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This special issue of the *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance* publishes a substantial number of papers, commentaries and notes drawn from presentations at the Commonwealth Local Government Conference held in Freeport, Bahamas in May 2009. In particular it focuses on contributions to the Research Colloquium that formed part of the conference.

The conference theme was *Improving local government: the Commonwealth vision*, and this was also the subject of a detailed background paper prepared by Dr Philip Amis of the University of Birmingham (UK).¹ I recommend reading it together with the articles published in this issue, not merely for its relevance to the other work, but for its cogent analysis of the contemporary practice of local government in the Commonwealth. A short commentary on the background paper by Joseph Stern is also included.

An overview of the conference is provided by Susan Rhodes, highlighting some of the key topics discussed and conclusions reached.



¹ The paper can be accessed from: <http://www.clgc2009.org/index.cfm/pageid/305/Background+paper>; alternatively it is included within the complete version of this issue downloadable from the contents page.

The 2009 Research Colloquium was attended by over 40 delegates from 14 countries, representing around 30 research and training institutes, donor agencies, other international organizations and local government bodies. The sponsorship of the Canadian International Development Research Centre is gratefully acknowledged, and Mark Redwood of IDRC has contributed a very useful introductory piece on 'Making Research Matter to Local Government' that reflects on lessons drawn from some of the Centre's recent projects.

The Colloquium provided an opportunity both for discussion of the conference theme and background paper, and for fifteen presentations on current research and practice – eight of which are included in this issue. Topics covered by the presentations were:

- Democratic local governance issues and reforms in the Caribbean, Southern Africa and India
- Public participation in local government in South Africa and rural India
- Challenges of urban development and poverty in Sri Lanka and Uganda
- Governance of capital cities in federations
- Inter-government relations in small island states of the Pacific and in rural India
- Internal structures and governance of municipalities in South Africa
- Infrastructure finance
- Performance monitoring and management systems
- Human resource development in the Canadian public sector
- New directions in New Zealand local government

Colloquium delegates highlighted the need for practice-oriented research to become more prominent in the work of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) that sponsors both the biennial conference and this journal. Increasingly, international agencies are demanding evidence-based policy and programs, while CLGF's global reach and membership mix of local and national practitioners plus research and training institutes makes it an ideal vehicle to identify needs for research, and then to disseminate findings and promote practical application. However, to take advantage of this opportunity, we will need to explore in more detail how local governments learn and share knowledge, and at the same time strengthen CLGF's capacity for knowledge management and dissemination.

A principal conclusion of the Colloquium was that *transformational change* in local government is required to produce sustainable organisations that can address the challenges of the 21st Century. Local government needs to be re-shaped and re-positioned in systems of government if it is to overcome capacity constraints and its current ‘invisibility’. It needs a more confident ‘language’ that speaks of opportunity and innovation rather than helplessness. This will involve among other things a broad ‘developmental’ model of local government that goes beyond direct service delivery and brings together key players (governments, civil society, private sector) to generate solutions to community needs through new frameworks of local governance. Local councils should be seen as *enablers of community action*.

There is no single narrative for ‘improved’ local government: it must be ‘fit for purpose’ in different local contexts. By the same token, care needs to be taken in applying ‘best practice’ solutions out of context. We need to understand what works and what doesn’t, but also the conditions that breed success in different places and how (or whether) they can be replicated elsewhere. In particular, we need to accept that ‘western’ models of local government are not always appropriate: in some cases adapted systems of traditional governance may be the best way forward.

As well as capacity building, some of the most critical elements in bringing about necessary change will include:

- ‘Strategic leadership’ on the part of mayors and councillors, and support to improve their skills
- Examining alternative governance structures within local councils (committee systems, executive mayors, ‘civic cabinets’ etc)
- Finding new ways to use local government’s powers to ‘unlock’ or leverage other resources through advocacy, partnerships and facilitating innovative community programs (such as local banks)
- Meaningful and effective community consultation and participation, so as to create a ‘new local citizenship’
- Improved monitoring and evaluation of local governments’ performance as a basis for improvement, and to demonstrate its worth to central governments and international agencies.

