Deepening local democracy in the Commonwealth

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Preface

By Carl Wright, Director, CLGF

In his work, *The Rights of Man*, 1791, Thomas Paine famously asserted that 'Governments arise either out of the people or over the people'. This theme of democratic rights and freedoms has been picked up by the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen and applied to modern times. Professor Sen argues that there is a direct link between freedoms, of which democratic rights is one, and development. He refutes the view that national, cultural or even economic factors are the pre-requisites for liberal democracy to flourish; that there are different Asian, African or European values: there are only universal values of human freedom and dignity.

Today, the great majority of the 53 Commonwealth citizens of countries enjoy democratically elected local government. Many governments are pushing forward the boundaries of democracy by experimenting with new forms of inclusiveness and representation, seeking to create a truly grass roots democracy. Of course in many countries the local democratic system is far from perfect. Just like central or provincial government, local government can fall prey to rigid elites, inefficiency, remoteness and indeed corrupt practices. This is however no excuse for denying citizens local democracy: what is required is the instigation of the appropriate structures of performance measurement, participation and accountability, with the aim of improving and deepening the local democratic structures.

There is a now a growing realisation that having effective and democratic local government structures is critical to achieving the Millennium Development Goals: local government provides a key vehicle for the pursuit of pro-poor development strategies. Likewise the terrible tsunami disaster of 2004 has highlighted the importance of local systems of disaster management and the role of local government in the reconstruction and rehabilitation processes.

Exercising democracy in the sphere of government closest to the people, through local democracy and elected community-centred institutions is, as was recognised formally by Commonwealth Heads of Government at their meeting in Edinburgh in 1997 is clearly fundamental to the democratic process. The intimate link between local democracy and developmental goals moreover was highlighted by the Commonwealth Expert Group on Development and Democracy, chaired by Mr Manmohan Singh of India, the conclusions of which were endorsed by Commonwealth Heads of Government at their meeting in Abuja in 2003.

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The third Commonwealth Local Government Conference in Aberdeen, Scotland, March 2005 'Deepening Local Democracy' provides a unique occasion to seek to promote, sustain and re-energise local democracy, from the ballot box to community planning and local decision making for better front line services. It will allow those involved in local government to meet, debate and learn from international experience and innovation. It will also provide an opportunity to formulate common principles and standards, and seek to apply the concepts of Professor Amartya Sen to the sphere of local democracy and to deepen the democratic process at the point where it is closest to the people. I hope this paper contributes towards those aims.

Carl Wright,
Director, CLGF, January 2005

Executive summary

This paper presents the case for local democracy. In recent years there has been a shift in focus on governance as a process controlled by the central government to one that involves the citizen in the decision-making process as much as possible. This shift in emphasis came about because of many reasons, which will be discussed, but the international financial organizations; donor agencies and governments; and NGOs played significant roles. Thus, interest shifted to democratic local governance that is participatory.

The idea is that local government is the unit of government that is best placed to involve citizens in the decision-making process. The more they are involved, the more likely it is that they will have the opportunity to live the lives to which they aspire. Participatory democracy refers to any system of governance that seeks to combine aspects of direct and representative democracy, and which encourages the involvement of marginalized, isolated or ignored groups in decision-making. It focuses as much on the process as the results.

A growing number of Commonwealth countries are either moving in the direction of decentralisation or are putting through legislative reforms to existing systems. But why should we focus on local democracy?

This paper will be looking at what constitutes a healthy local democracy, and the state of local democracy in the Commonwealth. It will look at how local democracy can empower citizens; its contribution to poverty reduction and the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); and illustrate that democratic local governance is one of the most crucial contributors to the democracy of a country.

Section 1 is a brief overview of the trend in recent years towards local governance, and why this has happened. It will introduce the capability theory devised by the economist Amartya Sen. Sen's theory has been used to analyse poverty and development; this section suggests using it to analyse local democracy as well.

Section 2 assesses the state of democracy in the Commonwealth. This is an important aspect of the discussion because it lays out the environments in which decentralization programmes are being attempted.

Section 3 is a democratic audit of local governance in the Commonwealth. What are the norms of a healthy local democracy? What steps have been taken towards democratic local governance in the Commonwealth? To what extent are local authorities independent?

Section 4 examines how deep the democracy is. Research indicates that citizens are disengaged from the process of local governance and are sceptical about the intentions of local politicians. What can be done to change this? This section argues that meaningful citizen participation is necessary but new attitudes are needed, on the part of both the political leaders and citizens as well.

Section 5 looks at the future of local democracy – the impact of what has been done in the local sphere, and what must be done if local democracy is to flourish? What new strategies can be employed to deepen citizen participation? Section 6 concludes by reiterating the necessity of institutional reform and participatory local democracy in order for citizens to have a better quality of life.

The paper draws upon case studies from ten countries within the Commonwealth to illustrate that much hard work is being done and progress is being made, in spite of constraints. It will also indicate however, that there remains much ground to be covered, and greater commitment is required by both citizens and governments. The ten countries are Canada, Ghana, Jamaica, India, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, South Africa, Trinidad & Tobago, Uganda, and the United Kingdom.

1. Introduction

Local democracy is simply about freedom close to home. At its most basic, it is about citizens controlling those who exercise power in local government and taking an active role in local decision-making. This paper reviews local democracy in the Commonwealth; how it can be deepened, extended and made more vital; and how it can work for pro-poor development. The economist Amartya Sen describes development as a process of expanding the real freedoms of people; can his theories on development be used in an examination of local democracy and its relationship to national democracy?

1.1 LOCAL DEMOCRACY

Effective local governance and local democracy are today seen as pivotal to a country's national development and democracy. By 1990, many countries had seen the end of a decade of structural adjustment and the Cold War had drawn to an end. A new dynamic was gaining recognition, the notion of globalization. The world was on the cusp of a new decade and it was a time of optimism and hope. The 1990s promised a decade of transition from adjustment to development; from authoritarian regimes to democracy; and from postcolonial and post-Cold War societies to new international configurations better able to cope with the major problems of the forthcoming century. (Pronk 2000) However, the 1990s was also a time of wars within countries and across borders. Millions of people were displaced from their homes as civil wars raged in places like Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone.

Previously marginalized peoples all over the world were raising their voices; countries came together on the issues of poverty, the environment and sustainable development. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 was a heralded as a landmark event. For the first time, delegates from developing countries felt as if their concerns were going to be a high priority and a different type of development would be pursued, one that was socially, economically and environmentally sustainable. Perhaps more significantly, it was expected that for the first time in a major UN conference, women's issues and concerns were going to be placed firmly on the agenda.

Flowing from Agenda 21 that had been agreed there was Local Agenda 21 that recognised that local government would be responsible for delivering upon much of what national governments had agreed. In 2003 at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) the local government role in the sustainable development agenda was further underscored.

In this environment, government was no longer seen as removed from the people; instead the people were regarded as integral to the process of governing. According to Diana Mitlin, in her paper 'Reshaping local democracy', rather than governments taking decisions in isolation, there was the expectation and growing acceptance that the state would negotiate its policies with those who were most likely to be affected by its decisions. Citizens were increasingly demanding change from politically repressive regimes to those that offered multi-party democracy (Mitlin 2004).

It was in such contexts that the concepts of governance and development became connected: it was felt that the shortcomings of governments in low- and middle-income countries were a key reason for the lack of development. The challenge for the 21st century was the construction of new relationships between citizens and governments, particularly in the local sphere (Gaventa cited in Mitlin 2004).

1.2 SEN AND DEVELOPMENT

The Human Development Reports, published annually by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) since 1990, have used Amartya Sen's approach in the analysis of contemporary development challenges. Sen is best known for his thesis that democracy results in a better distribution of resources: there has never been a famine in a country with a fully functioning democracy. He has shown that famines were not a result of a general shortage of food; rather, it was that people starved because they were not able to gain access to food. If people do not have access to food, they lose their 'entitlement' to food or their capability to be fed. Sen scrutinised the evidence of a number of famines. He found that during these famines the amount of food was not only adequate to avoid a famine; in some cases it even surpassed that available in normal times. (Sen, 1999)

The cause of famine, Sen concluded, is not a lack of food but a lack of access to food. This reasoning can be extended to an analysis of poverty also. It is rarely simply the lack of income that constitutes poverty, but rather a lack of basic capabilities, such as access to, potable water, housing, education, medical care, and affordable credit.

Sen's analysis puts freedom at the centre of development. Freedoms – political social and economic – empower poor people to become agents of change achieving an autonomy to shape the lives they would like to lead. He details five instrumental freedoms: political freedom, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security. Democracy is important to this analysis because these freedoms are supported in a democracy and stifled under non-democratic regimes.

At the other end of the spectrum from Sen there is a school of thought, often referred to as the "Lee Hypothesis", after its chief proponent Lee Kuan Yew, the former prime minister of Singapore (1959 -1990), which argues that for a poor person, economic development is more important than democratic well-being. (Sen, 1999) According to this line of reasoning, what comes first – removing poverty or guaranteeing political rights? It is argued that a poor person has no reason to choose the latter. As early as 1950, Bertrand

Russell, the British Nobel Laureate, asked "If one man offers you democracy and another offers you a bag of grain, at what stage of starvation will you prefer the grain to the vote?" The Lee hypothesis assumes that poor people are either incapable of understanding the benefits of living in a democracy or would not choose to do so if given the choice. It reduces personal well-being to an economic basis, ignoring the many facets of our lives.

Research increasingly shows that citizens across the world overwhelmingly want to live in democracies. The Commonwealth Foundation, undertook a two-year research study, seeking the views of over 10,000 citizens across 47 Commonwealth countries on issues of governance. The findings suggested that citizens want a strong state with a vibrant civil society, and fundamentally, a deepening of the principles and practices of democracy by means of a participatory democratic culture (Commonwealth Foundation 1999). Central to a strong state are robust political mechanisms responding to changing environments and changing demands. Local government is integral to such a state. From democracy flows stability, food and job security. Under democratic systems citizens enjoy freedom from repression, torture or worse if their views differ from that of the government's.

