EDITORIAL

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Editorial

The articles in this issue explore various ways in which local governments can – or should – advance effective local democracy, and the challenges involved. Five key elements are explored: electoral systems, accountability to communities, the distribution and adequacy of resources, quality of management, and relationships with traditional governance and the rights of Indigenous peoples.

Preety Choudhari, Trisha Roy, Khushboo Verma, Reena Bharti and Sonia Verma provide a challenging assessment of the outcomes of mandating reserved seats for women in Indian local governments (*panchayats*). They argue that despite those laws, recent experience in the state of Uttar Pradesh suggests that no meaningful political empowerment of women has occurred. Their research focused on the background and experience of women elected to the position of chairperson of district councils, and found that they were commonly installed as proxies for members of male ruling elites, rather than as the best candidate in their own right. Their election was made possible by the *indirect* election of district chairpersons within Uttar Pradesh: this enables 'strongmen' to pressure or bribe council members into voting for their preferred candidate. In this way the intent of the Indian constitution's reservation quota policy is being subverted. The authors urge a switch to direct election of district chairpersons, as practised in other states.

Wilfred U Lameck and Rudie Hulst focus on the issue of local government's accountability downwards to its communities on the one hand, and upwards to central government on the other. This tension was explored through a case study of the delivery of agricultural extension services in the Morogoro Municipality and Hai District of Tanzania. Those services were decentralised to local government in

1999 as part of the country's 'Decentralization by Devolution' programme, which was intended, among other things, to bring about policies that better reflect the needs and preferences of local people and stakeholders. However, previous research points to continued upwards accountability being the dominant force. Lameck and Hulst found strong evidence that downward accountability to the community was being restricted by limited administrative and political decentralisation, and centralised appointment of senior managers. Councillors saw their future in terms of loyalty to their party, not the community, and managers looked to the higher echelons of central government. The authors argue that incentive structures must change if local democracy is to be advanced: this might include new rules for local elections, including the way candidates are nominated and separate dates for local and national elections, as well as giving local governments more control over 'hiring and firing' staff.

Bernard Akanbang and Anass Ibn Abdallah also explore accountability, but through the lens of applying participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) to local government projects in Ghana. Their research focused on the rural Lambussie District of the north-west region, a severely disadvantaged area that enabled the authors to explore how PM&E works in practice in resource-constrained local governments. Conceptually, PM&E encourages productive participation by a range of stakeholders, and builds the capacity of local people to analyse, reflect and take action. It thus offers considerable scope to enhance accountability. However, consistent with the empirical literature, the authors found that the effectiveness of PM&E was hindered by resource constraints; inadequate procedures and processes for involving local-level participants; lack of clarity in policy guidelines and manuals; and the limited power of citizens. Accordingly, they propose rights-based community empowerment, plus further research into both the respective roles and accountability of PM&E stakeholders, and ways to simplify and clarify decentralised PM&E processes.

Megha Rao, Arnab Mukherji and Hema Swaminathan examine the resourcing of public health programmes across rural areas of the Indian state of Karnataka. Their research aimed to identify the extent to which local governments were able to exercise fiscal discretion in implementing programmes at the district level. This reflected a concern that the promise of decentralisation has yet to be realised at both sub-national and local levels. Through a detailed analysis of health funding the authors found that Karnataka's 'decentralised' health programmes fail to deliver meaningful autonomy to local governments. Overall, the amount of devolved funding was insufficient, and much of it was not targeted appropriately to areas of greatest need. Also, a large proportion went towards paying the salaries and wages of seconded state personnel who answer to their department, not the local government – a similar issue to that identified by Lameck and Hulst in Tanzania. The news was not all bad: in some sectors of health, notably nutrition, there was a high level of local discretion. Clearly, however, Karnataka has a long way to go in making decentralisation a reality, and that will require not only changes in policy at state level but also a major effort to build the capacity of rural local governments, especially their own-source revenues – another global issue.

