

Graham Sansom

Centre for Local Government,
University of Technology Sydney, Australia



The diverse contributions to this second issue of the Commonwealth e-Journal of Local Governance cover three continents as well as the Pacific Islands, and explore two broad themes: firstly, challenges for decentralisation and emerging systems of local government; and secondly, the nature and quality of democratic local governance and community cohesion.

Jaap de Visser examines the quite remarkable transformation of local government in South Africa since the end of apartheid – in many ways a model for other emerging systems. He finds that substantial progress has been made towards the goal of ‘developmental local government’ that can advance the vision of a better life for all South Africans. However, ‘institutional fault lines’ are holding back further advances. These include capacity constraints, deficiencies in municipal governance and inter-governmental relations, failure to recognise the potential of big cities to play a much stronger role, an overly ambitious and uniform planning framework, and – intriguingly – ‘overzealous institutionalisation of community participation’.

Related issues are addressed in the practice note by Annette Christmas and Jaap de Visser. This discusses some of the issues explored in a recent review of provincial and local governments in South Africa, including the need to clarify respective roles and responsibilities, and the scope to transfer more functions to those local governments with the necessary capacity to deliver. Christmas and de Visser again highlight the need to abandon a ‘one size fits all’ approach and to give the big cities more autonomy, whilst recognising that much of South African local government still faces severe developmental challenges. They put forward a set of criteria to guide decisions on where powers and functions are best situated.

A number of contributions focus on moves towards decentralisation in African and Asia-Pacific countries where local government is for the most part less advanced than in South Africa. John Kiyaga-Nsubuga and Yasin Olum assess the progress of local governance and local democracy in Uganda since the advent of radical

decentralisation policies in the early 1990s. They find a significant gap between intent and reality: the legislative framework is sound and real advances have been made, but local governments are burdened with responsibilities and expectations far in excess of the resources allocated to them and their institutional capacity to deliver. The problem is exacerbated by very low levels of civic awareness and education.

BC Chikulo provides a similar overview of Zambia's efforts to transform and institutionalise democratic local governance, and 'take power to the people', as part of a longstanding decentralisation program. He identifies four distinct phases of activity since independence in 1964, and three key constraints to further progress: a financial crisis facing local governments, lack of 'whole of government' planning and management at the district level, and limited scope for meaningful citizen participation at 'grassroots' levels. There are obvious parallels here with the Ugandan and South African experiences. An important theme is the reluctance of central government and their agencies to cooperate effectively with local governments, or to ensure that they have access to sufficient resources to discharge their responsibilities.

The huge challenges inherent in decentralisation are brought into sharp focus in the two practice notes from India. N. Ramakantan describes the extraordinary 'big bang' efforts of the state of Kerala to build capacity for decentralised governance and participatory planning. In this case very considerable resources were devolved to local governments, and literally hundreds of thousands of people participated in training programs. Importantly, training was extended to civil society in order to foster grassroots democracy, inclusive governance and accountability. Nevertheless, weaknesses in capacity and performance persist and require continuing efforts on a large scale.

Mani Shankar Aiyar and Nupur Tiwari report on action being taken to establish effective institutions of local governance in India's north eastern region. They outline the problem of unequal growth: India's economy is growing rapidly but many people and some regions – such as the north east – are missing out. A strategy is needed to produce 'inclusive growth', and that requires inclusive, decentralised governance. However, progress is patchy: there are needs for further incentives to encourage some states to empower local governments, for new financial arrangements to overcome lack of resources at the local level, and for measures to overcome a 'silo' mentality amongst central agencies.

Phil Richardson explores similar issues in the very different context of two very small Pacific Island countries, Kiribati and Tuvalu. Both consist of scattered islands, many of which retain an attractive semi-traditional lifestyle, although there is continuing migration to growing urban settlements on the 'capital' islands. Decentralisation policies have been pursued to address this urban drift and in part, as Richardson points out, to conform with donor policies. He concludes that some of those policies are inappropriate in Pacific Islands settings. In situations of very

scarce resources, devolution to local governments may simply prove unworkable. Moreover, institutions of traditional governance often still hold sway in the small island communities and adding a layer of 'western' democratic local government can generate disruptive tensions.

The remaining three contributions focus on various aspects of local governance in Australia. Chris Aulich reviews progress towards effective community engagement and participatory governance. He concludes that despite reform processes designed in part to increase engagement, and increased recognition of the need to treat people more as citizens rather than merely customers of service delivery, consultation remains piecemeal and haphazard. Further development of participatory governance may have to take place in organisations outside institutional local government.

Chris Hearfield and Brian Dollery consider another dimension of political governance, namely how local government functions as representative democracy. They examine changes over the years in the local government franchise, the nature of political representation, methods of vote-counting, and the implications of a steady reduction in the number of councils and councillors, which has led to a substantial increase in the ratio of population to elected representatives. This may have created a 'democratic deficit', although other changes may have offset this effect and improved the representative quality of local government. However, an underlying problem is the lack of recognition of local government in Australia's federal constitution: this is seen by some to undermine its democratic legitimacy.

A further critical variable in local governance is the functioning of civil society. Louise Holdsworth and Yvonne Hartman examine the concept of 'community cohesion' in the context of a small rural community. They note that building strong, safe and socially cohesive communities has become an important goal of public policy, and seek to identify a set of indicators of social cohesion based on the experiences of local residents as well as the academic literature. They highlight a sense of neighbourliness as the key factor, supported by good service provision and a well-designed physical environment that promotes accessibility, engagement and a perception of safety. These findings can assist local governments and other agencies to implement policies and initiatives that strengthen the 'social glue' that binds potentially fragile communities.

This issue also includes three reviews of books that also address some of the themes canvassed in other contributions: Robin Hambleton and Jill Simone's collection of papers on urban and metropolitan governance, which among other things highlights the importance of effective *government*; Fumihaiko Saito's compilation of studies of local governance and decentralisation in six countries (including South Africa, Uganda and India); and Liz Richardson's account of community self-help in disadvantaged communities in Britain. We thank Peter McKinlay, Randal Smith and Jenny Wills for these reviews.

I also wish to acknowledge the financial support now being given to the journal by the Commonwealth Secretariat. This has made it possible to appoint an editorial assistant, Anna Vo, to help liaise with contributors and process the increasing number of submissions being received. The Commonwealth Secretariat is a very welcome additional partner.