

STUDY OF CENTRALIZATION & DECENTRALIZATION OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Public administration can be broadly described as the development, implementation and study of branches of government policy. The pursuit of the public good by enhancing civil society, ensuring a well-run, fair, and effective public service are some of the goals of the field.

Public administration is carried out by public servants who work in public departments and agencies, at all levels of government, and perform a wide range of tasks. Public administrators collect and analyze data (statistics), monitor budgets, draft legislation, develop policy, and execute legally mandated government activities. Public administrators serve in many roles: ranging from "front-line" positions serving the public (e.g., peace officers, parole officers, border guards); administrators (e.g., auditors); analysts (e.g., policy analysts); and managers and executives of government branches and agencies.

Local government refers collectively to administrative authorities over areas that are smaller than a state. The term is used to contrast with offices at nation-state level, which are referred to as the central government, national government, or (where appropriate) federal government. "Local government" only acts within powers delegated to it by legislation or directives of the higher level of government and each country has some kind of local government which will differ from those of other countries. In primitive societies the lowest level of local government is the village headman or tribal chief. Federal states such as the United States have two levels of government above the local level: the governments of the fifty states and the federal national government whose relations are governed by the constitution of the United States. Local government in the United States originated in the colonial period and has been modified since then: the highest level of local government is at county level.

In modern nations, local governments usually have some of the same kind of powers as national governments do. They usually have some power to raise taxes, though these may be limited by central legislation. In some countries local government is partly or wholly funded by subventions from central government taxation. The question of Municipal Autonomy—

which powers the local government has, or should have, and why—is a key question of public administration and governance. The institutions of local government vary greatly between countries, and even where similar arrangements exist, the terminology often varies. Common names for local government entities include state, province, region, department, county, prefecture, district, city, township, town, borough, parish, municipality, shire and village. However all these names are often used informally in different countries & local government is the legal part of central government.

DECENTRALIZATION

Decentralization can be usefully understood as a **political process** whereby administrative authority, public resources and responsibilities are transferred from central government agencies to lower-level organs of government or to non-governmental bodies, such as community-based organizations (CBOs), 'third party' non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or private sector actors (Crook and Manor, 1998: 6–7; Rondinelli et al., 1989; Meenakshi Sundaram, 1999; World Bank, 2000a: 3). Conceptually, important distinctions can be made among:

- **Deconcentration**, in which political, administrative and fiscal responsibilities are transferred to lower units within central line ministries or agencies (Crook and Manor, 1998: 6–7; Rondinelli et al., 1989; Meenakshi Sundaram, 1999: 55; emphasis added);
- **Devolution**, in which sub-national units of government are either created or strengthened in terms of political, administrative and fiscal power (Blair, 2000; Crook and Manor, 1998: 6–7; Rondinelli et al., 1989);
- **Delegation**, in which responsibilities are transferred to organizations that are 'outside the regular bureaucratic structure and are only indirectly controlled by the central government,' (Meenakshi Sundaram, 1999: 55; emphasis added);
- **Privatization**, in which all responsibility for government functions is transferred to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or private enterprises independent of government (Meenakshi Sundaram, 1999, 56). Such transfers can involve the power to decide the allocation and distribution of public resources, the power to implement programmes and policies and the power to raise and spend public revenues for these and other purposes. These three powers we can classify broadly as political, administrative and fiscal decentralisation (Box 1):

Political decentralisation transfers policy and legislative powers from central government to autonomous, lower-level assemblies and local councils that have been democratically elected by their constituencies.

Administrative decentralisation places planning and implementation responsibility in the hands of locally situated civil servants and these local civil servants are under the jurisdiction of elected local governments.