Does this make democracy, a pre-condition for development? If so, does this mean that we invert the Lee thesis and pursue democracy at the expense of economic growth? No, but the two aims are not mutually exclusive. It is the pursuit of democracy, or indeed the process of democratisation that provides the conditions for economic development and poverty reduction. Economic development will in turn feed into and support the democratisation process, and the two become mutually reinforcing.

1.3 SEN AND LOCAL DEMOCRACY

How is Sen's approach relevant to a discussion on local democracy? Sen argues that the "expansion of freedom is viewed, in this approach, both as the primary end and as the principal means of development" (Sen 1999). In other words, democracy is freedom. Development literature has come to a point where it considers the relationship between development and democracy to be key. The sobering question of what difference democracy makes to development, or to be more precise, can democracy help redress the severe social and economic inequalities that characterize developing countries was posed. (Heller 2001) In the instance of local democracy, this question must also be raised and deserves an answer.

There is growing acceptance that for democracy to flourish at the national level, and for poverty reduction programmes to work, democracy must be developed in the local sphere. George Matthew, director of the Institute of Social Sciences in New Delhi, cautions, "There is no guarantee, however, that local democracy will function well in all contexts. It is prone to misuse by powerful sections of the community; it may lack an effective accountability mechanism; and it may provide little space for the poor to participate in local decision-making. In some cases, local government leaders may not have enough motivation or incentive to accommodate the development needs of vulnerable groups." But in this respect does it deviate fromt eh practices of central government counterparts?

Sen's approach readily lends itself to a discussion on deepening local democracy. It advocates participation, well-being and freedom. The Human Development and Capability Association, based at Harvard University, lays out the basic features of Sen's approach (in bold). For the purposes of this discussion, they have been applied to local democracy:

- **It combines ethics and economics:** decentralisation must proceed from the basis that all decision-making should be done in a morally sound manner, and economic development must be a central policy aim. This includes the subsidiarity principle i.e. that as far as possible, decisions should be taken at the level closest to the citizen.
- **It has many dimensions:** there is no one-size-fits-all decentralisation. It must be borne in mind that each Commonwealth country has different socio-economic, political and cultural realities. Countries will differ as to their capability to pursue decentralisation as well. Similarly, every citizen in the community will have different kinds of capabilities at their advantage.
- **It broadens the informational base:** a healthy local democracy enhances citizens access to information. It requires that local leaders and elected representatives are willing to listen to the information coming out of communities. The advent of community-based radio call-in talk shows has broadened the political arena and educational soap operas (eg those that touch on ways of preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS, or integrate the role of councillors) are two examples of popular information dissemination.
- **It recognizes that values differ across people and groups:** participatory local democracy is inclcusive and involves citizens from all walks of life n the decision making processes governing public services.
- **It involves people as participants and agents:** a healthy local democracy means citizens have the right to hold local authority figures accountable, scrutinise policies and influence change at election time and between.
- **It draws attention to group disparities (such as those based on gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, and others), and to capability disparities between nations:** effective local democracy not only highlights disparities within and across communities but finds meaningful ways of addressing them. Local democracy in the Commonwealth will be assessed in the context of these features. This paper will argue that for democracy to be deepened in the Commonwealth, it must integrate the features emphasised by Sen, and they must be enjoyed by all citizens, not just a privileged few. Has this been done at the national level, and more importantly, in the local sphere? Are the leaders of the Commonwealth willing to re-shape their notions of leadership?

The next section assesses the state of democracy in the Commonwealth today. Commonwealth Heads of Government regularly reiterate their commitment to democratic values in declarations, but how far does this translate into reality?

2. The state of democracy in the Commonwealth

The Commonwealth at Harare in 1991 redefined itself as an association of democracies, and in 1995 set up a Commonwealth Ministerial Action group to insure against the unconstitutional overthrow of governments. The work of the Commonwealth Secretariat can be seen as part of a world-wide movement for democracy which provides the context for this assessment of local democracy. This section assesses the state of democracy in the Commonwealth. It also examines the trends towards inclusive democracy.

2.1 WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

There is no universal definition of democracy , but perhaps the most commonly known is government of the people, by the people, for the people. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) suggests that a number of features common to genuine democracies:

- There are free and fair elections; power can and should change hands through popular suffrage, and not coercion or force.
- Political opponents and minorities have a right to express their views and have influence in the policy-making process – this means more than just achieve representation.
- Opposition is legal and loyal, and not extra-judicial and violent.
- There is the opportunity for change in governments, and above all,
- There is respect and protection for basic civil and political rights.

By this definition, several countries fall short.

International IDEA further suggests that democracy be defined by two fundamental principles. First, there should be popular control over public decision-making and decision-makers. Second, there should be equality between citizens in the exercise of that control. Underlying these principles is the struggle to make popular control over public decisions both more effective and more inclusive; to remove an elite monopoly over decision-making and its benefits; and to overcome differences of gender, ethnicity, religion, language, class or wealth (IDEA 2002).

The relationship between democracy and government is broken whenthe power to make public policy decisions is captured by organized vested interests. The practice of majority voting – or first past the post – can compound the situation by alienating large sections of the electorate who hold valid minority opinion they feel are being overlooked in favour of party allegiances.

In the ideal, "democracy is a system whereby the whole of society can participate, at every level, in the decision-making process and keep control of it. Its foundation is the full observance of human rights, as defined by both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Vienna Pacts and Declaration of 1993. And the promotion of those rights and the respect of differences and of freedom of speech and thought are indispensable preconditions for democracy." Further, there can be no democracy without an independent judicial system and without institutions that guarantee freedom of expression and the existence of free media. The power to legislate must be exercised by representatives of the people who have been elected by the people.

But a genuine democracy must strive to go beyond this institutional framework. It alone only provides the tools and the environment for the practice of democracy. Democracy is a learned process: we are not inherently democratic but become so as a result of learned behaviour. Democracy works best when it is understood as a partnership between citizens and the government. As Boutros-Ghali notes, it "needs to be embodied in a culture, a state of mind that fosters tolerance and respect for other people, as well as pluralism, equilibrium and dialogue between the forces that make up a society" (Boutros-Ghali et al 2002).

The Commonwealth Observer Group for Cameroon's Presidential Elections held in October 2004 stressed that "a participatory democracy should be accompanied by a democratic culture, with an enlarged role for citizens, stronger connections between them and their governments, and clearly defined institutions. A participatory democracy is characterised by inclusiveness rather than exclusivity." Unfortunately, in several Commonwealth countries the opposite is true.

There are impediments to democracy that occur in the Commonwealth, including religious and ethnic tensions. In several instances, the citizen is far removed from the levers of governmental power, and policy decisions in reality are the domain of a select group of elites. Not surprisingly, scenarios such as these can impact negatively on the quality of democracy and the economic development of countries. This leads us to the question of the relationship between democracy and development.

2.2 DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT

Boutros-Ghali et al. (2002) assert that development should be understood to mean the whole range of economic, social and cultural progress to which peoples aspire. No longer narrowly defined in economic terms, development should take into account all the factors that help individuals to fulfil themselves. Acknowledging this, Commonwealth Heads of Government called on the Secretary-General to constitute a high level expert group on development and democracy to recommend ways in which democracies might best be

Local democracy in Canada

Canada is a federal democracy, whose democratic tradition is very much alive. Yet, there are two diverging views of what local democracy is all about. First, local government is seen as a training ground for provincial and federal politics. Local government is expected to be accountable and accessible to citizens, and to be independent service providers. Second, a state-centered tradition of democracy emphasises that local governments are created by provincial legislation. According to this view, local governments are administrative arms of provincial departments.

Debate over this issue has increased as a result of the devolution of responsibilities to local government as provincial and federal governments seek to address their budget deficits. Consequently, recent mayoral contests have been enlivened, generating debates on critical issues and attracting greater voter participation.

Is local democracy effective in Canada?

Local democracy is never taken for granted in Canada. Local governments are constantly scrutinized by other spheres of government, the media, civic organisations and the general public. This is particularly true of the larger cities, such as Toronto, Vancouver or Montreal.

Electoral participation compares poorly to most European countries. In Canada's largest cities municipal contests rarely achieve a participation rate beyond 35%. Some would contend this is a crisis situation for Canada. The participation in civic elections may reach 80% in a municipality of average size that is about 25,000 inhabitants. However for municipalities whose population are over 100,000, and which have an at-large electoral system the participation rate may drop as low as 30% of the registered voters.

Recent federal and provincial policies of devolving services, as well as fiscal and budgetary reforms, appear to be modifying the local political environment. Vancouver and Toronto are two good examples. In the latest local elections in Vancouver there were 118 candidates contesting 27 posts and 280,003 registered voters. Voters were also asked to consider three referendum questions regarding public works and safety; parks and recreation facilities; and, the cost of shared infrastructures. Over 50% of registered voters cast their ballots marking this as the second largest turnout for a civic election in over twenty years. Toronto similarly experienced a stronger turnout than usual of forty per cent.

The differences in turnouts in the large medium and average sized municipalities fuel an important debate in Canada on the effectiveness of the local democratic system. Securing the democratic right of voters, and ensuring high participation rates are of great importance. The issue of the individual elector's "voting power" considers the impact of a single vote in an electoral contest. This raises questions concerning the size of electoral constituencies and the relationship between the elected members and their constituents.

Current recommendations for reforms regarding local elections include:

(1) the systematic reform of local at-large electoral systems towards geographical ward based constituencies;
(2) the general issue of "voting power" in large cities, and;
(3) the correlated decrease in voter participation, which is acute regarding all lower socio-economic groups, new immigrants and aboriginal people.

