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Editorial

This May 2022 issue of CJLG offers a rich collection of research articles and policy and practice notes that highlight the diverse forms and roles of local government, how it functions in terms of both representative democracy and accountable public administration, and how it responds to ‘big picture’ challenges and the need for collaborative inter-government relations – including relations with traditional authorities.

The issue begins with an analysis of the governance and community impacts of sporting mega-events – in this case the 2018 Commonwealth Games held in Australia’s City of Gold Coast – by Michael Falla, Jason Prior and Brent Jacobs. Their research examines the inter-relationships between the institutions (strategies, norms and rules) used to govern that mega-event, and how the Games impacted Gold Coast communities both during and following the event. Potential impacts on local communities may be profound and need to be managed carefully as part of the governance of a mega-event in order to achieve the best possible outcomes. The paper focuses on the extensive refurbishment of a local lawn bowls club as a major venue for the Games, and identifies the considerable benefits generated for the club and its surrounding community in terms of both physical and social capital. Ongoing benefits were evident several years later. The paper makes it clear that running a mega-event may be conceived and assessed along similar lines to governing a municipality – it becomes a complex exercise in collaborative governance.

Rebecca McNaught, Kalara McGregor, Matthew Kensen, Rob Hales and Johanna Nalau are also concerned with the practicalities of collaborative governance. Their research highlights the importance

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of local level collaboration to foster pathways towards climate- and disaster-resilient development across the vulnerable Pacific Islands region. It also reveals the current lack of guidance on how to design and implement processes of collaboration that are informed by local knowledge, experiences and skills. Notably, the Pacific Islands region has been at the forefront of efforts to integrate climate change and disaster risk management with broader planning for sustainable development: local governance in all its forms clearly has a key role to play, and collaborative skills are already evident in traditional Pacific cultures. The paper explores the systems and processes at work, and identifies a need for governments, donors and international agencies to support more robust frameworks for collaborative leadership.

Emmanuel Debrah offers another perspective on the need for enhanced collaborative governance by reflecting on the deficient relationship between traditional chiefs and ‘modern’ local government in rural Ghana. He explains the tensions arising from the lack of participation of chiefs in Ghana’s district assemblies and the failure of Ghana’s decentralised governance to grant chiefs a formal role in local development. These outcomes may be seen in part as a consequence of cultural and historical factors, for example concerns that chiefs would be demeaned by having to stand for election, and that chiefs have previously fomented land disputes and communal conflicts. But in practice rural communities continue to respect traditional authority, and the district assemblies often need the assistance of chiefs to engage with local people and implement projects, so excluding them is counterproductive. Debrah argues that more can and must be done to blend traditional governance with decentralised local government. Options include reserving for chiefs some or all of the 30% of district assembly seats currently appointed by Ghana’s president; making Paramount Chiefs the ceremonial heads of assemblies; or ceding some of the functions of elected members to chiefs in order to support local democracy and development.

Tanya Jakimow focuses on another key dimension of local governance, namely the extent to which elected councillors adequately represent the socio-cultural diversity of their communities. Her paper looks at the outcomes of recent local government elections in New South Wales, Australia. The results delivered a record 39.5% female representation, up from 31.2% in the previous election, but this masks an underlying failure to achieve a body of councillors that is truly reflective of the general population. The number of councillors of non-European ancestry remains very low, and the attitudes and practices that sustain the dominance of ‘white’ Australians, particularly men, must be challenged. Jakimow argues that the problem needs to be addressed in terms of *reducing the over-representation* of those men, rather than just encouraging more women and other men to seek election: “*We need to enquire into the process of domination and not only the consequences of the state of domination; that is, identify the practices, norms and subjectivities that sustain masculine dominance and ‘white’ supremacy in local government.*” This means addressing the attitudes and expectations of current councillors, making significant changes to the way local governments operate, and providing appropriate support (such as childcare and remuneration) to incoming councillors of diverse backgrounds.

