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The role and purpose of local government

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Abstract

The purpose of the local government system is to provide essential public services to the local communities as per their needs and ensure community participation in the planning and decision-making process. The idea of a local government system (LGS) is adopted worldwide for the social and economic development of the local communities through a community participation approach, but it works in different structures and sustains in a different framework. In Pakistan, South Africa, and New Zealand, the local government system has been introduced to empower the local communities and work for their well-being and development through a community engagement and participation approach. However, the local government bodies have more power and authority in New Zealand and South Africa than in Pakistan, as it is very systematic and organized. Local bodies enjoy power but are simultaneously under the control of the central government through a legal framework. LGS provides effective service delivery at the grassroots level if it is developed in a very systematic way, either regulated or managed through the constitution or the central government. Moreover, the capacity of local bodies is always a remaining issue, and the central government mostly hires private actors to combat the inability and inefficiency of the local elected officials. Lastly, the essence of local government systems all over the world lies in the “community engagement/participation”, as it cannot serve its holy purpose of local service delivery with the practice of community disengagement.

Keywords: Participation, Accountability, Transparency, Local government, Planning, Local communities

1. Introduction: The Role and Purpose of Local Government

1.1. Pakistan Context

The purpose of local government is to provide basic needs to the people and practice power at the local level. The local government system aims to fulfill the needs of the masses at the grass-root level, to guarantee the welfare of all. Moreover, a stable local government system also reinforces good governance due to its participatory and accountability features. Apart from his description of the role of the local government system, (Soomro & Chandio, 2013) criticized the process the local government system introduced, the authority who implemented this system in Pakistan said it was executed by the military. The military rulers did not let local government members work purely for the masses and assure their welfare at a grass-root level and instead they used them for their purposes. The local government system should be established as per the needs of the local masses, not for any particular powerful authority such as a military or political group. In Pakistan, the local government system is weak and could not perform the duties according to the needs of local citizens due to instability and the strong influence of bureaucracy. The elected local members are unable to work permanently as senate and national assembly members do because the constitution supports them and they can complete their tenure.

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On the other hand, the national constitution does not support/recognize the local government system as the third tier of government that's why the ruling political party can demolish the local government system any time and it creates instability like, when the current ruling party came into power in 2018 it demolished the local government system. Furthermore, even post-devolution bureaucracy at the local level is still so strong compared to elected local members, e.g., Assistant Commissioner (AC) has practiced more powers at the tehsil level than the elected tehsil chairman, and a deputy commissioner has gained more power at the district level compared to elected district chairman. Although citizens vote for the local government members, they are insulated by a specific political party and may be bound to work for the goals and purposes of that particular party instead of the needs of local citizens. However, the local government system can be improved and strengthened in democracy throughout the world through its significant features of participation, accountability, and transparency, which enables elected local members to efficiently deliver to the masses at the grassroots level (Soomro & Chandio, 2013).

Bari (2001) defined decentralization, distribution of political power, management authority, and resources at the grass-root level as significant values of the local government system. Also, the main purpose of the local government plan is to serve the community and engage them in community activities at the grass-root level. The core value of the local government system is the inclusion of diversity, diffusion of power to the local people by selecting them directly at the village and union council, and indirectly at tehsil level and district level and assurance of community's equal representation at all levels of the local government system.

According to Haq (2010, as cited in Soomro & Chandio, 2013), the aim of local government can vary across the countries but the common local government purposes are related to the development and welfare of the area such as roads, safety, educational facilities, health, water and sanitation with some additional functions which include cultural activities, sports, housing, and poverty and the like (Hureem et al., 2020; Ihsan et al., 2021).