British Columbia proposed ambitious changes in 2000: the systematic introduction of neighborhood constituencies (districts), the registration of all civic political parties with over 50 members, the enforcement of a 90 day electoral contest rule, and the limitation of campaign contributions and expenditure. The proposal also called for the provincial appointment of an electoral officer, instead of the current system that assumes the neutrality of municipal clerks and gives them mandates to serve as electoral officers. A similar provision exists at the federal and provincial elections but is not in force for local elections in most provinces, with the exception of Quebec.

While there is no doubt that Canada's local democratic tradition is strong, the level of participation to civic election varies and could be strengthened in the cities. This would also serve to raise the legitimacy of Canada's largest cities in the confederation.

What are the key obstacles to fuller local democracy in Canada today?

Canada experience a great deal of internal migration and immigration. For example, Calgary and Edmonton have been magnets for Canadians from other provinces, whereas Toronto and Vancouver have been particularly attractive to immigrants from abroad.

Managing issues concerning immigration poses special challenges for local government. The new ethnic and cultural diversity of Canadian cities has been a source of strength in a globalising economy, and inter-cultural tensions have been remarkably limited in scope and intensity. However, it is internal migration that often places local government in a more difficult position. Internal migration is connected to homelessness, unemployment and underemployment, rising housing costs, falling welfare rates, the de-institutionalisation of the mentally ill, and ongoing problems of alcoholism and drug abuse. Conservative estimates assert that there are about 40,000 homeless people living on the streets of Canadian cities.

While Canada's local democracy is seen as vibrant, local governments must work within the constraints of a tradition that empowers the provinces. This enhances the accountability of local government to provincial departments rather than to citizens. This intergovernmental relationship and the multilevel relation with the federal government, as the housing and homeless issues indicate, are sources of great debates but also a weak link. Top-down legislation frustrates local elected and public officials, without allowing for real consultation; local governments struggled with social housing and homelessness issues for ten years before both federal and provincial spheres addressed the issue.

In its 2004 report, on Quality of Life in Canada's twenty largest cities, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) underscores housing remains a critically important issue. Without a proper quality of life – shelter, income, social assistance – FCM argues that the poorest Canadians, about 10% of the population, increasingly face barriers to inclusion. Why would we expect them to participate and be actively engaged in Canada's local democracy if (1) Canada's local governments are unable to address those basic needs, and (2) if the intergovernmental networks are unable to process their demands?

Source: Dr E Brunet-Jailly, Co-Director, Local Government Institute, School of Public Administration, University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

supported in combating poverty. The expert group focuses on pro-poor development, a concept that recognizes four significant changes in development thinking: development is defined as strengthening human capabilities; a focus on the poor; identifying the poor; and, moving beyond the trickle down view of poverty reduction.

As noted earlier, it is often claimed that non-democratic systems are better at bringing about economic development. While it is true that some authoritarian states have had faster rates of economic growth than many less authoritarian ones, it has been found that they have severe difficulties in times of harsh international economic environment.

A commonly held belief among economists during the 1950s – the late colonial period - was that authoritarian regimes promoted development, while development generated democracy. It was argued that if less developed countries were to grow economically, they must limit democratic participation in political affairs.

The policies that led to the economic success of East Asian countries have been well documented. These included openness to competition, the use of international markets, a high level of literacy and school education, successful land reforms and public provision of investment incentives. But as Sen rightly points out, there is nothing in any of these policies that is inconsistent with democracy (Sen 1999).

The countries of the Commonwealth, collectively and individually, have been seeking over the past decade to confront the weaknesses of traditional democratic processes, and to find ways of responding to the challenge of poverty. The current situation demands a new approach. According to the Commonwealth Expert Group:

- One third of the Commonwealth's two billion citizens live on less than one dollar a day and nearly two thirds on under two dollars a day.
- Sixty per cent of global HIV cases are in the Commonwealth, and four of the nine most affected are Commonwealth members. Nearly 60% of Commonwealth citizens lack access to essential drugs and adequate sanitation facilities.
- Around half of the world's 115 million children without access to primary school live in the Commonwealth.
- Women constitute around 70% of those living in poverty in the Commonwealth.
- Around half of the world's 300 million indigenous peoples live in the Commonwealth, and they frequently suffer discrimination, intolerance, prejudice and violation of their land rights.
- Young people constitute over 50% of the Commonwealth population. A large percentage of them are adversely affected by unemployment, poverty, HIV/AIDS and illiteracy (2003).

Despite the fact that many of the world's new democracies are Commonwealth countries, it is clear from the above that the conditions are far from ideal. The Expert Group notes that "several Commonwealth countries have not yet established basic democratic procedures such as free and fair multi-party elections, or managed to respect, protect and fulfil the full range of human rights". It has been suggested that in many instances around the world, leaders set about consolidating their hold on power through such means as amending constitutions, manipulating elections and bullying weak legislatures and judiciaries. (Malloch Brown cited by Allen 2002)

Speaking at the Southern African Development Community (SADC) summit in 2003, Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa, said, "Our people need renewed hope. Today, all our countries are free in political terms, but our people still need hope, a different kind of hope, hope not just to live, but also to live well, hope not only to continue to be free, but to be free in decency and dignity" (Mkapa 2003).

2.3 TOWARDS PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Democracy has often been abused and distorted. This has led to growing demands for change. For democracy to be effective at the national level, it must place citizens at the centre of the governance process in the local sphere. As Tandon (2003) notes, democracy has been vulnerable to capture by organized vested interests who have the means and the power to make democracy work for them. He argues, "it has been recognized that strong, effective and accountable institutions – in the government, in the private sector, in the civil society (including media and academia) – are crucial for rooted, relevant and sustainable efforts in improving the lives of the masses".

It is in this context that participatory local government initiatives are flourishing across the Commonwealth. Tandon further writes in relation to India, "Local bodies – Panchayats and Municipalities – as institutions of local self governance are arenas where new practices in governance are being attempted. In several countries of the Commonwealth, these local bodies are being promoted as locally rooted institutions of governance".

Citizen participation in public decision-making, particularly in the local sphere, should not be seen as a simple panacea in itself. There are several constraints to be overcome, such as:

- Participation must be structured and not ad hoc.
- Care must be taken that the process is not captured by powerful interests within the decision-making forum.
- Citizens may be reluctant to take responsibility for poor decision-making.
- Participation may be further hampered by the limited capabilities of citizens, such as illiteracy, reluctance or fear of participating; or by problems caused by ethnic or religious conflict.
- The reluctance of national politicians to recognise the validity and importance of local governments. Including citizens in the public decision-making process necessarily means some relinquishing of power. This requires a political will that is not always forthcoming.

A more informed citizenry can contribute more effectively to democracy and poverty reduction at the local level. Government officials are less likely to engage in corrupt practices if they know that they are being scrutinised by citizens. Evidently if citizens are allowed to fully exercise their political rights through making informed choices or engaging in open political discussion, the democratic process is enriched.

Is local democracy in Ghana effective?

The district elections are the primary means for representation and the assembly is expected to promote the participation in local governance on a regular basis.

Elections are held every four years to elect assembly members of assemblies. Seventy per cent of assembly members are elected through universal adult suffrage but on a non-party basis. The President, in consultation with interest groups, appoints the remaining 30% at the district level, of which one-third must be women.

The powerful District Chief Executives, essentially executive mayors, are also nominated by the President and must be approved by the assembly before taking up their post.

Trends in voter turn-out have varied influenced by political, historical and social factors. In 1987/88 voter-turnout was 59.3%; in 1994, 29.3%; 1998, 41.6%; and in 2002, 32.8%. The first election (1988) was conducted under a revolutionary government. The second and third elections (1994 and 1998) were held in a constitutional, multi-party democratic environment but with the political leaders of the previous decade still in office.

The 2002 elections were influenced by three factors: a new political party forming the national government (changing the balance of power in the larger environment); the enhanced role of the media with more public participation in pre-election discussions; and advocacy and capacity-building efforts to promote women's participation. The results were a more aware and critical public that considered the assemblies as an arena for democracy, development and service delivery.

In the 2002 elections, women's candidature rose to 965 as compared to 547 and 384 in 1998 and 1994 respectively. Elected women also increased to 341 (7.4% of elected assembly members) as compared to 188 (5%) and 124 (2.9%) in 1998 and 1994 respectively.

The appointed memberships have two purposes. The first is to secure critical technical expertise and influence to complement the work of the district administration and departments. Through this means, experienced and influential residents of the locality are appointed. The law stipulates that interest groups should be consulted in their selection. The second purpose is to provide for representation of groups and sections of the population who would otherwise be excluded.

To this end, the government decided in 1998 that 30% each of the appointments would be reserved for women and traditional authorities. The quota for women was raised to 50% in 2002. In 1998, 36% of assemblies did not attain the quota. The 2002 standard of 50% has been reached in only six assemblies. However, more assemblies have about 40% of appointed members being women.

Apart from the representation and feedback functions of assembly members, the processes of the assemblies are expected to enhance the access of local people to governance. The sub-committees are expected to provide smaller fora for in-depth discussion of sector-based issues and specific local concerns. Assemblies are required to use local languages in addition to English in order to improve participation.

Assemblies are required to involve local interest groups in their planning and budgeting work through public hearings. Act 480 of 1994 also provides for sub-district/local action planning by local communities. Finally, assemblies are required to set up public relations and complaints committees as a forum for redress and information. In addition to these provisions, the key services such as Health and Education use local oversight committees on which non-assembly members are represented.

How well these provisions for representation and participation have worked in practice has not yet been conclusively assessed. It is widely reported that assembly members lack the capacity to discuss the more technical dimensions of their mandates. In spite of the provision for the use of local languages, assembly documents are still largely in English. The appointed membership mechanism has been consistently viewed to have been used for political expediency by national governments since 1988. Assembly members have been accused of not providing sufficient feedback or consulting their electorate enough. Members in turn cite difficulties with mobility, the costs of the expectations of their constituents and time as constraints to their effectiveness.