Lack of resources is also the theme of Ronald Adamtey, Clifford Amoako and Benjamin Doe's paper on the potential of volunteering to strengthen local delivery of essential community services in Ghana. Volunteering is widespread, but there is a pressing need to understand what is actually being achieved on-the-ground, and the scope to 'mainstream' volunteer resources within local governments. The authors studied the KEEA municipality in south-west Ghana. They explored reasons for volunteering, the specific activities in which volunteers were engaged, the impacts of their work, and the conditions needed to make their efforts more successful and sustainable. Two key findings were, firstly, volunteers' success in mobilising and empowering communities to become more proactive in meeting their needs, including through local fund-raising. And secondly, the need to bridge the current gap between the work of volunteers and the day-to-day administration of municipalities. Achieving longer-term, sustainable outcomes also requires action to strengthen relationships between local governments and their communities. These themes echo Akanbang and Ibn Abdallah's conclusion that Ghanaian communities should be empowered to become active participants in project monitoring and evaluation.

Turning to the quality of management, Tyanai Masiya, Yul Derek Davids and Mary S Mangai reflect on growing protests about inadequate provision of basic municipal services (housing, water and sanitation, land, electricity and infrastructure) to South African communities. They observe that while South Africa has advanced legal and policy frameworks intended to promote good services, the evidence points to deteriorating standards, and attribute this in part to the performance of municipal officials. Poor performance is seen as the result of a wide range of institutional, bureaucratic and political factors, and requires systemic improvement: *"the individual pieces in municipal service delivery (for example municipal officials, stakeholders, citizens, elected officials, other spheres of government etc) are important, but the way they work together makes the difference as to whether the municipalities as systems succeed"*. The authors conclude that central government must invest in building the capacity of municipal officials through skills development and broader systemic interventions, notably improved oversight of the way local government operates, and promoting non-partisan appointment of officials.

Jimmy Francis Obonyo and William Muhumuza shed light on local democracy from the perspective of how 'Western' local government interacts with traditional African governance. Their research focused on the Karamoja sub-region in north-eastern Uganda, an area characterised by a harsh semi-arid environment, an agro-pastoral economy, and widespread poverty. Despite the introduction of elected local governments in the late 1990s, much of the population of Karamoja continues to recognise the authority of elders, who in turn seek to secure their position in the system of government and resist the imposition of unacceptable new laws and practices. Tensions abound, reflecting the differing concepts of 'democratic pragmatism', which sees continued traditionalism as incompatible with a functioning democracy; and 'organic democracy', which finds that traditional authorities can still play a useful role and cannot just be wished out of existence. The authors tend to the latter view, noting that in Uganda

traditional authorities were recognised in the 1995 constitution alongside decentralised local government, creating two parallel systems. They advocate the development of a hybrid system, arguing that integration is not only essential for good governance but also as a uniting factor in a multi-ethnic and divided country.

Ed Wensing contributes Part 2 of his paper on Indigenous peoples' human rights, self-determination and local governance. Part 1 concluded by discussing the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, authored by Australia's First Nations peoples in 2017, and how it marked a turning point in their struggle for recognition. Part 2 considers progress made since then in heeding the Statement's calls for Voice, Treaty and Truth-telling. It also explores the concept of coexistence, particularly in terms of Australia having two culturally distinct systems of land ownership; draws comparisons with Canada and New Zealand; and briefly discusses the potential role of local government. Wensing expresses serious concerns about the performance of Australia's federal (Commonwealth) government, which has largely failed to endorse and follow-up the key themes and principles set out in the Uluru Statement. However, he identifies wide-ranging, and in some cases world-leading, initiatives by several state and territory governments. In particular, the state of Victoria and the Northern Territory are demonstrating both firm commitment and creative leadership. He also outlines the scope for local governments to make a decisive contribution, building on their place-based functions and close connections with communities. This positions them to 'reconfigure' relationships with Indigenous peoples at a local and regional scale, bridging gaps in culture and governance, advancing mutual respect and ensuring just outcomes.

In summary, these articles indicate that while frequent, free, fair and transparent elections may be seen to underpin local democracy, they must be complemented by a range of other mechanisms to deliver promised benefits. Elected representatives must be accountable first and foremost to their communities, and citizens empowered to engage effectively with local governments and ensure their needs are met. Local control over decentralised funding programmes should be strengthened, and innovative steps taken to mobilise and augment available resources. The capacity and performance of local management must be improved. And Indigenous cultures and traditional governance must be respected and enabled to coexist in a productive relationship with 'Western' systems.

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