Khan discussed that when management authority and political power diffused at the grass-root level the local administration system transformed into local government and required to consider the local government bodies as, "decentralized democratic government at the local level" instead of administrative managers of the provincial government. The core significance of local bodies is to make efforts to successfully run need-based development programs, for example, eliminating poverty at the grass-root level by prioritizing the needs of the poor. Moreover, to spend on social protection program, provide incentives to marginalized population such as small farmers who needs equipment's, advance farming techniques, women working in informal economy and also invest on women specific facilities at the formal workplaces (Khan, et al, 2009, p.g:233; Khalid et al., 2022; Hureem & Butt, 2018; Ashraf et al., 2022).

Moreover, for the success of national development projects, the inclusion of elected local bodies; village councilors, union councilors, tehsil councilors, and district government members at all levels of development projects from design to the implementation stage is crucial, as they know the needs of local people better due to their service delivery at the local level.

People have more trust in local government than provincial and central government because elected local bodies work to fulfill the needs of local people. They involve community members in the community activities and this paves the way to building trust and confidence of local communities in the local government system (Khan, 2006; Hureem, 2025).

(Cheema et al., 2005) analyzed the post-devolution situation by highlighting the changes in the local administrative system after the diffusion of power from province to districts in 2000. Before devolution, bureaucracy has administrative authority but post-devolution, it is transferred to elected local bodies like the district Nazim, tehsil and union councilors. As discussed, village and union councilors are elected directly through public voting whereas tehsil and district level bodies are elected indirectly and the elected district Nazim is the head of the district government. Now district administrative heads like, DCO (District Coordination Officer) directly report to the Nazim instead of reporting to the non-elected provincial representative as per previous practice (Bari, 2001). Whereas, in 2013 according to Soomro & Chandio, despite the devolution of power to elected local bodies, bureaucracy has more influence due to the instability of the local government system.

The local bodies have power and authority to access and utilize the financial resources at a local level post-devolution. The utmost important thing is now, they can plan development projects at the local level whereas, previously the provincial government planned the development programs and took decisions at the provincial level. But now, the elected local bodies are the decision-makers of the local development projects. Authors also highlighted the issues faced by elected local bodies post-devolution which creates hindrances to effectively delivering at the grass-root level. They still have to depend on the provincial and federal government for the release of funds to run their development schemes

and to meet non-development expenditures. For example, when they design water supply and sanitation schemes as per the local community's needs, they require approval and fiscal resources for the proposed schemes from the provincial government/cabinet (Cheema et al, 2005). The approval of the local development schemes depends on the interest of the political actors as the political parties do have an influence on the role of the local government system and this limits the actual purpose of the local government system as they are unable to serve as per needs of the local community (Soomro & Chandio, 2013; Hureem, 2025).

1.2. New Zealand Context

According to the local government act (2002), the main purpose of local government in New Zealand is to meet the needs of local communities, build good infrastructure, and an effective provision of public services at a local level. The local establishments, which include territorial authorities; cities and districts and members of regional councils, have full power and authority to make decisions and work independently to achieve community goals. They are legally bound to engage local communities in the decision-making process, ensure community participation, involved them in the community development plans especially long-term plans (10 years) which are required to revise after three years to assess the outcomes. The purpose of territorial authorities that are comprised of city and district councils and mostly district councils are rural and city councils are urban. They are there to provide public services for instance water and sanitation, health, safety, infrastructure, recreational and cultural facilities, local regulations and development of the local community. Whereas, the role of regional councils in the local government system is mostly related to physical and natural resources management such as environment, air, food, pollution, water and some are also deal in public transportation matters at the regional level (The Local Government System in New Zealand Country Profile, 2017–18).

There is a two-tiered government in New Zealand; national and local and the local government works independently in all spheres like administration, finance and politics. Local authorities are not accountable to the central or national government in fact; they are responsive to their communities as they work on behalf of their communities. As local people elect local members; mayors and councilors, for planning, well-being and development of the local communities and they take decisions as per the legal framework developed by the central government, issues arise when local bodies miss or ignore the significant element of "community engagement" (Asquith, 2012; Rohe, 2011).