The issue of inter-government relations featured prominently in Colloquium discussions. There was a general view that local government itself needs to take the lead through consultation and planning to promote improved inter-government frameworks and stakeholder relations at both local and regional levels. Different forms of decentralisation (devolution, deconcentration, agency arrangements etc) should be applied on their merits in different contexts, and in particular taking into account the attitude of provincial and/or central governments towards local government.

Moreover, while central government support for stronger local government is essential, it cannot be assumed that 'political will' is sufficient to bring about necessary change (such as through policies for decentralisation). Ways need to be found to overcome often entrenched bureaucratic opposition, and bureaucratic discretion in implementing policy should be reduced. Local government(s) may need to devise strategies to 'draw down power' where or when higher tiers of government are reluctant to relinquish this.

The *Report of the 2009 Research Colloquium* and Colloquium presentations can be viewed at the following link: <http://www.clg.uts.edu.au/research/colloquium.html>



The research papers and commentaries published in this issue cover most of the main themes discussed at the Colloquium. Shuaib Lwasa and Gilbert Kadilo from Kampala, Uganda, and Neranjana Gunetilleke from Colombo, Sri Lanka, report on action research projects undertaken to strengthen links between researchers and practitioners, enhance policy formation and implementation processes, and thus address urban challenges of poverty and environmental degradation.

Raghabendra Chattopadhyay, Bhaskar Chakrabarti and Suman Nath evaluate recent approaches to decentralisation and people's participation in West Bengal, India. Their telling analysis of village meetings and development councils reveals concerns about low levels of participation, party-political infighting and inadequate transparency and accountability.

In a quite different context, Jaap de Visser discusses a similar theme: the perception that local councillors in South Africa are often seen to be inaccessible and unresponsive to

the needs of their communities. People allege that councils are inward-focused, preoccupied with the goings-on within the political realm and the technicalities of administration. Why is it that many communities do not trust their councillors and what can be done to remedy this?

Eris Schoburgh also considers the complex terrain of community engagement and empowerment in her study of the establishment and early years of operation of the Portmore Municipality adjoining Kingston, Jamaica. She reviews the extent to which the philosophy and practice of local/community self-management are in fact being institutionalised in the operations of the municipality, and considers lessons for the wider adoption of a process of municipalisation.

Andrew Molloy and David Johnson discuss the human resource challenges of developing a new generation of local government managers, specifically in Nova Scotia, Canada, but with reference to global issues. They note that demographic trends – especially pending retirement of many ‘baby boomers’ – are causing municipalities to consider how to go about recruiting young talent. However, few have done enough to execute succession plans and recruitment strategies that are sufficiently imaginative and forward thinking.

Three extended commentaries are provided by Bornwell Chikulo, who outlines emerging issues and challenges for democratic local governance in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region; Peter McKinlay, who reports on new directions in New Zealand local government; and Graham Hassall, who reviews the progress of the Commonwealth Local Government Pacific Project.

The final section of this issue presents ‘Conference Notes’. This material has been drawn from the conference working group program, and includes presentations as given, or short articles written later by presenters that expand on their contributions. These notes are intended to give a sense of the scope of work and ideas covered at the conference, and as might be expected, it is a very diverse selection covering themes of: planning in the 21st Century, and the Inclusive Cities Network project (Christine Platt); gender and local government in view of decentralization and local governance (Shelia Roseau; Elsie-Bernadette Onubogu); the work of the ICMA in the Americas (David Grossman); Resourcing local government for improvement (Dr. K K Pandey); practical capacity building in local government (Ronald McGill); local government improvement in the UK

(John Hayes); local government and youth business entrepreneurship (Andrew Fiddaman); the challenges of local governments in the Americas and the work of the OAS (Paul Spencer); and, local democratic governance in Europe (Kristof Varga).



Finally, I would like to acknowledge the work of the Assistant Editor, Daniel Grafton, in both organising the Research Colloquium and putting together this special issue. Thanks also to Anna Vo, our publications assistant, who worked on four issues of the journal before leaving us to take up a scholarship in Germany. We wish her every success. As well, Chris Watterson again contributed his expertise in preparing the final text for the website.