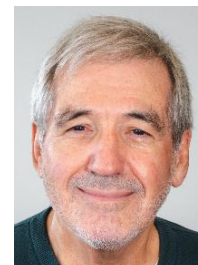


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Editorial: Looking ahead to the 2023 Commonwealth Local Government Conference

This issue of the *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance* coincides with the lead-up to the 2023 Commonwealth Local Government Conference being held on 14–17 November in Kigali, Rwanda. The theme of the conference is *Building Local Resilience*: how local government can be better prepared for current and future challenges and ensure sustainable development for all. Discussions will address various aspects of resilience, the importance of local democracy, and the role of local government in addressing local, national and global threats, including achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Our next issue in March 2024 will include coverage of conference papers, presentations and outcomes.¹

Appropriately, seven articles in this issue come from Africa, and all provide valuable insights into dimensions of resilience, local democracy and sustainability. Overall, they highlight the fragility of local government. Recurring themes include the continued dominance of central governments despite formal commitments to decentralisation; the struggle to secure sufficient resources at the local level; and the need to ensure effective, principled governance by tackling the pervasive risks of corruption and improper influence over decision-making, and by reaping the benefits of meaningful community engagement and empowerment.

In the first of six research papers, Justa Wawira Mwangi, Gitile Naituli, James Kilika and Wilson Muna examine the impact of fiscal decentralisation on public service delivery by two counties (local governments) in Kenya. The counties began operations in 2013 following major reforms to regional and local governance. Using affordability as a key measure of the quality of services, they find that

¹ Commencing with this issue CJLG has switched publication dates from June/December to March/September.

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fiscal decentralisation does not necessarily lead to better services. The relationship is moderated by a range of factors, including adequate grant funding and/or revenue autonomy that would enable local governments to mobilise sufficient resources; legal and policy frameworks; institutional structures and bureaucratic practices; and cultural values and belief systems. Notably, corruption makes public services less affordable in both counties. In one there had been no discernible improvement in services following decentralisation, while in the other improvements were brought about by a change agent – a new arms-length central government agency (Nairobi Metropolitan Services) that took over key services from the county administration.

Stella B Kyohairwe and Christopher Yikii Agatre focus specifically on the funding and delivery of primary health care services by central and local governments in Uganda's West Nile sub-region. They identify a range of complementary requirements including motivated health workers, sound health plans, good-quality infrastructure and technologies, and a consistent supply of medicines. However, their principal concern is the adverse impacts of deficiencies in the amount, allocation, disbursement and timeliness of government health funding. These failings force people to rely heavily on private services, which is not sustainable in poor rural communities. Uganda's national budget allocation for health falls well short of the 15% of total expenditure proposed by the 2001 Abuja Declaration. There is a pressing need for increased central funding, and for district local governments to allocate more of their own budgets to health. Supplementary funding by other means, such as Community Health Insurance Schemes, is also required.

In a second paper from Uganda, Jimmy Francis Obonyo and William Muhumuza report research conducted in the Karamoja sub-region to establish the extent to which decentralisation reforms introduced in 1992 have actually empowered local people. Karamoja has historically been isolated and marginalised, and decentralisation might have delivered significant benefits. But the reforms have not measured up to expectations. State–society power relations remain largely unaltered and favour ruling political and bureaucratic elites, who control decision-making and use government to satisfy their vested interests. Ordinary citizens suffer from a continuing lack of local mechanisms through which they could voice their demands, as well as ingrained central control over local governments. To achieve political empowerment of citizens, there is a need to increase the autonomy of local governments, while at the same time amending laws and establishing mechanisms to ensure that local elites are subordinate to citizens' elected representatives, and that communities are truly engaged in decision-making.

Issues raised by the two Ugandan studies are mirrored in Femi Abiodun Olaniyan's paper on the structures and processes of informal community governance in Ibadan, Nigeria. There, statutory local governments exhibit serious failings both as democratic institutions and especially in service delivery. As a result, citizens have taken the initiative to establish their own informal entities for community governance. Olaniyan's research finds that those arrangements are functioning well, providing essential

services and nurturing the democratic culture required for successful long-term local development. Management structures and decision-making processes are open to all, participatory democracy is visible, and corruption is not tolerated. Appropriately institutionalised, community governance along the lines seen in Ibadan could operate across Nigeria, working alongside a reformed system of statutory local governments to better address current and emerging community needs.

