

Chapter 24

Local Government Reform in Jamaica: A New Paradigm for Participatory Local Governance

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ABSTRACT

Local government as a formal institution has existed in Jamaica since 1667. It has traditionally been perceived as the lower of a two-tier system of government in which it has essentially operated as an instrument of central government. The second of two major reforms to the local government system was initiated in 1990 and officially launched in 1995. The current reform program constitutes a new paradigm of subnational governance and development, in which local government is no longer primarily a creature of central government, but rather a vehicle for the management of local affairs, including the pursuit of local developmental priorities, with strong participation by local citizens and stakeholders. Such a paradigm is claimed to be critical to addressing governance and developmental challenges that currently confront Jamaica. This study examines the validity of this claim and whether this new paradigm is likely to enhance subnational governance and development.

INTRODUCTION: SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Jamaica is classified as a middle-income country with a population of 2.7 million people. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) in its 2014 Country Strategy for Jamaica contextualized the country as a stable democracy with relatively strong institutions. However, it has a very high debt (over 140% of GDP) and growth has stagnated for several decades. It is at a crossroads to reverse the protracted trend of high debt and low growth. Policy alternatives are limited by a persistent balance of payment imbalance, and the high debt makes it imperative to reduce fiscal deficits. Growth prospects are reduced, as public debt crowds out lending for private activity. Energy and security costs are high, and regulations

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are onerous. This decline is reflected in the social sector, where poverty and unemployment are at very high levels and the informal sector is large and growing.

Jamaica is a former colony of Great Britain. It gained independence in 1962, some 307 years after its capture by the British from the Spanish. This long and sustained period of colonial domination has left a deeply entrenched and inherited institutional model – including political and public administrative systems and other national institutions (Jones, 1992) – that serves far more to preserve colonial and other external interests, influence, and control, than to nurture innovation or encourage or mobilize local creativity, indigenous resources, and problem-solving capacities that are critical to grasping the opportunities that accompanied independence.

Jamaica is heavily impacted by several new phenomena, such as globalization, loss of traditional markets, climate change, and pervasive exposure to alternative external cultures and value systems. These are most effectively responded to by a capacity for adaptation, innovativeness, and utilization of local resources – natural, human, and physical – which are all associated with local and community-based styles of social organization, rather than those that are bureaucratic and represent a highly centralized organization of the state (Schoburgh, 2006).

The Jamaican people have demonstrated a tremendous capacity for innovation and adaptation in the face of local and external challenges, and for finding solutions to local problems. After emancipation of the slaves in 1834, many former slaves refused to continue working on sugar estates. Instead, with support from missionaries and other well-wishers, they migrated to the hills and established self-reliant communities, characterized by local leadership, indigenous institutions, and a self-reliant philosophy and spirit. They achieved significant success, first in providing a subsistence existence for their members but eventually in becoming important contributors to the national economy. International agencies regarded it as an excellent model of community development which was worthy of replication internationally, a clear testimony to its success. These international agencies brought observers from many countries to learn from the Jamaican experience and achievements, while several local leaders of this community development process were recruited by these agencies to serve as advisors on community development in several countries across the globe.

This model of self-reliant community development was not initiated or supported by the state. In fact, it was strongly discouraged, because the departure of a substantial number of former slaves deprived plantation owners of their traditional source of workers and threatened the viability of the sugar industry. Central government eventually assumed direct responsibility for the community development process and brought it within its style of top-down, highly centralized structure of public administration. This resulted in a decline of self-reliant leadership and spirit in these communities and its replacement by a new dependency syndrome, in which community leaders and members now look increasingly to politicians and “the system” for “let-off” and for the distribution of scarce benefits. This change of attitude is a major contributor to many of the social and economic problems with which the country now contends. It is against this background that the local government reform program, initiated in 1989–1990, was perceived as a vehicle for restoring and supporting the self-reliant community development model of an earlier era. This time, however, it would be with official recognition by, and support from, the state.

Local Government Reform in Jamaica: Historical Perspectives

Local government in Jamaica dates back to the 1660s, about 12 years after the capture of the island by the British from the Spanish in 1655. The first local elections were held in 1667. The initial model was

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