

Book Review: Improving Local Government

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BOOK REVIEW: Improving Local Government¹

Reddy, P. S., De Vries, M. S. and Haque, M. S.

(Palgrave Macmillan. 2008)

This book is a compilation of ten essays on local government with an introductory and concluding chapter. The themes discussed include metropolitan governance, the role of community leadership, the value of best practice as an administration technique, indigenous knowledge, intergovernmental relations, public-private partnerships and local management.

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Academic literature that engages in a comparison of local government systems, policies and practices and their impact on democracy and development is hard to come by. Yet, these comparisons are critical as they shed light on challenges, failures and best practices in local government across jurisdictions. They also reveal an often-surprising similarity in challenges and choices experienced by countries that engage in decentralisation and are therefore critical resources for policy entrepreneurs and policy makers. This book is thus a very welcome addition to this small pool of academic publications that pursue such comparisons.

The article by Rodriguez-Costa and Rosenbaum contains a fascinating overview of metropolitan governance in Latin America, examining metropolitan governance in Quito, Lima-Callao, Santa Fe de Bogota, Sao Paulo, Santiago, Mexico City, Buenos Aires and San Salvador. The authors conclude that the challenges of metropolitan governance are huge and they bemoan the complexity of metropolitan governance arrangements, often characterized by a multitude of local and regional institutions sharing responsibility in a metropolitan area. A particularly interesting conclusion drawn by the authors is that the relative novelty of decentralisation in Latin America may be the reason why local authorities are reluctant to cede their newfound authority to cooperative ventures in the interest of better metropolitan governance. It is a pity that the authors don't often buttress their important observations about the socio-economic climate within which metropolitan governments operate and their performance, with sources that could assist the further academic enterprise in this area.

Reddy's article, entitled "Metropolises in Africa" is a comprehensive case study of three metropolitan municipalities in South Africa, where metropolitan areas are governed by single local government authorities. The article may as well have been entitled "Metropolises in South Africa" as the discussion is limited to the South African context. It offers an impressive and comprehensive consolidation of the debates surrounding metropolitan governance in South Africa, the history preceding the establishment of the new metropolitan municipalities, and their effectiveness so far. The article is impressive in its comprehensiveness and the author makes the important argument that the bold institutional arrangement for metropolitan governance in South Africa cannot be held up as an undisputed success story that is to be emulated by other jurisdictions. An area that the author left untouched is the effect of the establishment of powerful single-tiered metropolitan

municipalities on the balance of power between local, provincial and national government in South Africa. This is a pity, particularly considering the trend, which is all too common in Africa, of opposition parties winning municipal elections in urban areas (see for example Harare, Addis Ababa and Cape Town) and the consequent challenges for multi-party democracy. While Reddy argues that institutional arrangements are no recipe for successful metropolitan governance, Rodriguez-Costa and Rosenbaum observe that the fragmentation of metropolitan governance institutions in Latin America contributes negatively to the governance challenges in that region. The two papers represent, albeit implicitly, two sides to an interesting debate to which, in my view, the editors could have paid more attention in their overall assessment.

The book places a high premium on the theoretical discourse surrounding the rationale for local government autonomy. Haque, De Vries and Reddy discuss the classic theoretical foundations of local government and emphasise the limits of these theories. They propose a new theoretical foundation for local government, entitled the “multi-centred theory”, which calls for a more balanced approach to local government autonomy vis-à-vis accountability to the centre. Reflections on a foundation for local government are critical because, after a wave of decentralisation that has sustained itself for more than twenty years, there is still no conclusive evidence that decentralisation is inextricably linked to development. The usual platitudes that talk of ‘government closest to the people’ are generally not sufficient to justify local government. A firm conceptual basis is critical and the authors make an important contribution to the debate in this publication.

Haque’s survey of local government in South Asia is a very well documented article and provides the reader with an impressive arsenal of sources on a region whose local government experience is not often discussed (except for the Indian experience which has been the subject of extensive research and comment). Despite the promising attempts at deepening decentralisation, the author sees a long road ahead for local government in the region. Haque attributes the limited progress made thus far to the usual cocktail of socio-economic, financial and intergovernmental challenges that harass local governments in the developing world. However, the author also makes the critical point that ethnic, religious and caste cleavages bedevil progress in decentralisation.

