

Conceptualizing Local Government from a Multi-Dimensional Perspective

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Abstract

Community or local government is an ancient institution with evolving conceptualization. Local government is generally conceived as a political mechanism for governance at the grassroots (local) level. Though, politics which highlights the participation of the local citizenry in goal setting and decision-making is central to the concept of local government; its conceptualizing in contemporary times is a lot more encompassing. This paper posits that local government is a multi-dimensional and integrated concept. It is an integrant of democracy with social, economic, geographic, legal and administrative dimensions.

Key words: Local government; Multi-dimensional perspective; Government activities; Democracy

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Government activities when conducted from a central point and far away from the people tend to become impersonal, and against this impersonality or abstract view, there is a perpetual rebellion. Localities are not simply areas and sites but groups of people, living together as neighbours. They feel that they differ from the abstract average of humanity legislated for by the government and claim discretion to apply its uniform rules in a way, more closely fitting their real needs and their own ideas of themselves. At this point, the essence

and claim for local government takes form on the premise that it will check the danger of absolutism.

Also important is the fact that, with the amount and the variety of work to be done country-wide by government, it is impossible for a single authority to undertake directly their performance. The government too, does not have the requisite knowledge of all the diverse problems which are local in character. In this regard, Laski (1975, p.411) rightly observed that:

We cannot realise the full benefit of democratic government unless we begin by the admission that all problems in their incidence require decision at the place, and by the persons by whom the incidence is most deeply felt.

In effect, democracy in Laski's view takes a firm root when there is the existence local authority that ensures participation of the local people in decision-making to meet local needs.

Though there are many definitions by different writers, the definition of Local Government which has been widely accepted as reasonably embracing and which both the Cambridge (UK) Conference on Local Government in Africa and the United Nations Conference at The Hague on Administrative Aspects of Decentralization in 1961 considered and adopted is the United Nations definition. The United Nations Office for Public Administration defines local government as:

A political subdivision of a nation or (in a federal system) state, which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local affairs, including the powers to impose taxes or to exact labour for prescribed purposes. The governing body of such an entity is elected or otherwise locally selected.

Perhaps the definition is made more explicit by Kick Green (Whalen, 1970, p.312) who explained that:

Each unit of local government in any system is assumed to possess the following characteristics: a given territory and population, an institutional structure for legislative executive and administrative purposes, a separate legal identity, a range of powers and functions authorized by delegation from the

appropriate central or intermediate legislature, and lastly, within the ambit of such delegation, autonomy, subject always, at least in Anglo-American tradition, to the limitations of common law such as the test of reasonableness.

DIMENSIONS OF THE CONCEPT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The definition of United Nations Office for Public Administration and that of Kirk Green as well as definitions of some other writers clearly shows that local government is a multi-dimensional concept. The dimensions are:

Social Dimension

From the social dimension, local government is basically a social institution. It is an organized social entity based on the feeling of oneness. This emanates from the fact that man is a social animal and must of necessity interact with other people. Local government provides a platform for people in a locality to express and fulfill their human urge to interact and in the process of interaction, the feeling of convergence bring to the fore the commonality of basic needs of the people in the neighborhood of food, shelter, clothing, water, etc. It is these facets of their feeling of oneness that are a binding force not only among themselves but also between the local authority and the local people.

The feelings of convergence are the *raison d'être* for a local authority. They are a cementing force among local inhabitants. The stronger the feeling, the deeper the roots of a local authority, and the greater the resentment of outside control (Rice and Sumberg, 1997).

Economic Dimension

Local Government is basically an economic institution with a foremost role to play in promoting the economic well-being the people of the locality. The economic dimension of the concept of local government relates to its economic viability. Thus, revenue generation becomes a primary function of local government. A local government that is not economically viable cannot do much to improve the economic conditions of the people in the locality. It is impossible to give what you do not have. The economics of a local area reflects in its local authority. The local authority can give a good account of its performance without much problem if the locality is economically viable. An unviable area, with least potentiality for growth and development, makes local development a stupendous task for the local people. If the local government is economically viable, it will have the initial advantage in not only rendering local services, but also in warding off government intervention. Therefore, local governments work on the front lines delivering needed and desired services, such as education, road maintenance, public safety, and health care, to citizens (Kettl and Fesler, 2008).

Because of this, localities have adopted a culture of civic engagement where citizens participate in public affairs and promote the public good (Rice and Sumberg, 1997).

Different points are put forward in respect of the desirability or otherwise, of the participation of local communities in economic development of a country. These points which are diametrically opposed to each other may be analysed under two broad categories. The first category argues that the local authorities have no particular role to perform in the economic development of a country because they have meagre resources, barely enough to meet their local needs while development programmes involve heavy expenditure and sophisticated technical know-how.

