of accountability. It needs to be clear who does what, with respect to finances, regulations, strategic planning, implementation and monitoring. It is worth underlining that this concerns all levels of administration, and not only local or regional ones. At each level, competences and responsibilities need to be assigned in accordance with the territorial, political and administrative nature of the entity concerned. It is essential to ensure that responsibilities are assigned in accordance with the characteristics and needs of the entities concerned and that adapted solutions are found for specific territorial units (asymmetry of reforms).

30. The assignment of responsibilities is most effective where it takes place on an on-going process. The responsibilities should match the evolving needs, and they should be adjusted continuously, based on the experience, feedback received and lessons learned. It is important to ensure that both the responsibilities assigned and processes for their adjustment are reflected in the legislation. The development of coordination mechanisms is essential for smooth interaction among various levels.

31. Effective monitoring systems help to ensure that the decentralisation arrangements meet the needs of the population and provide data for decision making on necessary adjustments if required. Parliaments can play an important role in overseeing the implementation of decentralisation processes and ensuring transparency and accountability of relevant arrangements.

32. Solutions found should be adapted to specific territories and their functions (e.g. by distinguishing between metropolitan and rural areas). Complementary reforms may be required in order to take into account the lessons learned and to adjust the design and implementation of the decentralisation processes. Pilot projects may be helpful as part of a national learning process, in order to test various approaches on a small scale and to support adjustments through learning by doing. Parliaments can support, promote and lead this kind of reforms, through the work of relevant committees and parliamentary initiatives.

33. Mobilisation of adequate resources including human resources and training programmes for civil servants directly involved – in accordance with the responsibilities assigned – is essential for successful decentralisation processes. As parliaments approve the state funding they have the power and a responsibility to ensure that the state provides local and regional authorities with the means that correspond to the missions and responsibilities that are entrusted to them.

4. Parliaments as sites for negotiating and monitoring decentralisation reforms

34. Next to governments where officials are regularly found amongst the initiators of decentralisation reforms, national parliaments are important players for the deliberation of reform principles, scrutiny of details as well as for the ratification of the decentralisation reforms. All decentralisation reforms are ratified by a vote in parliament, thus receiving the approval of a directly elected body and involving a democratic process. National parliaments are therefore essential stakeholders in the legitimacy of a decentralisation reform.

35. As pointed out in a recent OECD report, the challenge of multilevel governance reforms is not merely to adapt to a new, stable and definitive situation but to enable public administration at all

levels to adapt continually to a permanently evolving environment¹⁴. In this case, the parliaments should be involved on an on-going basis as well, and not only at the stage of the adoption of relevant legislation.

36. Parliamentary committees may provide resources and space for formulating drafts and for scrutinising details of a reform. It is essential that parliaments are included in the reform process from the initial stages, and are not expected to simply ratify the texts that have been negotiated by other actors. When this is the case, it might lead to lack of support for the proposed reforms, delays with ratification or subsequent contestation of relevant arrangements. More active involvement of parliaments in the decentralisation processes is required for ensuring the coherence of policy development in this area within the overall social and economic policies; for safeguarding quality provision of public services; and for ensuring the sustainability of the reforms.

37. When comparing decentralisation reform processes, researchers have noted that parliamentary working groups were regularly formed to focus on one specific aspect of the reform (e.g. for drafting proposals on the redistribution of financial resources, on the recognition of distinct communities or on specific selected policies such as education). Overlapping membership between parliamentary committees and working groups and parliamentary research staff are often found to be valuable assets in providing expertise and knowledge to the drafting of proposals as well as to ensure that the political feasibility of solutions is considered during that stage.

38. Like in other legislative processes, parliamentary committees provide an opportunity for engaging with outside actors, for example through hearings with other stakeholders, including civil society organisations, or by calling for comments from experts or the interested general public on reform drafts. This engagement with civil society and the public is important for gathering information about the potential impact of decentralisation on different sectors or interests but also for building a broader consensus for the intended reform. In particular in the context of ratification processes which include popular referenda, the communication between elected representatives and civil society needs to be organised and strengthened in order to increase the chances of a successful reform.