Nwaka's contribution deals with indigenous knowledge and suggests that development and reform initiatives on the African continent are still dominated by conventional strategies for economic development. He challenges the development sector and the stakeholders on the African continent to rely more on indigenous moral and indigenous resources in order to develop a distinctly African tactic towards development.

Geldenhuis' chapter, entitled "The Crux of Intergovernmental Relations" discusses intergovernmental relations and carries a case study of South Africa. He introduces the South African framework for local government and narrates the transformation of local government. The framework for integrated development planning is posited as a critical vehicle for improved intergovernmental relations. Geldenhuis' chapter would have benefited from deeper reflection on the practice of intergovernmental relations. This may have been useful against the backdrop of the complaint, widely expressed by practitioners and increasingly recorded by academics, that intergovernmental relations in South Africa is at risk of getting stuck in a paradigm of good intentions, motherhood and apple-pie, ambitious legal frameworks and IGR forums that are pleasant get-togethers rather than real programmatic exchanges. For example, a reflection on the intersection between centralised politics and intergovernmental relations would have been useful. Another critical issue in intergovernmental relations is the notion of asymmetry in relationships. The contribution almost treats local government as a monolithic entity; it may have been useful to take into account the huge variations between municipalities and the impact this has on the practice of intergovernmental relations.

Kroukam and Lues discuss various initiatives and strategies to improve local government management. They discuss the modernisation agenda and provide a useful theoretical underpinning for it. They suggest eleven themes as crucial factors in making modernisation efforts successful. The authors introduce and assess the New Public Management concept, propose a new governing framework and then proceed with practical examples of improvement strategies in Bulgaria, Norway, South Africa, Tanzania and Brazil. While the context of the article suggests that the authors will review the modernisation of local

government management in these countries, the actual case studies focus largely on a description of ‘macro’ local government reform in the respective jurisdictions.

Du Plessis discusses the role of community leadership in local government. He distinguishes political leadership, managerial leadership and civic leadership, and discusses the various features of these different types. With regard to civic leadership, Du Plessis raises important questions particularly with regard to the desired levels of institutionalisation of community participation. The article promises a discussion of community leadership in South Africa, Latin America and Asia. However, the author’s delivery on that promise is somewhat lopsided. The South African discussion is comprehensive while the Latin American and Asian discussions are limited to quick excursions.

Göymen renders an interesting discussion of the background and rationale of the ever-increasing involvement of private enterprise in local development. The author posits that the history and prevailing ideology of the state will largely define the type of partnerships that will emerge. A strong public ideology will result in the domination of public actors in the partnership. He then proceeds to discuss examples of private-enterprise involvement in Turkey, Jordan, Poland and Uganda. The Turkish example is discussed at length against the backdrop of Turkey’s transformation from centralist to decentralised administration. The other three countries are afforded very limited attention and are not discussed in the conclusion.

Andrews addresses best practices as a technique in public administration. She discusses proposals to improve the ‘transferability’ of best practices and reiterates that context is all-important. The article then proceeds with a discussion of best practices in the field of intergovernmental relations, local leadership, local government management, private sector involvement and indigenous knowledge.

The book is likely to appeal more to the academic than to the local government practitioner. It contains valuable contributions to the study of local government across the globe and steers clear of too much attention to practical considerations. The book does not aim to be overly methodical in its comparison. The editors are not very explicit about the overall

objective of the various case studies and comparisons, or what has informed the choice of topics and regions (including a distinctly South African bias). This may very well have been intentional to allow the individual authors to deliver within their disciplines and interests. However, it ultimately leads to a conclusion, which some may find obvious, that there is no singular truth to local government and that a one-size-fits-all discourse on the topic is unproductive. Perhaps this important book may have benefited from a greater effort to distill trends from the various contributions and case studies, and to present those in a manner that assists practitioners in making everyday choices about local government. Nevertheless, the book certainly represents an important contribution to the body of international work on local government.