Foundations for Local Governance

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Editor

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Decentralization
in Comparative Perspective

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book is an outcome of a five-year research project at Ryukoku University, Japan. The research project is named Local Human Resources and Public Policy Development System Open Research Centre (LORC),¹ and is funded by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT)² and Ryukoku University. The overall purpose of LORC has been to examine ways in which participatory policy making has been attempted and to articulate possible systems for human resource development for future local regenerations within the world-wide trend towards decentralization. More specifically, the LORC has been focusing on the following areas:

1. participatory/partnership-style public policy development systems;
2. education and training systems for human resources who are to shoulder local public policy; and
3. social accreditation of policy/human resources development systems;

At the beginning of the research, it was widely acknowledged that effective public policy making would involve partnerships of diverse stakeholders between public, private, community and voluntary sectors. The research findings generated by the LORC, since its inception, have been utilized further by joint activities with domestic and overseas local governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), non-profit organizations (NPOs), and research institutions.

While the LORC targeted the improvement of local governance in Japan, it has been made acutely aware that such improvement needs to be informed by a wide range of international experiences encompassing both industrialized and developing countries. In fact, in some aspects, participatory development initiatives have been more numerous in Asia and Africa than in Japan. Therefore, the fourth research group within the LORC project embarked on comparative analyses of decentralization and local governance reforms in six developing countries: India (with a particular focus on Kerala State), Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Uganda, South Africa and Ghana.

¹ The project website is found at: <http://lorc.ryukoku.ac.jp/eng/index.html>.

² MEXT funding was made through an “Open Research Center” project.

While all these countries are unique in initiating “decentralization” within their respective historical and political backgrounds, it is also very interesting to compare ways in which such policy initiatives were conceptualized and have subsequently been implemented. These countries have been selected especially because the policy rationale to “bring services closer to people” originated in different socio-political backgrounds. The state-society relations in the respective post-independence periods since the second half of the 20th century present both similarities and differences. These diversities provide rich material against which these comparative analyses have been conducted. Thus it was decided that it would be theoretically informative to conduct such comparative diagnoses, while management of this magnitude of research would be very challenging.

As the readers immediately discover in reading this book, a variety of decentralization measures have recently been pursued in the world, including developing countries. Particularly since the 1990s, the decentralization reforms are intended to contribute to further democratization, to effective development, and to good governance. However, there is no automatic guarantee that these intended outcomes will be achieved just by decentralizing political and administrative institutions. This purpose of this book is to fill the missing link between policy assumptions and outcomes based on the different experiences of these six developing countries.

In 2003, identification of relevant institutions and resource persons in each targeted country started. Subsequently, the network of collaborators was gradually built. On several occasions research meetings were organized in order to share common concerns, articulate key analytical concepts, and apply them to each country’s setting. In November 2004 in the Hague, in The Netherlands, the first research meeting was organized in conjunction with the symposium jointly organized by LORC and VNG (Association of Netherlands Municipalities). In June 2005, some of the collaborators visited Japan to have a second round of discussions. In February 2007, the final meeting to discuss the manuscripts was held at Ryukoku University, Japan. (With much regret, another chapter on Sri Lanka has not been incorporated into this volume for various reasons.)

Throughout these meetings, a common consensus started to emerge. Although decentralization measures are potentially useful for attaining both political democratization and economic efficiency, what is often packaged under the umbrella of “decentralization” needs to be disaggregated analytically. Successful reforms need much more coherent approaches in which a range of stakeholders must become willing to share responsibilities and resources in order to achieve the ultimate outcome of poverty reduction in the developing countries.

One of the essential messages of this book is that decentralization per se does not necessarily lead to an improved governing arrangement between the leaders and citizens. In some cases, it may be suitable to use the instruments related to decentralization in order to redefine the roles and responsibilities of diverse stakeholders, and through such redefinition better governance might be achieved, as in the case of Uganda (roughly from 1993 to 2000). In other cases, what may be needed is not transferring tasks from the center to local governments but rather improvement of capacities of both central and local governments in order to harmonize effectively what each tier of the government provides, as suggested by the case studies of Sri Lanka and Ghana. Thus, our conclusion is that decentralization reforms are deeply entangled in the political landscapes of the respective countries and envisioning decentralization in particular, and governance reform in general, as a quick technical fix, as might be assumed by some international aid donors, tends to be counter-productive.

* * *

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Second, all the contributors have made serious and demanding efforts writing in the middle of their busy schedules. I deeply thank this team of authors for their endeavors.

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tion, the LORC project coincided with my participation in another research project organized by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) on decentralization and governance reform in three East African countries. I have learned an inordinate amount from Michiyuki Shimoda, Yoichiro Kimata, Masao Yoshida, and Yuichi Sasaoka. (The latter two and other academicians also organized a parallel study group with the financial assistance from MEXT, from which I have also partially benefited.)

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