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New Century Local Government: Commonwealth Perspectives

Graham Sansom and Peter McKinlay, Commonwealth Secretariat, London 2013

<http://publications.thecommonwealth.org/new-century-local-government-962-p.aspx>



This ambitious and highly informative volume is premised on both the seismic shift in the perceived developmental role of local government across the globe, and the challenges that local governments will face as their key role in achieving the post-2015 sustainable development goals is increasingly being recognised within the global policy fora. *New Century Local Government* brings together an impressively wide geographic spread of country case studies from across the four regions of the Commonwealth, and pulls together work by leading scholars of local government who are all members of the Commonwealth Local Government Research Advisory Group (CLGF-RAG). It provides a plethora of detailed country case studies arranged around three themes: decentralisation in the Caribbean, Pakistan and England, local government finance and local economic development in India, South Africa and Tanzania, and new approaches to governance in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Not only do the papers provide detailed accounts of the changes in policy and practice within their focus country cases – but many of them, notably the papers by Brown, Reid, McKinlay and Sansom include a comparative perspective with developments from Commonwealth countries in other regions, which is one of the key strengths of the volume. It is also the *raison d'être* of comparative work across the countries of the Commonwealth, given the shared legal and administrative histories and the dominance of English as the academic and often administrative *lingua franca*. It would have been great to see more of the cross-regional and cross-country lessons being drawn out from across the contributions in a final concluding chapter, but the editors leave this to the reader – possibly to ensure they read the volume in full.

Drawing on examples of recent attempts to further devolution in a number of Caribbean states, including Antigua and Barbuda, Jamaica, St Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago, Schoburgh and Ragoonath show that with the exception of special constitutionally mandated provisions for certain islands (e.g. Barbuda and Tobago), as well as city municipalities (e.g. Portmore in Jamaica), there continues to be a resistance to uniform decentralisation policies in many Caribbean countries. They point to a lack of organised voice and vision for Caribbean local government in calling for and leading the reform process. Similar issues are found in Alam's paper tracing local government reforms in Pakistan, where the return of civilian government brought with it a return to greater scepticism for subsidiarity. The paper also highlights the need for strengthening the capacity of the newly formed local government associations to effectively coordinate the necessary lobbying needed to push for the re-establishment of elected local government across the federal country. These tensions between central governments and elected local authorities continue with two papers reflecting on recent changes in the approach to local government in England and Wales with 'localism' as the mantra for decentralisation during austerity. Keohane looks at these latest developments in light of the changes over the last decade under the labour government, providing clear and concise city case studies from Manchester, Birmingham and London, and how these compare unfavourably when considered against the substantial devolution to the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Assembly. Bennett and Orr look to place these challenges of localism in a longer historical perspective by providing a fascinating historical case studies of the evolution of central-local tensions in the UK government system over the last five centuries. Both papers explore the attempt by the current conservative-liberal democrat coalition government to give the perception of empowering communities through their flagship 'big society' policy whilst at the same time empowering the Secretary of State for Local Government and Communities with more opportunities to intervene in local decision making.

The ability of local government to collect locally-raised revenue is covered by the next two papers drawing on examples from the Commonwealth BRICS countries of India and South Africa. Mathur laments the inability of Indian municipalities to mobilise revenue collection at a time of significant urbanisation, economic growth, and infrastructure deficits. While the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments have brought sweeping powers to local government, the complexities of working through a federal three-tier system have constrained much of this intended autonomy. In his paper on property rates as an instrument of development, de Visser identifies lack of capacity within local authorities in South Africa as the main stumbling block to realising socio-economic goals through the potential increase to local revenue. In both India and South Africa, these two papers show that the enabling legislation needs to be reinforced support to strengthen the capacity of local governments. The all-too-often destructive role of local government on the informal sector, and in particular street vendors is highlighted by Brown through three complementary case studies also drawing on South Africa (Durban) and India (national street vending policy) as well as Tanzania (Dar es Salaam). She concludes that there is a need to address the lack of understanding of the contribution made by informal sector activities both to the over-all economy and to the welfare of socially excluded groups which has led to inconsistent local government policies. These policies are often destructive as the sector is seen to be in conflict with powerful interests and Brown calls for a rethink of the role of local government from being simply a local outpost of 'government' to one of local 'governance' through community leadership to enhance local well-being.

The third and final section of the book draws together four papers looking at recent changes in governance of local authorities in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Walisser, Paget and Dann trace the successes and challenges of cross municipality co-operation and shared services, and highlight the need for enhanced regional leadership and tools to navigate the complex negotiations needed to ensure the optimisation of benefits to all localities. In his paper on long term strategic planning in New Zealand, Reid outlines the challenges that local governments face in ensuring the necessary accountability and transparency mechanism for effective participatory community engagement and ownership of strategic planning, with a particularly informative section drawing out wider Commonwealth experience from Australia, England and South Africa. Drawing in key line ministries to such local strategic planning processes, and ensuring they are bound by local decisions is far from easy, and aligning local strategic planning and national strategic planning creates further challenges. Staying in New Zealand, McKinlay provides an impressive selection of case studies of local authority-owned companies and other arms-length entities which have been created to manage local government assets and services. Experience of such arrangements in Europe, as well as elsewhere in the Commonwealth: Australia, Canada and England, is helpfully reviewed and the importance of clarifying the role of elected councillors in the governance of these entities with an emphasis on good practice dissemination rather than the more usual compliance regime of normal local government activities. Finally, Sansom examines the evolving role of mayors in Australia, comparing with developments in England, New Zealand and the US and concludes that the increased mandate of directly elected mayors to provide community leadership should be supported by enabling legislation and clarity of their role and responsibilities to enable effective oversight from fellow councillors and constituents.

Both the editors and contributors of this excellent volume must be commended for providing us with such insightful reflections on recent changes and ongoing challenges to local government across the Commonwealth. Whilst it would have been great to see more examples alongside Pakistan and Tanzania from beyond the Commonwealth's four OECD of the Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK, and two BRICS countries or India and South Africa, and given the large numbers of small states (31) within the Commonwealth (53), a chapter on recent developments in local government in the Pacific island states to compliment the excellent chapter on the Caribbean would have been a welcome addition – maybe something for the second edition?

Given the unprecedented richness of detail and the diversity of the case studies provided, *New Century Local Government: Commonwealth Perspective* will make a significant contribution to filling vital knowledge gaps to enable evidence-based policy making and good practice dissemination across the Commonwealth and is both an essential read for any comparative local government scholar, as well as informed local government practitioner who is looking to understand current local government good practice, trends and issues.