On the other hand, local civil society organisations are gradually demanding accountability for public resources and require services from assemblies. There have been some important initiatives such as the "civic unions approach" promoted by the GAIT Programme and the HIPC Watch Committees facilitated by SEND Foundation.

Local democracy has clearly delivered two important gains for the poor. There is better and more nuanced understanding of marginalisation and poverty, and more locally-based decision making and participation in governance.

What are the key obstacles to fuller local democracy in Ghana today?

The key obstacles to fuller local democracy in Ghana today include:

- The low capacity of local populations and CSOs to engage local authorities to press their demands, require services and participate in public planning and budgeting events.
- The limited capacity (in terms of time, skills and knowledge) of assembly members to meaningfully address technical issues reaching the assembly.
- The inability of assembly members to provide feedback and solicit the input of their electorate on a consistent basis.
- The lack of managerial experience and technical capacity of the leadership of some assemblies. Appointed memberships need to be more transparently and objectively made.
- The limited control of assemblies over key technical and administrative staff in the district. Control over key personnel such as health, forestry, agriculture and education professionals lie outside the district
- High turnover of skilled technical people such as district planners and administrators.
- Limited experience of assembly staff to plan and implement public
- The reluctance of some central government agencies to entrust assemblies with more control over resources and programmes.
- Tensions between certain key actors in assemblies, such as conflict between members of parliament, presiding members and district chief executives due to differing interests and interpretations of their roles.

(Source: E Ofei-Aboagye, Institute of Local Government Studies, Ghana)

Sen draws on the example of Kerala to highlight the point of the value of effective information dissemination. He points out that public discussion has an important role to play in reducing the high rates of fertility that characterise many developing countries. The sharp decline in fertility rates in parts of India was heavily influenced by public discussion. Kerala's fertility rate of 1.7 (as of 1999), similar to that of Britain and France, was achieved through a participatory process in which political and social dialogues played an important part. The lessons of this experience may be extended to the achievement of several of the Millennium Development Goals.

Implementing participatory democracy involves the integration of established positions of leadership and authority, be they emocratically elected or, for instance, tribal leaders, with previously marginalized citizens, who are now sitting at the table for the first time. Such inclusion has been legislated for in a number of Commonwealth countries. Considerable gains have been reported in women's representation at the highest level of decision-making, particularly at the political level.

Democracy in the Commonwealth, as anywhere else, can be improved. Commonwealth leaders have committed themselves to finding workable solutions to the problems of poverty and underdevelopment. Their commitment must be supported by tangible initiatives to shore up the democratic institutions and processes within their countries. It is difficult to measure precisely how successful countries have been in attempts to deepen democracy but hope must be drawn from the fact that the leaders are, in many instances, at least cognizant of what needs to be done.

Sadly, they are less so when it comes to local democracy. Partly as a result of the growing public advocacy of the many organisations like the CLGF and the Commonwealth Foundation, and partly as a result of what international development agencies are focusing on, deepening democracy in the local sphere is seen to be integral to the political, social and economic well-being of countries. Further, as discussed earlier, citizens are not afraid to demand more of their governments. These demands emphasise good governance not only at the national level, but increasingly in the local sphere as well. The next section looks more closely at local democracy in the Commonwealth, and how this can be improved.

2.4 DEMOCRACY, GOOD GOVERNANCE AND THE COMMONWEALTH

The Commonwealth and its various organisations have taken a lead role in the promotion of fundamental political values notably the principles of democracy and good governance. This is perhaps not surprising as the modern Commonwealth, established in 1965, was built on the concept of anti-colonialism and national freedom, multiculturalism and the rule of law. These principles have been reflected and built upon in statements by Heads of Government including Singapore (1971), Harare (1991), Edinburgh (1997) and Fancourt (1999). A comprehensive review of the Commonwealth's role and its fundamental principles was agreed in Coolum (2002) and building on the recommendations of the 2003 Commonwealth Expert Group on Development and Democracy further principles were established in Abuja (2003).

The main intergovernmental organisation in the Commonwealth is the Commonwealth Secretariat with the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC) as its development wing. The Commonwealth Foundation has the task of supporting the many professional and civil society organisations which give the Commonwealth much additional strength and outreach beyond its official structures. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) provides a forum for parliamentarians and the promotion of parliamentary principles.

During the period up to 1994 the Commonwealth strongly supported the struggle for political freedom in southern Africa (especially Rhodesia-Zimbabwe, Namibia, South Africa). The Commonwealth led the international community on sanctions against the apartheid regime of South Africa, initiated key assistance programmes for liberation movements like the ANC and SWAPO and helped to develop the intellectual foundations for the post- apartheid political transition and human resource development.

With the solution of the South Africa problem and the new international scenery brought about by the end of the Cold War in the early 90s, the Commonwealth increasingly focussed on how it could assist democratic processes and help prevent and resolve conflicts. This led to Commonwealth election observer teams being sent to many countries and passing judgement on the 'fair and free' nature of the elections and recommending how elections might be improved in future. Commonwealth experts also advised on democratic structures and electoral systems and how to strengthen local capacity.

Unique among intergovernmental organisations, the Commonwealth created machinery (the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group of foreign ministers set up under the 1995 Millbrook Action Programme) which not only monitored and passed judgement on the extent member countries kept to the Commonwealth principles, but also led to the formal suspension of certain members (eg Fiji, Nigeria, Pakistan, Zimbabwe). Much technical and other expertise was provided to strengthen good governance and in 1994-95 the Commonwealth Secretariat assisted the establishment of both the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) and the Commonwealth Association of Public Administration and Management (CAPAM).

Since 1995 CLGF has been actively promoting local democracy and good governance and working closely with the Commonwealth Secretariat and other partners in this area including in the holding of policy roundtables, providing technical assistance and monitoring local elections (eg Mozambique, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sierra Leone). The importance of local democracy and the role of the CLGF has been formally acknowledged by Heads of Government at all their meetings since its inception. In 2003 the CLGF was accorded the status of an associated Commonwealth organisation in recognition of its governmental membership structure and receives accreditation to the CHOGM and other key Commonwealth meetings.

Local government helps deepen democracy in India

Self-governing village communities have existed in India for centuries. Even during the medieval period and under Mughal rule the village panchayats existed. Sir Charles Metcalfe, governor-general of India (1835-36), aptly described panchayats as "the little republics". However, they were not democratic in those days.

The constitution that India adopted in 1950 incorporated local bodies only as part of the Directive Principles of State Policy enjoining the states to organize panchayats and endow them with powers and authority to function as units of self-government. Left to the states to hold local elections, the panchayats failed to emerge as viable instruments of local democracy. Yet, since some states held local elections, albeit irregularly, the idea of local democracy was kept alive.

In December 1992 Parliament amended the constitution requiring every state to establish municipalities and panchayats and that (i) every panchayat shall continue for five years and no longer, and that (ii) election to constitute a panchayat shall be completed before the expiry of its five-year duration or within six months of its dissolution.

A unique feature of the local government system in India is gram sabha, the assembly of all voters residing in a village. It meets four times a year to approve the plans and budgets, etc. The gram sabha is direct local democracy in action. These reforms have been hailed as a "silent revolution" in the context of the development of democracy in India.

Today, local government occupies a pride of place in India's federal polity. Regular local elections have broadened its democratic base. Previously, the democratic structure that was restricted to the two houses of parliament and state assemblies had 4,963 elected members; now there are more than three million elected representatives of whom more than one million are women.

In India the voter turnout in local elections is higher than in the elections to Parliament and State Assemblies. In 2003 voter turnout was 80% in West Bengal's local elections, in the 2004 parliamentary elections it was only 58%.

One of the most dramatic impacts of the new generation of local government institutions is women's participation in governance. One-third of seats are reserved for women. Thus, more than a million women get elected to local government positions. Since on an average more than two women contest, millions of women enter public life through local elections. One third of all chairpersons of local authorities are also reserved for women.

Local democracy has also provided political space for the hitherto excluded communities, such as the former untouchables (scheduled castes) and the scheduled tribes. They constitute about 25% of India's population and can contest from constituencies reserved exclusively for them, in proportion to their population in a given State.

More decentralisation required

Even though all the states have passed legislation in conformity with the constitutional amendments, not all have transferred functions and funds to the local bodies. The Union government has an annual budget of about Rs.200 billion (£2380 million) for schemes, catering to the poorer sections of the population. However, since money is still handled by line departments delivering directly in the villages without fully taking into confidence the local government bodies, there is growing frustration among the elected local government representatives. Currently, there is substantial overlap by various agents with local government work. Consequently, while the democratically-elected local institutions are in place, their capacity to play a holistic role in the community is inhibited.

The new generation of local democracy was introduced in West Bengal in 1978. Then the percentage of people below poverty line was about 73 per cent. By 1999-2000, it came down to 30% through the effective intervention of local democratic institutions. The high levels of voter turnout in West Bengal's local elections must be explained in part by this efficacy. Kerala and Karnataka have also had substantial success in alleviating poverty through local government service delivery mechanisms.

Obstacles to deepening local democracy

Despite these successes, why is local democracy not blossoming in India to the desired level? Reasons are not hard to find. The principle of subsidiarity — taking decisions closest to the people they affect — is fundamental to the success of local government institutions as well as local democracy. This principle is not strictly adhered to. The top down approach is still pervasive. Several state governments have allowed civil servants to retain considerable power over the elected body directly or indirectly.

The reluctance of state-level politicians to recognize the importance of the local governments — their autonomy, their powers and their areas of functioning — creates problems. Ministers, Members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs) and senior political leaders see a potential threat to their power if panchayats and municipalities become really powerful. As panchayats are functioning today with a large number of elected representatives, people are becoming aware of their rights, thanks to regular participation in the panchayat programmes and activities.

