



UCLG CONGRESS  
WORLD SUMMIT OF LOCAL  
AND REGIONAL LEADERS

New Generation  
of Universal Local  
Public Services

Tangier  
Local4Action

# Decentralisation as Democratic Practice

## Lab

**Date and time:** Wednesday, 24 June 2026, 14:30–16:00

**Duration:** 1.5h

**Lead organizer:** The Hague Academy for Local Governance

### Overview

In this **interactive workshop**, participants will examine when and why decentralisation contributes to democratic governance, drawing on experiences from different governance contexts. Through **peer exchange** and **small group discussions**, participants will be invited to identify and exchange practical approaches for strengthening local accountability, citizen participation, inclusion and responsive decision-making. By the end of the session, participants will emerge with a set of key principles and enabling conditions for democratic decentralisation.

### Agenda

**Facilitator:** Lars Burema, Deputy Head, The Hague Academy for Local Governance

- 1. Opening and framing**  
Introduction to the session theme and interactive reflection on the relationship between decentralisation and democracy.
- 2. Political decentralisation in practice**  
Brief practitioner perspectives on the opportunities and challenges of political decentralisation, highlighting different governance contexts and experiences.
- 3. Peer exchange: Successes, challenges and trade-offs**  
Small-group discussions exploring when political decentralisation strengthens democratic governance and when it may fall short, drawing on participants' own experiences.
- 4. Plenary discussion: What explains success and failure?**  
Sharing lessons learned and identifying common factors that influence democratic outcomes, including local autonomy, accountability, citizen participation and multilevel governance.



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## **5. Towards a democratic decentralisation checklist**

Collaborative identification of key principles and enabling conditions for democratic decentralisation, contributing to discussions around UCLG's Local Social Covenant.

## **6. Conclusions and key takeaways**

Reflection on practical lessons for strengthening democratic governance through decentralisation.

## **Background**

Political decentralisation is often seen as a cornerstone of democratic governance. By transferring decision-making powers to elected local governments, it is expected to bring government closer to citizens, strengthen accountability and create opportunities for participation. Yet experience from around the world shows that these outcomes cannot be taken for granted.

In some contexts, decentralisation has empowered local governments, increased citizen influence and strengthened trust in public institutions. In others, it has led to limited local autonomy, weak accountability, elite capture or growing inequalities between territories. The transfer of powers alone does not automatically result in more democratic governance. This raises an important question for local and regional leaders: under what conditions does political decentralisation strengthen democracy?

Answering this question requires looking beyond formal institutional arrangements. Democratic outcomes depend on how power is exercised in practice, the extent to which citizens can influence decision-making, the accountability of local leaders, and the quality of relationships between different levels of government. Political decentralisation is therefore not only a governance reform; it is also a democratic practice that shapes how citizens and governments interact.

This interactive lab will bring together local and regional leaders, practitioners and governance experts to reflect on both the promises and pitfalls of political decentralisation. Through peer exchange and discussion of real-world experiences, participants will explore why similar decentralisation reforms can produce very different results in different contexts. Together, they will identify practical approaches for strengthening democratic governance through more responsive, accountable and inclusive local institutions. In doing so, the session will contribute to UCLG's Local Social Covenant by exploring how political decentralisation can help build stronger and more meaningful relationships between governments and the communities they serve.