

Graham Sansom

Associate Editor and Adjunct Professor
Institute for Public Policy and Governance
University of Technology Sydney
Australia

Email: graham.sansom@uts.edu.au



Editorial

To begin on a personal note, it is a great pleasure to once again edit an issue of the *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, and after a decade's absence to find it in such good health. The flow of papers submitted for publication is strong and we now expect to publish issues twice each year. Scholars and practitioners of local governance across the Commonwealth evidently see the Journal as a valuable point of reference and forum for exchange of information and ideas – precisely the basis on which it was founded in 2008. Thanks are due to all those who have worked hard over recent years to ensure the Journal continues to flourish, especially Alison Brown (who remains editor-in-chief), Gareth Wall, Diane Bowden and Juliet Chalk.

The papers in this issue explore both the global context for local governance and democracy and the varied experiences of seven diverse Commonwealth countries. We begin with a review of progress in localising the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Africa by Eunice Annan-Aggrey, Elmond Bandaoko and Godwin Arku. This could fairly be described as an existential challenge for local governance. Effective action at the local level is critical to the achievement of the SDGs, but capacity to ensure that the needs of communities are both properly understood and then met is presently lacking. The authors therefore provide a 'roadmap' of strategies that can enhance local-level implementation. They identify priorities for improvement in availability of data and its use, funding gaps, the institutional context and framework, and social inclusion: their recommendations are clearly of global relevance.

A closely related paper is the analysis by Wilberforce Turyasingura and Lazarus Nabaho of 'organisational citizenship behaviour' (OCB) in Ugandan local governments, and how it affects

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5130/cjlg.vi24.7790>

Citation: Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance 2021, 24: 1-3, <https://doi.org/10.5130/cjlg.vi24.7790>

© 2021 Graham Sansom. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Unported (CC BY 4.0) License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), allowing third parties to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and to remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially, provided the original work is properly cited and states its license.

capacity for effective service delivery. They measured the extent to which local government staff exhibit four key dimensions of positive OCB: responsiveness to clients' needs; accessibility (ease of contact with front-line staff); professionalism (including fairness and honesty); and reliability (delivering on service promises). Sadly, the evidence points to poor OCB, with significant adverse impacts on services. The authors propose that to realise the potential gains of decentralisation, local governments must give more attention to creating a working environment in which OCB can flourish. This requires among other things more effective leadership and supervision; promotion of a culture of client-centred performance; and empowerment of local staff.

The second global theme is that of Indigenous people's human rights, including the right to self-determination, and how those rights should be reflected in systems of national, sub-national and local governance. Ed Wensing's paper reflects on the expanding scope of the international human rights framework and how it is being applied, particularly in Australia. The international community has given special attention to the rights of Indigenous peoples, who are among the world's most marginalised. But the commitment of Australia's federal government to international norms and standards, and especially constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, has waxed and waned. Canada and New Zealand have made significantly greater progress. On the other hand, there are signs that Australia's sub-national governments will exercise stronger leadership through amendments to state constitutions, native title settlements and treaty negotiations. Those moves will be the subject of a further article in December.

The other five papers explore different ways in which local democracy is being expressed 'on the ground' and how it might be further advanced. Vinothan Naidoo looks at the 'uneven playing field' of local democracy in the very large and diverse city of Cape Town. Patterns of settlement established during the apartheid era have entrenched socio-economic inequalities and as a consequence highly uneven experiences of local democracy. These inequalities are reflected in the differing roles of ward councillors. They range from improving services and mitigating social conflict in low-income wards; to reconciling the differing priorities of more and less affluent areas in mixed-income wards; to maintaining quality of life and place in high-income wards. All these roles require councillors with the skills to work successfully both with local communities and through the complex bureaucratic and political machinery of mega-city government.

Sarah de Vries investigates how Australian local governments can advance good governance in decision-making for major projects. Through two case studies she demonstrates that local governments can be forceful advocates for their communities, acting to increase the quality and availability of information, strengthen community participation, and create opportunities for local deliberation. This enables citizens to access the decision-making process, scrutinise the costs and benefits of projects, and consider the merits of alternative courses of action. However, local governments may face significant

barriers to such advocacy, including the influence of political parties, funding and media pressures, and the ‘shadow of hierarchy’ – their lowly status relative to powerful state and/or national governments. Legislation that clarifies and supports their advocacy role would be a valuable step towards better decision-making.

Andy Asquith, Karen Webster and Andrew Cardow pose the question: why are New Zealanders reluctant to vote in local elections? They observe that although local government in New Zealand occupies a strong position by global standards, voter turnout in local elections continues to decline, reaching a low of just 38% in 2019. It appears that with rare exceptions (such as a hotly-contested mayoral election for Auckland – by far New Zealand’s largest city government), voters either do not regard local elections as sufficiently important, or come from socio-economic groups that typically display less interest in the electoral process generally. The authors suggest a range of ways in which this problem might be addressed, concluding that “*local government in New Zealand is at a crossroads – it will either be rejuvenated as a source of local democracy and prosper, or decline into an administrative arm of central government*”.

Paradzai Munyede, Delis Mazambani and Jakarasi Maja also address the issue of participation in local governance – that of young people in Zimbabwe. They note that despite aspirational statements such as the African Youth Charter, youth participation in local decision-making across Africa has been minimal, and examine the efficacy of Zimbabwe’s junior councils as a means of turning that around. Junior councils have been in existence for several decades in urban Zimbabwe, but are a recent creation in rural areas. The research suggests that youth participation remains largely tokenistic in both cases, and that junior councils struggle for resources and to gain government and community support, especially in rural areas. An underlying problem is the lack of a clear mandate and tailored legal framework that sets out the respective supporting roles of the relevant ministries and the ‘parent’ local governments.

Finally, Niaz Ahmed Khan, Jannatul Ferdous and Md Imran Hossain Bhuiyan examine citizens’ trust in local government in Bangladesh, with a particular focus on *upazila parishad* (sub-district councils). Their research proposes that trust is essential to promote democratic involvement, financial achievement and effective governance, and that to secure trust local governments must perform well in service delivery. The results mirror those of Turyasingura and Nabaho concerning the adverse impact of poor organisational citizenship behaviour in Ugandan local government: trust was at a low level due to delays in service delivery, dishonest and unfair practices, and disrespectful treatment of clients by service providers. This could be explained at least in part by lack of resources and training, frequent staff transfers, and the ability of influential elites to gain preferential access. There is an urgent need for systemic reforms.