Government officials working in local government averse to the idea of being closely supervised by the elected panchayat representatives, much less taking order from them.

Social iniquity and political violence at local elections are two further impediments to deepening local democracy. However, regular local elections under the strict supervision of election commissions and the police have brought about a radical transformation. The dynamics of local democracy is breaking the system of patronage based on religion, caste and feudal interests giving way to political contests based on ideology and performance.

Despite severe constraints, local government in India has begun to change the face of Indian democracy. The most visible impact of the panchayat system is on governance, which is now moving beyond Union and State governments. Governance in India is deeper, more extensive and more inter-connected than ever before. Local government has made Indian democracy more accountable, if not more transparent. The empowerment of women and excluded sections of society, though inadequate, has led to a change in the very grammar of Indian politics.

(Source: George Mathew, Director, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi www.issin.org)

3. A democratic audit: the state of local democracy in the Commonwealth

The state of local democracy in the Commonwealth is extremely varied. In some countries it is flourishing. However, in others, the powers, finance and electoral legitimacy of local government are poor. But the health of local democracy is dynamic. For example in India, where over half the citizens of the Commonwealth live, the overhaul of the panchayats (local councils) has rejuvenated local democracy. This section draws on up-to-date case studies to illustrate current trends.

It is easy to criticise government institutions, both the local and national spheres. But how does one assess how well or badly a government is performing? By what indicators is performance measured? Mechanisms to monitor governance have evolved from those that focus on the state, and which merely divide nations into the categories of democracy and non-democracy. Today, with the knowledge that local democracy is an important indicator of good governance at the national level, organisations such as UN-HABITAT and International IDEA have moved in the direction of devising frameworks with which to monitor local governance. UN-HABITAT suggests four indicators in its campaign for good urban governance: effectiveness, participation, accountability and equity. The organisation launched its campaign in 1999 in support of the Habitat Agenda goal of "sustainable human settlements development in an urbanising world." These indicators are useful tools,

- to measure the effectiveness of policies
- to monitor if local capacity building efforts yield results
- to engage civil society and the private sector in local governance
- To provide an objective account of the achievements and failures of local elected leaders.

International IDEA suggests that with the widespread establishment or re-establishment of democratic forms of government in all regions in the 1990s has come a desire to assess how well they are doing, and how much progress has in fact been made. Such concerns are given added urgency by the common perception among citizens that their democratic arrangements have not delivered nearly as much as they have been promised, and that the global triumph of democratic norms has not been matched by comparable changes in governmental practice.

The value of local government stems from the fact that it provides for the dispersal of power and brings the reality of government closer to the people. The term 'local government' is used rather than local administration for important reasons:

- The members of a local authority are democratically elected and are accountable to their electorate, no to central government;
- Local government has tax-raising powers – powers which are shared only with central tiers of government;
- Councils are responsible for the provision of a wide range of services which are delivered in ways which meet the needs of the locality; and,
- Councillors are recognized as being leaders in their communities.

Source: COSLA Manifesto 2003

3.1 WHAT CONSTITUTES A HEALTHY LOCAL DEMOCRACY?

Local democracy embodies values such as meaningful citizen participation, with an emphasis on involving the marginalised citizens within a community; informed and constructive political debate; and the formulation of policies that cater for the economic development and personal well-being of local citizens. To be effective and successful local democracy requires the strengthening of the democratic structures and institutions of local government.

Local government is responsible for a number of functions including the provision and delivery of public services to local populations, but also, and perhaps increasingly, acting as a leader or catalyst in securing the delivery of publicly desired goods by private and voluntary organisations. Local government is given autonomy because it is believed that the needs and wants of local populations vary from one locality to another. By allowing the activity of the state to vary from area to area the state is thus better able to meet the varied needs and wants of its citizens. To ensure that those needs and wants are adequately expressed and influence what it does, local government has to be democratic.

Curtice (1999) explains that one of the keys to ensuring that local government is democratic is the holding of local elections. Some believe, he says, that local elections are about holding politicians to account for their past actions, while others prefer to focus on elections as a means for citizens to express their views about what they want their politicians to do in the future. Both these positions rely on the assumption that citizens will actually go to the polls, for if only a minority turn out to the polls,

Jamaica: Local democracy, gender, participation and good governance

Jamaica is a middle-income country with a poverty rate of between twenty and forty per cent. The legacy of colonialism is deep social divisions exacerbated by the political and socio-economic conditions obtaining today. There is a lack of capacity and, apparently, political will to meet such basic needs such as universal access to safe water and adequate sanitation, education, or affordable housing. Crime and violence, worsened by drugs trafficking, are daily occurrences. These conditions leave many feeling isolated from government. They perceive their local government representatives as powerless and turn, instead, to self-appointed community leaders (often with links to the criminal world) for assistance.

The Jamaica Report on Civil Society in the new millennium (1999), indicates that there is growing disaffection and cynicism towards political leaders and their avowed interest in helping citizens to better themselves and create a good society. Street demonstrations increased to a high of over 200 per year in the late 1990s, the most memorable being the Gas Riots of 1999. Political commentators report an decrease in voter turn-out at elections, especially by young voters.

Paradoxically, although citizens are disengaged from the governance process itself, they remain fiercely loyal to one or the other of the two main political parties, the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) or the People's National Party (PNP). This has led to what is known as garrison constituencies, as the support for each party tends to be delineated by boundaries.

The status of women

While Jamaica may boast of the fact that 79% of graduates from tertiary level institutions are women, the faculty is in turn 79% male. At the last general election (2002) there was a reduction in elected women from eight to seven, and in the local government elections (2003), the decrease was from 58 to 41, including a decrease from four mayors to one. However, in both elections there were more women candidates. Within the main parties, less than twelve per cent of the national executive members are women, but women continue to be 'over-represented' among the foot soldiers.

Gender sensitisation within communities is essential to underscore and generate an understanding of the need for gender equity at all levels. While women swell the ranks of volunteers at parent teacher associations, church committees, and the like, they are less likely to be school board chairs and pastors.

Provision of basic needs

A major source of contention for many Jamaicans is the provision of basic infrastructural needs such as water, sanitation, roads, affordable housing, especially in the rural areas, peri-urban and inner-urban communities. According to the Government's 2001 Survey of Living Conditions, across Jamaica, 71% of households had access to piped water in the year 2000. However, coverage varies according to location, and can range from 40% to 98%. In some rural communities, 99% of the residents use pit latrines, and less than 40% have access to piped water in their homes. Inner-city communities face problems of water and sanitation access, largely relying instead on standpipes and community latrines.

Local government reforms

Local government is responsible for numerous areas of importance to people's everyday lives, (see country profile) and reform of local government has the potential to facilitate meaningful participation and sustainable development.

The most recent reform process was initiated in 2003 and had a forerunner in 1994. The latter had great opportunities for change. It was characterised by the following:

- Monthly meetings held around the country – these have fallen into abeyance;
- A Reform Unit operating independently within the Ministry;
- Fiscal decentralisation was addressed – 2/3 of Motor Vehicle Tax (MVT) was earmarked to the parish revenue funds, as was 90% of property taxes;
- Experimentation with new models of service provision e.g. community – local government co-management of water resources.
- Parish Development Committees (PDCs) were established.

Unfortunately, many councillors remain unaware of the goals of the reform agenda and some of the recommended legal reforms have yet to be implemented. The PDCs remain underdeveloped. Their membership is dominated by community elites, and there are few initiatives taken to involve others. The PDCs also have a poor record of interaction with other community-based organisations.

Initially there was a willingness to experiment in community participation. The government report on the reform process noted the uncoordinated approach to community development and called for building community participation, as it is critical to a participatory model of local governance. But there are still a number of questions to be tackled:

- How is multi-stakeholder linking to be encouraged?
- What is the role of the recommended Parish Development Committees (PDCs)?
- How can NGOs/CBOs and communities be involved in partnerships?

Key obstacles to deepening local democracy

A number of factors are disincentives to greater participation by the public in the process of local governance. These include:

- Strictly party political decision making creating an exclusive governance process. The lack of clear processes to facilitate people's participation is perceived as the devaluing of the community's traditional knowledge and leads to poor services and poor income generation.
- Disappointed hopes that the local government reform process would generate a new culture of partnership between the community and the local authorities. It was also hoped that reform would lead to an administrative and political structure in local government that was more responsive, inclusive, transparent, accountable and results-oriented.
- Political infighting and violence have been a major disincentive to deepening participation.

For local democracy to thrive in Jamaica, local governments will need to foster new attitudes to leadership, greater transparency and accountability to the citizenry. They will need to be pragmatic policy-makers, and find resourceful ways of working with local civil society and the private sector. Above all, people's participation is fundamental, if local development is to succeed.

(Source: Joan Grant-Cummings, Coordinator, Coalition For Community Participation in Governance, Kingston, Jamaica)

we cannot be sure that their collective decision reflects the views of the community. (Curtice 1999) Citizen participation is therefore critical to the success of local elections, and to a healthy local democracy.

Curtice (1999) advises that regular and continuous consultation with pressure groups and with individual citizens also has a vital role to play. He cautions though, that "for the most part these other forms of democratic participation remain the preserve of a minority about whose representativeness doubts may be expressed." Throughout the Commonwealth there is a strong history of citizens meeting to discuss issues of local concern, whether this be in informal community gatherings in the village square or convened meetings at the city hall. Arising out of these meetings, representation is frequently made to the local government.