The second school of thought supports the participation of local authorities in development by advancing different arguments on political, economic and psychological grounds. Thus, it is contended that their participation will ultimately reinforce local autonomy. This is because local government introduces economic decentralisation and discourages centralising tendencies in planning and development. To put it differently, through planning from below and implementation of development projects, the local authorities reduce extreme centralisation which is the natural consequence of planning and development.

By taking up small works, the local authorities contribute their quota to national development. In addition, since political tutelage and economic development go hand in hand, the only way to promote local autonomy is economic emancipation of local authorities through participation in economic development. All these results in strengthening local authorities as units of local self-government and ensures continuous, rather than formal relationship, between them and the Government.

Their participation is in consonance with simple but sound principles of economics that ensures a firm basis for the economic welfare of a country. Their participation in economic development encourages division of labour by freeing the Government from small works which are within their capacity; and which require local knowledge, local decision, and local action. They can also organise extension work for government projects.

Furthermore, local works are generally labour intensive. This is of utmost importance in the developing countries which have an enormous amount of potential of little works which can be carried out through intensive labour. Better local roads or markets for instance, stimulates the output of cash crops within a single season. Also, rural and urban planning raises not only standard of health and living, but also improves the quality of labour. Finally, planning from below makes planning more pragmatic it as fulfils the real needs of the people (Maddox, 1962, p.445).

Participation of local authorities in economic development is also supported for psychological

reasons. What counts more than anything else with the ordinary citizen is to see some tangible result of their tax contribution of labour in which they can take a personal interest in the form of a road, market, dispensary, etc. Such works stimulate a feeling of civic consciousness and a desire for improvement. With their participation in national development, growth and initiative of the local authorities also get stimulated (Jackson, 1960, p.214).

The concept of local government has an economic dimension of great significance. It highlights two facets of local authorities: one; with a bearing on their very existence as units for local self-governance; and the other, on their legitimate place in national development. Cumulatively, these facets of the concept of local government can help promote the desirable objective of partnership between the central government and local government for the ultimate fulfilment of the common goal of good life for the local populace.

Geographic Dimension

Local government also has a geographic dimension. From the perspective of a specific and defined territorial jurisdiction over a particular human habitation, the local government may be conceptualised in geographic terms. The geography of local government, which includes physical, demographic and economic features, has its impact on its policies, administration and law. These various features are of universal character, hence may be conceptualised.

The geographic dimension of local government stems from the fact that among the inhabitants of a given area, there is a consciousness that they are differentiated from the inhabitants of other areas in the same country. This is what is called the *concept of neighborhood* which makes the inhabitants of an area automatically aware of the interests which infringe upon them more directly than upon others.

These interests differ in quality and character from the interests of other neighborhoods. With the interests varying from area to area, problems vary. Different problems entail different solutions, be they political, administrative or legal. Human migration and shifts in economic activity have, sometimes brought about revolutionary changes in the character of a local government.

The geography of local authority offers an important dimension to the concept of local government. Its impact on local people and, therefore on local law, politics and administration can be all pervading. Hence, the decision-makers need to have adequate acquaintance with local geo-demographic variants for rendering meaningful services to the local people.

Legal Dimension

Local government is a legal institution in the sense that it is established by law of a competent and higher authority.

This makes local government a miniature body-politic and a body corporate. In its former capacity, it is the agent of the State and, as such, represents public interest. In that capacity, it exercises a part of the powers of the State legally delegated to it within specified geographical boundaries.

Thus, as a legal self-governing institution, local government:

- a. exists as an organised entity, possessing organisation and some minimum powers (constituting, what is called, autonomy) relating to the raising of revenue, preparation of budget, control and management local resources, human, fiscal and material.

- b. has governmental character. As an agency of the public, it must be chosen by the local people to whom it must be accountable.

- c. has the right to enter into contract and to own and dispose of property. The corporate status makes the local government in law, a person with rights and duties of a private individual defined through legislation and allowed through judicial interpretation. As such, a local authority can institute legal proceedings for the recovery of its property; it can sue for outstanding debts, and can also seek to obtain damages for the breach for contract.

- d. can also act as defendant in legal proceedings. It can be sued for failure to meet its obligations as employer, land owner, debtor or buyer.

- e. unlike *other persons*, it is bestowed by law the status of immortality - a continuous life. The people and the voters may come and go, the population may increase or decrease, Councillors and Mayors Chairman/President of local governments may be voted in or voted out, the form of local government and the extent of its powers may be changed from time to time, yet its legal entity will go on without interruption. Its perpetual succession will also continue indefinitely. Further, it has a name along with a corporate seal to distinguish it from other entities of a similar character.

Legally, local government can be extinguished by the government which is its creator. The contention that local self-governance is an inherent right of local people is no longer held valid. Developing countries that lack strong traditions for grassroots democracy do not present a happy picture. Frequent resort to dissolution or supercession speaks of the tendency of higher level of government to exercise literally their power to destroy its creatures. Hence, constitutional safeguards, until favourable traditions strike roots, may arrest the unhealthy tendency.

