

Chapter 15

Not Forgetting the Public Servants: Capacity–Building to Support Subnational Governance and Development Implementation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter draws attention to the importance of the public service as a key agent in the implementation of subnational governance and development initiatives. A framework for teaching-learning and capacity-building more broadly is provided that builds on a model of decentralization implementation. This gives rise to a program of training that focuses on helping public servants: to improve their understandings of decentralization and on the country and its goals; to consider the design of the system of multi-level governance; to focus on both central and local capacity; and to adopt flexibility, supported by feedback mechanisms, in the process of decentralization. Each element is discussed in some detail, and illustrated by means of examples from the author's experience as an educator in Australia as well as contributor to initiatives in countries adopting federal systems of government, including Nepal, Indonesia, and Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, there has been a re-examination of the public sector in transitional and emerging economies that has led to a shift toward decentralized modes of planning and resource allocation. This is in contrast to a prior emphasis on development strategies based on a strong, interventionist central state (Chattopadhyay, 2013; Rondinelli & Nellis, 1986). Rees and Hossain (2010, pp. 581–582) wrote that “decentralization has become a byword associated with Public Sector Reform in developing and transitional countries” and that it has become a strongly debated issue in the world of development. At the same time, there is a diverse mix of relationships between central and subnational governments in

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sovereign jurisdictions throughout the world, and many different meanings have been assigned to the concept of decentralization, which itself is frequently left undefined (Hankla, 2009; Kim, 2008).

Decentralization is both a structure and a dynamic process, and relates to questions of authority, responsibility, and power, as well as to the functions and resources of different levels of government (Ryan & Woods, 2015). Under decentralized systems, competencies, responsibilities, and financial resources are transferred from the center to lower tiers of government. According to the World Bank (cited in Chattopadhyay, 2013, p. 425):

Decentralisation attempts to influence the incentives within the public sector through a pragmatic combination of administrative, fiscal and political changes that will both empower local governments and hold them responsible for service delivery, for efficient fiscal management and staff behaviour. And these changes in perceived accountabilities will then have an impact on the efficiency and equity aspects of service delivery.

The objective to “influence the incentives within the public sector” contained within this definition is of particular interest. While decisions to engage in decentralization reforms are often justified on political, economic, and social development grounds, this chapter argues that, in order for such reforms to achieve their desired outcomes, it is crucial to focus on the administrative and technical capacity required of central, provincial/state, and local/district regional agencies of government. This is particularly so in respect of the tier of government that is closest to local communities – local government. Public servants working in local government need to function efficiently and effectively in their organizations and communities, and in the multi-tiered system of government of which they are a part. The productivity of the system and its ability to achieve its intended outcomes is strongly determined by how the human capital is structured, motivated, and resourced. Ongoing and targeted professional training is crucial in the development and building of capacity.

The concept of capacity can be regarded as the sum of all the factors and resources that, over time, enable a local government organization to implement public policies in keeping with its societal role, public service principles, and community needs and expectations (Honadle, 2001; Wallis & Dollery, 2002). Capacity draws on institutional, political, technical, administrative, and human resources, and includes an appreciation of historical antecedents, opportunities, and constraints, an appraisal of current governance capacity, and the capacity to take on additional challenges and responsibilities. Reddy, Nemec and de Vries (2015, p. 163) wrote that “the successful and ongoing development of any country is dependent to a large extent on having the required capacity to facilitate the process.” These authors also pointed out that capacity development (or capacity building) seeks to sustain and strengthen the basic foundation for planning, implementing, and reviewing local and national development strategies within the country.

This chapter puts forward a design for a learning and development program that would be suitable for managers and senior managers working in local government, or in the agencies of provincial/state and central governments who are responsible for liaison with local government. The prospective program is broadly conceived as suited to a broad range of jurisdictions in which decentralization reforms are taking place or in which there is a focus on enhancing the capacity of local public servants. The training program would ideally be part of a broader capacity-building initiative that also addresses the institutional, political, technical, and administrative resources necessary to take on the additional challenges and responsibilities that flow from decentralization reforms.

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