A common frustration however, expressed in an article on local democracy by Canadian writer, Ned Jacobs, of Vancouver, is "trying to deal with a city government that often seems indifferent or hostile to neighbourhood associations." The other side of this problem of course, is that local government representatives themselves are usually constrained by limited resources and a lack of time in which to sufficiently attend to all the concerns of the residents of the community. Indeed, Jacobs (1998), speaking about the councillors in Vancouver, noted that "they are dedicated individuals doing their best to govern a city of more than half a million people spread across dozens of neighbourhoods. To possess an intimate knowledge of every city neighbourhood and its history, to keep up with its current issues, and to maintain on-going, detailed discussions with individuals and community leaders is simply not humanly possible." A survey of Welsh councillors who decided not to stand at the 1999 local government elections found that more than half of those standing down had done so because of the increasing demands which council work was placing on their time.

A healthy local democracy manifests itself in a number of ways including:

- Elections conducted in an atmosphere devoid of intimidation and under a system that is transparent and also commands respect and legitimacy
- Inclusive local decision-making
- Appropriate devolved powers
- Clarity of roles and functions of the different spheres of government, preferably through constitutional or other legal recognition
- Finance commensurate with its functions
- Efficient and effective delivery of services
- Local government having an organized voice that is recognized as autonomous and legitimate.

3.2 STATE OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN THE COMMONWEALTH

On 8 December 2003 Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Abuja, Nigeria, officially endorsed giving constitutional recognition to the sphere of local government. This was as a result of lobbying by the Commonwealth Local Government Forum. The Heads of Government also reaffirmed the value they attach to elected local government as an important foundation for democracy (CLGF 2003).

The importance of this endorsement is widely recognised. Zibani Maundeni (2004) in an assessment of local democracy in Gaborone , Botswana explains that because the local government is not enshrined in the constitution of Botswana, they lack the inherent competence derived from being constitutionally defined. He argues, "Having local authorities whose existence is not entrenched in the constitution weakens and marginalises local democracy".

Nonetheless, in Botswana there is a developed and functioning system of local democracy, with elected councils and programmes to reach out to the community. However, the ability of local authorities to address governance challenges remains limited by restrictions on the autonomy of local government. The city authorities also have a limited capacity to resolve problems concerning poverty and unemployment, housing shortages and competition over land and the provision of universal access to water, healthcare and education within city boundaries.

3.3 THE IMPACT OF DECENTRALISATION

The focus on decentralisation and local governance has increased over the past decade. It was borne out of the concern that the "creation and sustaining of democratic institutions within societies, as well as the role of good governance in maintaining democratic institutions, had in many instances failed to materialise. In addition, the failure of efforts at encouraging democratic economic development within the framework of highly centralized states gave rise to much concern about issues of good governance". (Rosenbaum 1999)

A notion widely accepted by international development agencies and governments alike, was that since it was the sphere of government closest to the citizen, decentralisation could be a key tool to deepening democracy, promoting sustainable development and reducing poverty from the bottom-up. Promoting good governance in the local sphere increasingly came to be tied to aid programmes. Jütting et al. (2004) assert that a clear link between decentralisation and poverty reduction cannot be established. Questions clearly remain to be researched concerning what types of decentralisation in which circumstances, and particulary what role does local democracy have in driving success. This is particularly true when there is evidence of states like West Bengal in India, where local democracy was introduced in 1978. Then the percentage of people below the poverty line was approximately 73%. By 1999-2000 this figure had been reduced to 30% through the effective policies set in force by the local government authorities. (Matthew 2004)

Jütting et al. argue that in some of the poorest countries characterised by weak institutions and political conflicts, decentralisation could actually make matters worse. Interestingly, they also note that "decentralisation would appear to depend less on the physical country setting, for example a country's size or quality of infrastructure, than on the capacity and willingness of policy-makers to ensure a pro-poor devolution process". (Jütting et al. 2004) This view certainly echoes the findings of the Participation Toolkit Partnership (2004), that neither size nor geographical setting plays a part in the success or failure of participatory

Reform of local democracy in New Zealand

The local government sector has recently been reformed. The Local Government Act, 2002, marks a significant change in the way local government is conceptualised in New Zealand. The aim of these reforms is firstly to create a local government sector that is able to work in partnership with central government to promote well being for New Zealanders in their communities. Secondly, to give councils the ability to fulfil that role, and be responsive and accountable to their communities.

Until 2002 local authorities simply discharged the various functions they were given by statute. By contrast, the new Act states that the purpose of local government is:

- to enable democratic local decision-making and action by, and on behalf of, communities; and
- to promote the social, economic, environmental, and cultural well being of communities, in the present and for the future.

This new broad statement of purpose in the law is combined with a new statement of the powers of local government, to create much greater flexibility and allow for enhanced local democracy. Local authorities now have full legal rights, powers, and privileges, including full capacity to undertake any activity or business, do any act, or enter into any transaction. The main restriction is that these powers must be exercised for the benefit of the area for which the authority is responsible. The new Act requires that substantial community consultation is undertaken before significant decisions are taken.

The reform has been accompanied by an increasingly active partnership between central and local government in the achievement of social and policy goals including the establishment of a Central-Local Government Forum. It meets biannually and is co-chaired by the Prime Minister and the President of the local government association, Local Government New Zealand. The forum enables discussion of the issues and priorities, including transport, community development, social cohesion and housing, e-government and regional development.

There is also ongoing discussion about the relationship between local and central government activity to address poverty. However addressing poverty is not a core local government function so the level of involvement is determined by the individual council. In 2002 Auckland City Council withdrew from the provision of low cost housing, in order to address the city's infrastructure. Wellington City Council, on the other hand, provides low cost housing to promote community health and safety. It plans to remain a significant provider, but is discussing the possibility of funding assistance with central government.

How active is local democracy?

National government attracts a healthy and active democratic engagement. Although it is not compulsory to be on the electoral roll, the enrolment rate is 92.7%. Voter turnout at the 2002 general election was 77%. Estimates of the 2001 local elections suggest that about half the electorate participated. – the lowest turnout in fifteen years.

Analysis of the 2001 electionis identifies a correlation between voter turnout and the ratio of the population to elected members: the smaller the ratio, the higher the turnout.

The recent local government reforms also included changes to the local electoral system:

- local authorities may adopt a single transferable vote system (STV). Ten councils opted to use this system in the October 2004 elections.
- Communities may choose to introduce separate seats for the Maori population in the area.

Is local government effective?

Whether local government itself is effective is a harder question to answer. The accountability indicators reveal a sector that is working solidly and carefully:

- The most extreme form of accountability available is the removal of a council that has become dysfunctional, and the appointment by the Minister of Local Government of a Commission in its place. That has occured only once.
- Ongoing oversight is provided by the Controller and Auditor General, who audits the financial position and management practices of all local government bodies and their subsidiary entities.
- A survey of court judgments on local government matters shows there is the occasional judicial review case, which at times reveals errors of judgment or procedural failures.

A number of issues are emerging, however, with aspects of the responsibilities that local authorities discharge and whether the existing legal framework and structure of the sector is effective.

Could local democracy be deepened?

The recent reforms aim to encourage and deepen local democracy. It will take time for the reforms to work through and for communities and councils to explore the new opportunities that they provide. Nonetheless, the building blocks are in place:

- communities may adopt electoral arrangements to suit their particular needs;
- the purpose of local government has been changed from the delivery of a list of specified functions, to a broad purpose of promoting community well-being across all dimensions;
- the powers of local government have been changed to support the breadth of purpose, so that councils now have the same broad legal capacity as any organisation, subject only to the constraint that those powers should be exercised for the benefit of the community;
- Central and local governments hold 6-monthly forums, and are working closely together on a wide range of projects.

Key obstacles

There is therefore a strong push, from several directions, for the role of local government to continue to develop. But there are barriers:

- a limited number of people for communities to draw on for positions on local bodies.
- The cost of the community consultation requirements.

The small size of local authorities has affected the nature of the responsibilities that they have carried. That narrow focus is changing, however, as the issues for which local government carries responsibility move into the national spotlight, as the trend for government and community to work together deepen, and as recent reform of the sector has created new breadth and opportunity for local authorities. Many in the sector are enthusiastic about the coming period, as these changes are implemented, and as communities and councils explore what can be done with this new flexibility.

(Source: Nicola White, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Policy Studies, School of Government, Victoria University of Wellington)

processes. What matters is the nature of citizens' involvement and the commitment of policymakers.

But for decentralisation to be effective, a number of criteria must be satisfied. According to Rosenbaum (1999), effective decentralisation requires a strong local government. A key element of this is the capacity to raise local revenue. Without this, local government will remain dependent on central government and inevitably vulnerable to its control. Strong local government requires effective local law making capacity. Regional and local governments ought to have a great deal of discretionary authority in terms of the passage of various kinds of laws, statutes and regulations. Without this authority, local governance is not likely to flourish.

Meaningful decentralisation requires strong support from national government policy makers and institutions. This may take the form of enabling legislation as well as legislation providing local units of government with the capacity to act autonomously and independently to provide needed services, regulate local activities and raise the revenue necessary to adequately fund local services.

Even the most permissive and supportive national government, if acting alone, cannot adequately insure meaningful, vibrant decentralisation. Clearly there has to be significant local demand and local concern for the development and maintenance of a decentralized governance system. The reality however, is that the leaders of most centralised governments are not eager to give up either resources or the authority to control them. For political purposes one may frequently hear national leaders speak of the need to encourage decentralisation, local government capacity and citizen participation but the reality is that too often such statements gain meaning only when there is pressure from the local community to carry them out. (Rosenbaum 1999) Further pressure can be brought to bear by regional or international bodies as well.