Thus, the powers of local government anywhere always derive from the central government. In a unitary political system, as in Britain for example, that central government is easily identified. Physically it is situated in the nation's capital. In a federal system of government, as in Canada, the United States and Nigeria, the power of local government derives not from the government

in the nation's capital, but from the provincial and state government in each case. Generally, too, the powers of a local government are contained in the statutes of the particular government that sets it up. The local government, as mentioned above, has to operate within the legal limits of such statutes. If its acts outside the limits of the statutes, it acts outside its powers, and its actions, to the extent as they are outside that legal limitation, are regarded as *ultra vires*, i.e. outside the law. If it acts within its legal limits, its actions are legal and can normally only be challenged in a court of law or overruled by a retroactive legislation of the central government that set up the local government.

Political Dimension

Local government is also a political institution. Local government is basically a political mechanism for governance at the local level. It has a direct bearing on the nature of the local government which is very intriguing, giving rise to several questions. In this regard, it is important to note the following:

i. Local government is not like other higher levels of government. It does not share with them legal and political sovereignty and does not usually derive authority directly from the Constitution.

ii. Local government does not fall into the administrative hierarchy of the government. It is not an administrative outpost enjoying delegated authority. It is a level of government established by law.

iii. Local government is not a public enterprise/public utility institution with statutory foundation, enjoying financial and operational autonomy. A body corporate with legislative and executive arms along with territory jurisdiction, deriving authority under law, may not actually qualify as a local government.

Conceptually, local government is an integrant of democracy. When local government loses its democratic feature, it degenerates into local administration. When local administration imbibes democratic character, it then becomes local government. Without democratic norms there can be no self-governing institutions. The right of the citizens to elect local officials and to bestow on them the right to represent them which *vox populi* comes hand in hand with other basic democratic principles, such as accountability and transparency are of extreme importance for a sound and effective government (Dragos and Neamtu, 2009; Haruta, Radu and Radu, 2009; Haruta and Radu, 2010). In a real democracy, citizens' involvement is possible for three reasons; because they can, because they want or because they were asked (Verba et. al, 2004, p.316-341).

Administrative Dimension

Local government has an administrative dimension. It has its local bureaucracy like other higher levels of government. They are basically of two types. There is

the Unified Service which is region-wide or state-wide and managed by a single Local Government Service Commission. There the Localize Service which is restricted to the individual local governments.

Thus, local government is operationally an administrative organisation with the confluence of politics and technology. The degree of confluence in the local government is of a unique character. Sometimes, one cannot make out when the political, organisational and technological processes begin and end and how they intermingle. Almost at all levels, whether at by-law-making level, planning or programming level, supervision or inspection level, execution or evaluation level, one notices them working as a team, each of them drawing upon the other's knowledge and experience. This is true in the Council or in its committees, in office or in the field.

The local authorities are so strategically placed that both as units of local self-government and as agents of government, they may succeed in producing optimum results without sacrificing the basic norms of democracy. This is so because they conform to the two cardinal objectives of Public Administration: *efficient performance and responsible performance*, resulting from their two-fold characteristics: their existence at various points of contact with the people the ultimate sovereign, and the allocation of sphere of activities with required authority to take necessary decisions. They can combine the best of representative democracy, bureaucracy and technocracy while at the same time, eliminating their deficiencies.

The politician can be at his best as:

1. He has direct control not only over the decision but also over their execution; and

2. He is constantly exposed to public gaze.

The administrator-technocrat can prove his mettle as:

1. He is continuously subjected to scrutiny by his immediate and ultimate bosses, injecting promptness and responsiveness;

2. His knowledge and experience will produce rewarding concrete results and inculcating commitment to work thereby giving full sense of satisfaction; and

3. He has necessary climate to make best use of his knowledge and experience.

On the whole, it may be said that local government is basically an organised social entity based on the feeling of oneness. In political terms, it is concerned with the governance of a specific local area, constituting a political sub-division of a nation, state or other major political units. Thus, that local government or local self-government (a concept that underlines the democratic aspect of election) cannot include rule by local notables, by traditional or hereditary rulers, some special elites or any one as a matter of right. In the same manner, local self-government is not reconcilable with the running of local affairs by local men nominated for the purpose by the central government. The participation of the local

population in the selection of representatives, whether by election or by some special selection, is a very fundamental prerequisite of local government or local self-government.

In the performance of its functions, it acts as the agent of the State. In effect, local government is an integrant of the political mechanism for governance in a country. As body corporate and juristic person, it represents a legal concept. The geography, demography and economic factors of a local area, offer important dimensions in the conceptual articulation of local government.

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