Under new reforms in LGA (2002) more powers have been assigned to the local government minister, he/she makes sure the local authorities comply with main legislations, their effective delivery to the local communities. The local ministers have the power to interfere with the local bodies in case of irregularities, incompetency of the local authorities in making decisions and the provision of public services at the local level. (The Local Government System in New Zealand Country Profile, 2017–18).

1.3. South Africa Context

In South Africa, the local government system consists of municipalities; local/district/metropolitan, is responsible to provide the basic and important services especially to the poor inhabitants within their jurisdiction or govern area and it is a legal commitment as per the constitution. The core functions of the local government are related to the welfare and development of the local community, for example, good infrastructure, water and sanitation facilities, safety, recreational and emergency services. Some provincial responsibilities are also assigned to the municipalities such as local health, tourism and public transport services. The significant aspect of the local government system is the engagement of the local communities in the essential matters and activities of the municipalities for instance, development planning, decision making and performance outcomes. (Roux, 2005; Koma, 2010).

The provincial government monitors the municipalities to ensure the good service delivery of the local government departments. In case of poor performance of the local municipalities, the provincial government hires or appoints administrators to resolve the challenges faced by low-capacity municipalities and build their capacity to achieve their constitutional mandate. The local government bodies cannot afford to provide poor service delivery as local people have trust and confidence in the municipalities. They are close to the local government compared to the national and provincial. Moreover, it is also a legal obligation of the local government to provide essential public services to the local communities in an effective way (Koma, 2010).

Presently, the local government is dealing with serious issues related to the provision of good quality local services and local communities are not satisfied with their performance. They are unable to deliver well due to lack of management capacity; human and financial management, poor leadership, inadequate financial resources, ineffective utilization of funds, inability to have clear and strong planning of development projects and execution of the government policies. In this regard, national and provincial government support is needed to build the local government capacity for the welfare and progress of the local communities (Koma, 2010; Roux, 2005).

2. Conclusion

Overall, the purpose of the local government system is to provide essential public services to the local communities as per their needs and ensure community participation in the planning and decision-making process. The local community elects the local bodies to serve for the social and economic development of the local communities through effective service delivery. As discussed above, in Pakistan, South Africa and New Zealand, the local government system has been introduced to empower the local communities and work for their wellbeing and development through community engagement and participation approach. However, the local government bodies have more power and authority in New Zealand and South Africa as compared to Pakistan, as it is very systematic and organized, local bodies enjoy power but are simultaneously under the control of the central government through a legal framework. In Pakistan, powers diffuse at the grass-root level from the national and provincial government and it is not in the constitution. The decentralized system is not fully authorized the local elected officials they are dependent on the national and provincial government for the funds and policy decisions. They cannot independently perform their work at the local level whereas, in New Zealand, local elected officials are more autonomous in administration, political and financial matters. There is no devolution of powers from the national and provincial government to the local bodies, in fact, the local government system is introduced through its constitution and it's their constitutional obligation to serve the communities within their jurisdiction.

Although, local bodies are responsible to provide good quality local services to uplift local communities but they are not effectively delivered especially in Pakistan and South Africa. There are many issues, for instance, lack of funds, capacity building issues, poor leadership, bad management, corruption, appointees' control and the like. In South Africa and Pakistan, the poor performance of the local bodies is mainly due to lack of capacity, good leadership and poor caliber and in Pakistan, instability and central control are also responsible. As local government system is not stable, not recognized in the constitution and mostly depends on the provincial and central government for administrative and financial approvals.

The idea of a local government system is very good and adopted worldwide for the social and economic development of the local communities through a community participation approach but works in different structures and sustain in a different framework. They provide effective service delivery at the grassroots level if the local government system is developed in a very systematic way either regulated or managed through the constitution or the central government. Moreover, the capacity of local bodies is always a remaining issue, and the central government mostly hires private actors to combat the incapability and inefficiencies of the local elected officials. Lastly, the essence of local government systems all over the world lies in the "community engagement/participation", as it cannot not be serving its holy purpose of local service delivery with the practice of community disengagement.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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