In 2001, the Organization of American States (OAS) agreed the Quebec Plan of Action. (This international organisation includes some fifteen Commonwealth countries.) Recognizing that citizen participation and appropriate political representation are the foundation of democracy, and that local governments are closest to the daily lives of citizens, the OAS pledged to:

- Promote mechanisms to facilitate citizen participation in politics, especially in local or municipal government;
- Promote the development, autonomy and institutional strengthening of local government in order to promote favourable conditions for the sustainable economic and social development of their communities;
- Strengthen the institutional capacity of local governments to allow full and equal citizen participation in public policies without any discrimination, facilitate access to those services fundamental to improving citizens' quality of life, and strengthen decentralisation and the integral development of these services in part through commensurate and timely funding and initiatives that permit local governments to generate and administer their own resources.
- Promote sharing of information, best practices and administrative expertise among local government personnel, associations of local governments, community associations and the public, in part by facilitating access to information and communications technologies by municipalities and by encouraging cooperation and coordination among national, sub-regional and regional organizations of mayors and local government.

In India, self-governing village communities have existed for centuries. Panchayats or village councils were described in the 19th century as "the little republics". (Matthew 2004, case study) Today it is one of the most decentralized countries in the Commonwealth. It has a federal system, with governments at state level, and councils at district, block and village level. The 73rd and 74th amendments to the constitution (1992) have attempted to strengthen the panchayats as a means for participation (PRIA 2004). In addition, gram sabhas or village assemblies provide arenas for the direct participation of citizens. Bangladesh is a unitary state with less mechanisms for direct participation. (PRIA 2004)

Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya each have local authority acts. Uganda has the most explicit constitutional and policy framework for citizen participation in the local sphere through its decentralized five-tier local government system. (PRIA 2004) Participation however, in the 2002 local elections was described as modest. This was put down to various factors including inadequate civic education in the rural areas where illiteracy levels are relatively higher compared to urban areas; late delivery of polling kits, which led to some voters turning away without voting; and instances of voter intimidation and hooliganism. (Mukwaya 2004, case study)

The UK recently devolved power from the Westminster parliament to a Scottish parliament and assemblies in Wales, Northern Ireland (in suspension in December 2004) and London. (PRIA 2004) The 2000 Local Government Act introduced new political management options for England and Wales aimed at separating executive and scrutiny powers. Executive powers were removed from the council as a whole to executive committees, referred to as cabinets. The role of the backbench councillor is to hold the executive to account through scrutiny committees and act as community representatives. In addition, there is the option to introduce a directly elected mayor into local authorities where there was public support for the idea; in 2002, eleven such mayors were elected. (Randle 2004, case study)

In New Zealand, following a four-year of review, public consultation and in-depth discussion, the new Local Government Act was passed in 2002. Until then, according to White (2004), "local authorities simply discharged the various functions they were given by statute but now local authorities have full legal rights, powers and privileges, including the full capacity to undertake any activity or business, do any act, or enter into any transaction, to the benefit of the area for which the authority is responsible". (White 2004, case study)

The population of Papua New Guinea is approximately five million scattered over difficult and often impassable terrain. The country is made up of very diverse peoples speaking over 800 languages. (Sepoe 2004, case study) In Guyana, 94% of the population lives on just 6% of the land that makes up the coastal strip, with the remaining land area sparsely populated mainly by Amerindians and mining communities. In such instances, while there may be some form of political decentralization in the form of village councils, constraints such as weak political institutions mean that their system of governance is largely centralised.

Local democracy in Papua New Guinea

The population of Papua New Guinea (PNG) is approximately 5 million, scattered over difficult and often impassable terrain. It is ethnically diverse with over 800 languages; the official language being English. Enormous difficulties are experienced in communication and transportation. The ethno-linguistic diversity and the topography makes devolution of powers to serve both political (or democratic) and administrative objectives inevitable for PNG. Any attempt to devolve power to the grassroots level requires flexibility in policies and programmes as well as adopting administrative structures and processes that are appropriate for localities. Efforts are currently underway to address this issue. Intergovernmental relations, the national ministry responsible for lower level governments, has recognised this need and has proposed that "central government should debate the flexible application of requirements for community representation…according to cost and representation of diverse interests". Despite the fact that relations between the ethnic groups has often been hostile, PNG features proudly as an integrated national political community, yet still vulnerable, by global standards of governance.

Since the colonial era PNG has had local government. The principle of citizen participation was fully embraced by independent PNG in 1975. The Organic Law on Provincial Governments (OLPG) was enacted in 1977. In 1995, the existing OLPG was replaced with the Organic Law on Provincial and Local Level Government, defining the roles and responsibilities of provincial and local levels and intergovernment relations.

Objectives of local government

The broad objectives of local government are two-fold:

- Foster and promote local self-determination and self-reliance; democracy and popular participation
- Enhance effectiveness and efficiency in governmental delivery of goods and services in localities.

The policy goals include:

- Meaningful opportunities for local self-determination and popular participation in local decision-making;
- Increasing managerial and administrative capacity as well as providing lower level governments with sufficient resources for development and services within the framework of national objectives and strategies; and
- Improving chances for overall, harmonious national development by balancing national control and local autonomy.

What constitutes effective local government in PNG?

The hallmark of local democracy is the effective involvement of people in governance and more specifically in participating in decision-making on issues that affect their lives. This is proclaimed in principle but in practice has yet to be realized. This would be possible if legal provisions were properly implemented. Weak administrative capacity and/or the pervasive abuse of scarce resources compounds this problem. In general, accountability and transparency have yet to become ingrained in governmental processes and the body politic.

In general, three inter-related factors paramount to effective local level democracy are:

i) Access to decision-making forums in localities
ii) Avoiding conflicts in perceptions of roles of councillors, officers and citizens
iii) Clarity in benefits and the costs of participation for the people in PNG.

The lack of central government support in terms of resources and expertise/technical support; a fiscal crisis at the national level; lack of co-ordination between central agencies responsible for implementing the Organic Law; lack of knowledge about legislative and financial legislation and procedures; and the abuse and misappropriation of resources, all contribute to this situation. At the local level, traditional leadership is often co-opted by national politicians and end up being rubber stamps. Many officials at the local level become conduits of personal interests of national politicians. This makes effective management, accountability and responsiveness of local level government difficult.

Does local democracy deliver for the poor?

Local government has made rural people aware of the basic institutions and processes of liberal democracy such as voting, representative government through majority principle, and government based on popular consent. However, in terms of service delivery a vast majority of people living in rural areas have very little or no access to basic goods and services. This has been the most critical topic of political debate and discussion for many Papua New Guineans. There is a general consensus that development has yet to reach the rural majority in PNG.

Currently initiatives are underway to deepen democracy by reviewing the structure of local government committees in order to make them more representative of the diverse interests of local communities.

Key obstacles to fuller local democracy

Personnel: rural conditions make it very difficult to retain qualified staff in rural authorities. Finance: with a limited revenue base most local authorities are dependent on central government leaving them susceptible to interference by national politicians. Development plans fail due to inadequate resources.

Weak administrative capacity and corruption erode attempts to deepen local democracy.

Structural factors such as low literacy amongst the adult population, poor transport and communication infrastructure, also contribute significantly.

Overall, local democracy in PNG is not effective given the lack of compliance by key actors to the provisions of the Organic Law on Provincial and Local Level Government. There is a lack of implementation of the most basic of provisions in the law that, in principle, recognize the active and effective participation of citizens in their respective local governments.

Although voter participation is usually very high in PNG, advocacy and community lobbying between elections is conspicuous by its absence. Many local governments have not complied with legal provisions on gender representation. Consequently, few local authorities have women's representatives. Rural people remain disempowered. Women, youth and low-income people suffer political marginalisation.

Conclusion

A significant change has occurred at the grassroots level. Formerly fragmented and diverse ethnic groups are now forming one local government entity. This has paved the way for, and facilitated national integration and a sense of national identity amongst citizens. The purpose of instituting local government was to engage local people in governmental decision-making by determining their own developmental priorities; and to ensure provision of goods and services to satisfy their needs. The overall situation in PNG is one of widespread failure to achieve the twin goals local government: democracy and delivery of services, in any significant way. The vast majority of people remain spectators in a system largely dominated by the private interests of national and local politicians.

(Source: Dr Orovu Sepoe, University of Papua New Guinea)

Evidently, because of varying levels of institutional and financial capacity, as well as social capital, decentralization has been attempted with varying levels of success. It is beyond the scope of many of the small states within the Commonwealth to even pursue decentralization at all. St. Vincent and the Grenadines for instance has no local government system: all six parishes are administered by central government. The country has recently approached the CLGF for assistance in establishing local democracy.

It can be easy to overlook the limited capacity of small states to pursue decentralization. The former Commonwealth Secretary-General Chief Emeka Anyaoku for instance, speaking at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in 1999, referred only to larger countries with substantial populations when he addressed the issue of decentralization, citing the rich dividends that could be reaped. Acknowledging that this required some level of political courage, he expressed the view that a flourishing system of local government is the bedrock of an efficient and inclusive democracy.

Though this is undoubtedly true, it raises the question of the feasibility of decentralisation for some states. While Jütting et al. (2004) have found that a country's size does not play a role in the success or failure of decentralization, a 2003 OAS/UNDP report declared that there are "clear challenges to governance, democracy and development in small states. It noted that the security of such states is related to their capacity to deal adequately with threats to governance posed by a rapidly changing international environment and complex socio-economic pressures."

3.4 LOCAL-CENTRAL RELATIONS

The quality of relations between the local, provincial and national spheres of government has a significant impact on the quality of local democracy. There are tensions inherent in the relations between different spheres of government. In countries where there is a well structured relationship, the dialogue that is required to ensure that all spheres of government work towards the same developmental ends is much better achieved. Governments in all spheres must cater for the needs of their citizens. As such, the different spheres are broadly reliant on each other, and must draw from a finite pool of resources in order to fulfil their mandate.

