

Chapter 20

The Normative Base of Local Government: Progress in Local Democracy and the Reformation Process

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ABSTRACT

International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences defines local government as a public entity which is a sub-unit of a state or of a region, charged with the determination and carrying out of certain public policies in a relatively small territory. Local authorities are created to respond to certain needs of the inhabitants in local communities. These are mainly administrative, political and social factors. Leaving aside a few exceptionally small states, carrying out of all the public services from a single center is almost impossible. In order to ensure efficient performance of public services and to avoid both “apoplexy” at the center on one hand, and “anemia” in the periphery, there is a need to reduce the load on the shoulders of the central government and to take necessary measures to strengthen local authorities.

INTRODUCTION

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The Normative Base of Local Government

Efforts to increase efficiency in public services at the local level aim at:

1. Revising the size of the optimal service area,
2. Reducing the number of local authorities to prevent waste of financial resources, and finally,
3. Leaving the local units such public services which they can carry out most efficiently.

Certain public services such as energy production and distribution may be put into effect better by centralized systems. Public health, education, water provision, territorial planning and urban development may have different “optimal sizes”. It is generally assumed that such services as sanitation, public transportation, parking, construction and maintenance of streets, urban development and planning, open spaces and city parks are definitely public services of local nature. One should keep in mind that in view of the immense diversity prevailing in different societies, one should keep away from making generalizations in this respect.

Social development, on the other hand, is closely related with the existence and development level of local governance. Rapid industrial and urban development of a society paves the way for the development of local authorities. Even the increase of literacy rates plays an important role in the formation and strengthening of local government. In some underdeveloped countries, lower literacy rates have been used for a long time, as an excuse to postpone the establishment local self-government. On the other hand, the contribution of local governments to socio-economic development is also regarded as one of the reasons explaining their necessity to exist (Maddick, 1963). From a socio-psychological point of view, empowering local inhabitants to govern themselves contribute to strengthening their self-reliance and self-confidence, and thus to the development and consolidation of democracy.

Liberty, participation and efficiency have always been regarded as the fundamental values on which contemporary local self-government is based (Sharpe, 1970, p. 115). Liberties concerned in this respect are certainly not individual liberties but the liberties possessed by local communities as a whole. They are more than the sum of the liberties of the individuals. This concept of liberty is reflected in the principle of local self-government conceptualized by the European Convention of Local Self-Government.

Public participation as one of the principal values underlying local self-government presumes that the city or the society is above the individuals. Apart from the public services offered by them, local authorities are regarded as autonomous representative institutions. It is believed that most democratic form of government is local self-government because it allows the participation of the people in decision-making processes to govern their own affairs. This is the reason why Robert Dahl, well-known political scientist, determined that during the 21st century, progress in technology and communication will make the cities as the most convenient democratic institutions in the USA (Dahl, 1967, pp. 953-970).

Encouragement of public participation, ensuring efficiency in carrying out local public services, speeding up social and economic development of local communities and finally the protection of national unity and territorial integrity are among the basic contributions expected from local self-government. However, it is not possible to maximise the contributions of all these functions at the same time. Because, there exist certain contradictions among these expectations. Throughout history, one or more of these goals had a chance to be realized as compared with others. For example, in Napoleonic France, increasing efficiency of local public services has had the priority.

At the beginnings of the 20th Century, autonomous and democratic local administration was among the most respected societal values. At present, in such countries as Federal Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden, where there is no need to worry about the sustainability of the national unity and territorial

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