Turning to the administrative side of local government, Priyanshu Gupta, Manish Thakur and Bhaskar Chakrabarti consider the role of ‘street-level bureaucrats’ – front-line workers such as teachers, police and staff in social services who must often make difficult decisions ‘on the spot’ about applying rules and policies in everyday situations and to particular people. These bureaucrats exercise considerable discretion and may depart significantly from the intended application of policies, thereby raising important questions about their autonomy and accountability. While consistent decision-making based on established policies and procedures is highly desirable, and fraud and corruption must be avoided, rigid adherence to rules may not always be appropriate. The authors note, for example, the challenges faced during India’s COVID crisis: *“front-line healthcare staff were called upon to allocate scarce healthcare resources ... Local government officials ... had to decide whether to create isolation zones and conduct contact-tracing drives, or allow flexibility to ensure availability of essential goods and services.”* The paper seeks to clarify the nature of this ‘agency-accountability conundrum’ across various dimensions of street-level bureaucrats’ work and performance, and to advance debate about how their exercise of discretion can best be managed.

The last two research papers explore systems of local governance at two very different scales. Gordon Morris considers the future of England’s lowest tier of local government, parish and town councils. These are typically small in area and population, although an increasing number are home to tens of thousands and in total the sector represents about 11 million people. As financial pressures and service delivery challenges faced by the higher tiers of district and county councils mount, and districts are amalgamated into larger units, parishes and towns – which are empowered to raise a supplementary local tax – may well be expected to play a greater role. The aftermath of Brexit and the COVID pandemic could also increase expectations regarding their future responsibilities and performance. The author researched these issues through a wide-ranging survey of councillors, officials, academics and other interested parties. Most respondents believed parishes and towns would have to do more and will need to enhance their capacity and skills to do so. They already enjoy a ‘power of general competence’ to respond to community needs by taking on new responsibilities, but many are reluctant to exercise that power. Much will depend on whether central government is willing to devolve further powers and resources to local government in general, and then whether more emphasis is placed on addressing priorities at a truly local scale.

By contrast, Zack Taylor looks at recent developments in metropolitan-level governance in Canada. He identifies and explores three models, which sometimes operate in combination with each other: multi-purpose regional intergovernmental organisations, single-purpose metropolitan agencies, and provincial metropolitan policy overlays. In each case local government may have a key role to play, but Taylor notes the ‘fading’ of previous approaches that saw metropolitan governance primarily as a task for municipalities, such as Toronto’s formal two-tier system. He suggests that today: *“Canada would not have forms of authoritative and effective metropolitan governance without unilateral provincial*

intervention, often imposed over the objection of local communities and their elected representatives.” Canadian metropolitan governance may therefore be characterised as ‘regionalism from above’ rather than the product of bottom-up, voluntary mobilisation. This reflects the need for greater policy coherence and enhanced capacity to make and implement decisions at the metropolitan scale. Provincial governments have the resources and constitutional authority to act directly themselves in metropolitan planning and provision of major infrastructure and services, as well as to incentivise cooperation between municipalities and with other players when that is preferred. Whether increasing centralisation of metropolitan decision-making is seen as a desirable outcome is, of course, another matter.

To complement Zack Taylor’s article, the Policy and Practice section of this issue begins with a collection of four ‘perspectives’ on metropolitan governance from other Commonwealth countries. A short introduction to those pieces can be found at page 160.

The final article is a practice note presenting *Fact Sheets on Decentralisation in Africa*, prepared by Jaap de Visser and Tinashe Chigwata. Ten fact sheets were produced in response to the spread of governance reforms across Africa that include some form of decentralisation. Most of those reforms aim to empower local authorities without introducing federal or federal-type arrangements, but some seek to do both at once (for example the 2006 constitution of the Democratic Republic of the Congo), or to introduce a system of multilevel government that sits somewhere between federalism and local government (such as the devolution to ‘counties’ in Kenya). However, all forms of decentralisation need to address a common set of issues such as sub-national autonomy and elections, intergovernmental supervision and relations, subnational revenue instruments, and intergovernmental grants. The fact sheets therefore seek to provide clear and accessible materials to assist policymakers, practitioners, students and the public at large to better understand the various concepts and mechanisms involved.

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