Fiscal decentralisation accords substantial revenue and expenditure authority to intermediate and local governments. Source: World Bank (2000a: However, democratic decentralisation implies more than the downward delegation of authority. Crucially, it entails a system of governance in which citizens possess the right to hold local public officials to account through the use of elections, grievance meetings and other democratic means (see below). Blair (2000: 21) captures the essence of this important idea: (Democratic decentralisation) can be defined as meaningful authority devolved to local units of governance that are accessible and accountable to the local citizenry, who enjoy full political rights and liberty. It thus differs from the vast majority of earlier efforts at decentralization in developing areas, which go back to the 1950s, and which were largely initiatives in public administration without any serious democratic component. A defining feature of any democratic system is that decision-makers are under the 'effective popular control' (Mayo, 1960: 60) of the people they are meant to govern. How this is accomplished, of course, constitutes a major dilemma for theorists and proponents of democratic development. Nevertheless, a number of defining features can be observed. Mayo (1960: 61–69) identifies four:

- Popular control of policy makers, both by regular elections and by the pressure of social interest groups;
- The institutionalization of all adult citizens in voting (i.e. one person, one vote);
- Political freedom in the eyes of the state;
- Policy decisions made on the basis of majority rule.³

DECENTRALIZATION IN INDIA

A commitment to the reduction of poverty has been a defining characteristic of the Indian state, from the time of Independence to the present day. As Kohli (1987: 62) has argued, the Indian state that emerged after Independence was deeply committed to industrialisation, economic growth and a modicum of income distribution.' In terms of poverty reduction, this involved an early attempt at improving agricultural productivity through the implementation of land reforms, agricultural cooperatives and local self-government (Harriss et al., 1992; Varshney, 1998).

From an early stage in this process, the reduction of poverty and the empowerment of poor and politically marginal groups in India have been strongly associated with at least some form of decentralisation (e.g. Drèze and Sen, 1996; Jha, 1999). Perhaps the most enduring image of decentralisation in India is Gandhi's vision of village Swaraj, in which universal education, economic self-sufficiency and village democracy would take the place of caste, untouchability and other forms of rural exploitation. Although this vision has been hotly debated since (at least) the time of independence (see, especially, Ambedkar's debates with

Gandhi, cited in World Bank, 2000a: 5), Gandhi's vision has had an enduring effect on the ways in which decentralisation has been argued and defended in Indian politics.

Beyond the symbolic imagery of the independent 'village republic,' an important element of this relates to the idea that formal, constitutional changes in India's administrative system can have a lasting impact on informal and unequal structures like caste, class and gender. (We shall return to this theme in due course.) Box 2 gives an idea of the various commissions and committees that have inspired contemporary thinking about Panchayati Raj in India. Perhaps the most important among these – particularly since independence – were the B. Metha Commission of 1957, the Asoka Metha Commission of 1978, and the G.V.K. Rao committee of 1985.

An enduring issue that features in all of these assessments is the notion that the Panchayats have been weakened or undermined on three fronts:

- (1) States that are unwilling to devolve substantive power;
- (2) a resistant bureaucracy and (3) the power of local élites.' Such realizations were instrumental in the drive to give the Panchayats constitutional status in the 73rd Amendment (Jha, 1999).6 6

CONCLUSION

The above discussion has shown how measuring decentralisation is a difficult and nuanced task. Power, autonomy or competencies are quite recalcitrant to precise measurement, and the manner in which power is wielded by an authority in question has both objective elements which can be understood by all and subjective perceptions of the population over whom power is exercised. This constitutive nature of power is often neglected by scholars in measurement schemes in their quest for identifying indicators that have macro-level validity and precision. At the same time, to discard all attempts to measure is a kind of defeatism. Despite several shortcomings, the share of subnational government expenditure or revenue in consolidated general government expenditure or revenue will continue to be used as a proxy for measuring the degree of decentralisation in the absence of a better one in quantitative terms. One has to admit that measures of decentralisation often present a partial side of the reality and have some relevance within the parameters defined by the measurement framework adopted by each author and the context in which they evolve. However, every exercise of measuring decentralisation contributes to the theoretical understanding of the concept even as it enables us to bring out some of the complexities surrounding it. This article does not claim to put forward a new measurement which addresses all these problems except to suggest that an interdisciplinary approach capable of accommodating both quantitative and judgmental criteria is necessary if we are attempting to come up with aggregated scores. Until we reach such a stage, the disaggregated approach to measurement will continue to have saliency.

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