39. Parliaments can play an important role in separating the constitutional from the political arena and in stimulating a problem-solving attitude among negotiating actors. While parliamentary committees reflect parliamentary majorities, constitutional conventions or special parliamentary commissions help to disconnect the time horizon from electoral cycles and to move the deliberation of principles of territorial reform beyond party politics. If the influence of party politics is reduced, chances are increased that partners involved will look for a consensus, thus addressing the underlying constitutional problem more effectively.

40. The contribution of national parliaments to the success of a decentralisation reform depends on the one hand on the extent to which the committees or working groups are dominated by political divisions and party politics. On the other hand, national parliaments need to balance consensus-building efforts with considerations about what reform is politically feasible under existing political majorities or constraints. Parliaments as sites for negotiating decentralisation reforms offer an opportunity to deliver that balance because they reflect political majorities while having the expertise and resources to reach out to economic and societal interests to foster a broader consensus about the content of the reform.

5. Lessons to be drawn from previous experiences

¹⁴ OECD (2017): *Multilevel Governance Reforms – Overview of OECD Country Experiences*, Paris.

5.1. Case study 1: Overcoming political polarisation through a coordination mechanism and capacity building for local elected representatives in Albania

41. Albania is a unitary state, which traditionally was highly centralised until its transition to democracy in 1991. Since then a number of decentralisation reforms have been put into place. The Rapporteurs of the Monitoring Committee of the Congress found in 2013 that Albania had successfully made the transition to a democratic society, and decentralisation of the state power and the establishment of local democracy was a major component of this democratisation. Albania's membership in the Council of Europe and the ratification of the Charter gave it the right momentum and direction for decentralisation.

42. [to be further developed after the exchange of views with experts in Strasbourg on 26 June 2018]

5.2. Case study 2: Improving efficiency through clear assignment of competences and relevant financial arrangements in Spain

43. Spain is among the most decentralised countries, with the highest levels of spending autonomy and tax autonomy. It has a three-tier system (like in France, Italy and Poland), with local, regional and national levels, and in such systems the breakdown of competences can be complex, sometimes resulting in duplication, overlap and co-ordination challenges. Most of the countries that have a fairly clear delineation of responsibilities and functions today did not start out that way, but have realized the importance of such reforms and addressed them over time¹⁵, and Spain provides an interesting example in this area.

44. [to be further developed after the exchange of views with experts in Strasbourg on 26 June 2018]

6. Preliminary conclusions and recommendations for upcoming decentralisation processes

45. Decentralisation brings decision making closer to citizens, it helps to ensure quality of public services and strengthens accountability. Over the last decades, there has been a clear trend towards an increase in decentralisation and the transfer of administrative, legislative or fiscal powers towards lower levels of government. In recent years, however, this trend has slowed down or has even been reversed in several countries. This is a growing concern for the Council of Europe, as balanced distribution of responsibilities is essential for the effectiveness of democratic institutions and an important factor in ensuring democratic security in the Council of Europe member states. As parliaments play a key role in upholding the member states' commitment to democracy and human rights, it is essential that they further strengthen their role in the promotion of inclusive, transparent and effective decentralisation processes.

46. Parliaments should therefore play a stronger role in advancing the underlying principles and supporting relevant reforms through legislation, inclusive and systematic consultation and ongoing monitoring of decentralisation processes in their countries. In particular, parliaments can make a substantial contribution towards addressing the persistent failure of State authorities to effectively include local governments in decisions that directly affects them. They can also promote and support a broader public debate, thus building a common vision and shared ownership of the reforms.

¹⁵ Allain-Dupré (2018 forthcoming), Assigning responsibilities across levels of government: Trends, challenges and guiding principles for policy-makers, OECD Working Paper, Fiscal Federalism Series

Focusing on the common public good and building alliances across political affiliations is essential to ensure the sustainability of decentralisation processes.

47. It is important that the Council of Europe member states share experiences and learn both from success stories and from failures that result from these decentralisations processes. With its Committee of Ministers, Parliamentary Assembly, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Conference of International Non-governmental Organisations, the Council of Europe brings together all the key partners involved in decentralisation processes and provides a valuable forum for such sharing and learning among member states.