Effective local governance is also the central theme of research undertaken by Ronald Adamtey, Florence Aburam, Benjamin Doe and Clifford Amoako into encroachment (unauthorised development) within the road reserve of the Kumasi–Accra highway in Ghana. They find that formal regulation is not effective in governing the use of vacant land adjoining the roadway: informal rules rooted in social networks of reciprocity matter more. People secure space for businesses and housing by invoking political and ethnic connections with public officials, enabled by non-enforcement of relevant laws and a lack of formal collaboration among the responsible public institutions. Encroachment reflects pressures generated by urban growth, poverty, and the need for people to grasp economic opportunities. Achieving better development outcomes and protecting space for future road improvements requires effective application of the principles and methods of multi-stakeholder governance, linking recognition of informal processes, improved regulation, and the role of traditional authorities.

A further perspective on the style and quality of local governance is provided by Wilfred Lameck and Chagulani Shabiru in their Policy and Practice article. This explores the impact of New Public Management reforms on the delivery of secondary education in Tanzania. Through a case study of Mwanza City in north-west Tanzania, the authors consider the effects of new policies introduced in 2014 from the perspective of local government education officers and teachers. They identify serious concerns arising from a combination of more onerous and restrictive guidelines on how teachers do their job, a well-meaning free-education policy that has dramatically increased high school enrolments, and a continuing lack of adequate facilities and resources. National standards are not necessarily consistent with local realities, and Mwanza’s education officers and teachers require more discretion to meet the needs of their students and communities in the most appropriate way.

Economic development and poverty reduction are essential elements of any agenda for resilience and sustainability. In the final research paper, Hayley Boks and Adrino Mazenda discuss the need to mitigate impediments to small business development in South Africa’s capital city, Tshwane (formerly Pretoria). Problems include excessive red tape and regulatory failure; crime and corruption; inadequate infrastructure and support services; supply chain challenges; limited access to markets; and insufficient training opportunities for emerging entrepreneurs. More effective support for small business, including start-up and informal enterprises, is seen as essential to promote broader economic development in the metropolitan region, creating job opportunities and advancing social progress. The City of Tshwane needs to apply good governance principles – improving its regulatory performance and building

networks amongst relevant government agencies and other stakeholders – to foster synergies between small businesses, support programmes and market opportunities. Its Integrated Development Plan should provide a framework for coordinated efforts to sustain growth and development, and incorporate targeted measures to assist competitive emerging businesses.

Turning specifically to reducing poverty, Shilpa Santhosh provides a Commentary on the Kudumbashree scheme introduced in the late 1990s by the state government of Kerala, India. A core element of Kudumbashree is self-help and microfinancing through neighbourhood groups that enables women to engage in economic activities and empowers them to play a more prominent role in society. Santhosh assesses the value and achievements of this approach through a feminist lens, noting Amartya Sen's view that poverty is not just the lack of money; it is not having the capability to realise one's full potential as a human being. She concludes that while Kudumbashree has played a useful role as part of Kerala's broader efforts to reduce absolute poverty, and has empowered women to some extent, there is still an absence of effort to bring about fundamental change in women's position in society.

In the second Commentary, Harry Hobbs and Ed Wensing look at the proposal to amend Australia's Constitution to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and establish a permanent 'Voice to Parliament'. The Voice would be an advisory body, empowered to make representations to Australia's federal parliament and government on matters relating to First Peoples. This can be seen as a modest change that would acknowledge Australia's ancient cultures, the rights and interests of Indigenous peoples, and the need to maximise their input to policies aimed at 'Closing the Gap' between the quality of their lives and those of most other Australians. Nevertheless, the proposal for a Voice has become highly politicised and controversial. The authors therefore explain where the idea of a Voice came from, its intended role, why it should be enshrined in the Constitution, and how other countries have taken similar steps to engage Indigenous peoples in the processes of government.

This issue concludes with Andy Asquith's review of *The Winding Stair*, the autobiography of Sir Rodney Brooke, a leading figure in English local government for over 40 years since the 1970s. The book is an entertaining account of Brooke's illustrious career, but it also paints a picture of inexorable decline in local government's role and stature. Functions have been stripped away as finance has become increasingly centralised, and councils increasingly ignored. Asquith finds this both depressing and bad for government and democracy, with little prospect of improvement in the foreseeable future.

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