In 1997 the ODPM and the Local Government Association agreed a framework for central-local relations. This provides for central and local government work in partnership to strengthen and sustain local government, and improve local service provision. By this framework they should:

- Promote effective local democracy, with strong and accountable political leadership;
- Support continuous improvement in the quality of local government services, helping councils to make a real difference for their communities;
- Support consideration in partnership of priorities for local government, and the definition of an agreed list of priorities;
- Increase the discretion and local accountability of local authorities on expenditure and revenue raising matters, within such disciplines as are essential to national economic policy;
- Enable and encourage local authorities to modernise and revitalise their structures and working practices so as to provide accountable and responsive leadership for local communities;
- As a general principle, provide for services and decision making affecting local communities to be undertaken in the sphere closest to the people and area to be served, consistent with competence, practicality and cost effectiveness; and
- Uphold standards of conduct in public life, founded on principles of selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. (ODPM)

According to the OPDM, it is central government, by the authority of Parliament, that has responsibility for determining the powers and duties of local government, and setting the framework for local government and local service provision. It has been argued that there are tensions within the government's reform agenda "between a top-down and bottom-up approach; between a drive for national standards and the encouragement of local learning and innovation; and between strengthening executive leadership and enhancing public participation". (Randle 2004 case study) While Labour's modernisation strategy has clear elements of a top-down approach (legislation, inspectorates,), there is also a significant bottom-up dimension (a variety of zones, experiments and pilots, albeit with different degrees of freedom). (Wilson 2003)

The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) notes however, that Scottish local government has long-standing concerns that require immediate attention if it is to fulfil its potential as local government rather than merely local administration carrying out the wishes of national government: "Institutionalised under-funding, unnecessary interference and control from the centre, the over-reliance on management by performance targets, and the inexorable growth of nationally imposed initiatives and partnerships are just some of the issues that need to be tackled if local government is to be allowed to flourish". (COSLA 2003 Manifesto).

This chapter in a small way illustrates the wide variations in the culture of local democracy in the Commonwealth. What is evident is that the gap between rhetoric and reality is a troubling one. However efforts are being made by governments and citizens' groups to deepen democracy. Commonwealth Heads of Government must be seen not only to be firmly endorsing local democracy but equally firmly holding each other to task when countries fall short. The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group performs an oversight role at the national level; perhaps serious consideration should be given to the establishment of an oversight mechanism for local democracy as well. In this regard, the call by the Commonwealth Local Government Forum for (1) a fund for democracy; and (2) that the state of local democracy should be taken into account when assessing national democracy, should be firmly supported. The CLGF sees the initiative as part of the modernisation of the Commonwealth, to safeguard, promote and support democracy and good governance in the local sphere. The establishment of such an initiative would most certainly contribute to healthy local democracy, and would go some way to further deepening democracy. The next section examines the depth of local democracy.

Deepening local democracy in South Africa

South Africa is a country of almost forty two million people of diverse cultural and political groups. It needs for effective local democracy to deliver national integration, development and poverty alleviation. The first and second local government elections held in November 1995 and May /June 1996, and December 2000 respectively were political watersheds in the democratisation of South Africa. Despite the ushering in of local democracy and accelerated service delivery to the disadvantaged communities, a large percentage of the population still lives in extreme poverty. Addressing this is as a matter of urgency if local democracy is going to be meaningful to the majority of South Africans.

The Deputy Minister of Provincial and Local Government has emphasised that tackling poverty in the country's 21 rural and urban nodes identified by the President would be the Department's main priority this in 2004. Since 1995, considerable progress has been made in transforming local governance in South Africa. However, given the challenges, particularly in relation to poverty alleviation and unemployment, there is no guarantee that by the end of 2005, that all municipalities will be financially sustainable entities capable of meeting their democratic and development mandate by 2010.

Local democracy and citicen participation

The voter turnout for the December 2000 elections was 48.6%, similar to previous local elections held in 1995/6. This was lower than the turnout figure for the national election held in 1999 which was 89%. About a quarter of councillors are women.

The active participation of the local citizenry in the electoral process in the South African context is driven by several factors, including:

- voters in urban areas are motivated by protecting privileges and use their vote to maintain them;
- previously disadvantaged citizens believe that their vote will ensure a better quality of life; and
- there disillusionment on the part of elector who do not believe the quality of life has improved.

Participation is critical to local democracy. Councils are obliged to consult communities via ward committees. However, the active participation of the rural populace is still problematic. Given the fact that the largest percentage of backlogs are in the rural areas, which are inhabited by the disadvantaged communities, it is imperative that that they are actively involved in addressing the issue. Lack of capacity and expertise has also been identified as a major problem.

Local democracy and poverty alleviation

Quality of life can be significantly enhanced by the provision of basic needs, namely housing, water and electricity. There are some practical problems with implementation as the lack of required infrastructure to provide water and electricity is quite evident in the rural areas. Water in some areas is being provided via "standpipes" serving many households, using a coupon system, which has its problems. To assist municipalities with the provision of basic services, national government makes available an 'equitable share' and indigent support grants. It is generally accepted that poverty is one of the principal reasons for non-payment for services.

A critical step forward in developing the asset base of the poor is to enhance their limited access to the full range of municipal services: water supply, sanitation, refuse removal, drainage, flood protection, local roads, public transport, street lighting and traffic management. Municipalities have a constitutional obligation to address poverty through the promotion of social and economic development and the provision of services in a sustainable manner. Indigence is a multifaceted social problem characterised by lack of jobs and income; inadequate access to housing and basic household services; inadequate access to public facilities and infrastructure and marginalisation.

Indigent policies play a crucial role in affording the poor access to basic services and in the process partly alleviating the problem of non - payment and cost recovery of services. It must be ensured that the very poor have access to household services as they are critical to the socio-economic development of the local community. A policy on indigence is also one of the nationally regulated general key performance indicators (KPIs) for local government. Municipalities must set, monitor, and review performance targets for each KPI and report these findings in their annual performance reports.

Obstacles to fuller demcracy

The advent of local democracy is a recent phenomenon South Africa becoming democratic in 1994. The transformation at the local level has involved the creation of grassroots democracy in many communities that had no experience of this previously. However, during the transition very little attention was paid to civic education. Consequently, citizens are not fully aware of their rights and responsibilities and how they can hold public representatives accountable in the context of local democracy.

The majority of municipalities have a core group of councillors and officials who have a good grasp of the challenges confronting local government and are committed to addressing them. However there is a distinct gap between the empowered councillor and those on a steep learning curve, and this has to be addressed through capacity development. There is also an urgent need to improve management skills of councillors to ensure the translation of policies and programmes to delivery, and ultimately development.

Traditional leadership is an integral part of local governance. Traditional leaders are not participating in local government until such time that the national government clarifies its role in local government. The opportunity to involve them in facilitating development is being missed, since the integrated development plan framework has been developed without the role of traditional leaders being finalised. There is a need to avoid the temptation to interpret traditional leadership as a threat to democracy. In the spirit of co -operative governance, traditional leadership must be accepted as an institution supporting democracy. Developments at the local level must be guided by a cultural ethos in line with the African Renaissance.

(Source: PS Reddy, University of Kwazulu – Natal, P Naidoo, Municipal Manager, Makana Municipality and doctoral student, University of Kwazulu - Natal and TT Ngcobo, consultant and doctoral student at University of Kwazulu – Natal)

4.How deep is local democracy?

Deepening local democracy means involving citizens more in local decisions that affect their lives. It means seeking a balanced involvement of both genders; and citizens of all ages. It means adequate scrutiny, accountability and information flows. It also means putting effective strategies in place for increasing and deepening citizen participation in decision-making processes in the local sphere.

Why should citizens participate? What are the tangible benefits of citizen participation?
According to Commonwealth Heads of Government: "If the poor and vulnerable are to be at the centre of development, the process must be participatory, in which they have a voice…good governance and economic progress are directly linked…Good governance requires inclusive and participatory process…" (Fancourt Declaration on Globalization and People-centred Development (1999) cited in Citizens and Governance Toolkit, p. 11).

Over the last three decades there has been a growing realisation among development practitioners and policy-makers that traditional 'top-down' approaches to development have not delivered the desired results. In particular, sustainability and equity have not been achieved. To effectively address these issues, 'people-centred' and 'people-controlled' development has evolved as an alternative approach (Commonwealth Foundation, 2004, p.105). Formerly used in the context of social projects, the concept of participation has now come to refer to the rights of citizens and to democratic governance. (Gaventa and Valderrama 1997)

4.1 WHAT IS 'PARTICIPATION'?

The idea of citizen participation in public decision making processes is not new. Citizen involvement can be viewed from the perspective of benefits gained and costs borne, "in accordance to the pre-existing local distribution of power". (da Cunha and Junho Peña, 1997) The argument is made that community decisions that involve citizens are more likely to be acceptable to the local people. Better community decisions, by definition, should be beneficial to the average citizen, And by extnsion more sustainable and therefore less costly to the local authority.

Citizen participation in community affairs serves to check and balance political activities, though Gaventa and Valderrama (1999) note that "within development literature there has been less attention to notions of 'political participation' which involve the interactions of the individual or organised groups with the state. Instead authors often focused more on mechanisms of indirect participation, such as Nie and Verba (1972) who define participation as those legal activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take". Twenty years later a broader definition was provided by Parry, Mosley and Day (1992) who saw it as "taking part in the process of formulation, passage and implementation of public policies". (cited in Gaventa and Valderrama 1999) The basis of political participation has been in the action taken by citizens to influence the decisions taken by public representatives and officials; expressed in individual and collective actions such as voting, campaigning, contacting, group action and protest – all oriented towards influencing the representatives in government, rather than active and direct participation in the process of governance itself. (Gaventa and Valderrama 1999; Commonwealth Foundation 2004)

The Commonwealth Foundation notes a clash between official and political cultures. The former, of institutions and official bureaucracy, is deemed "hierarchical, secretive, orientated to responding from the top down, exclusive, and its aim is to reduce things to simple essentials." This is compared this to the culture of civil society, or citizens in organised groups at the village level, which is non-hierarchical and open; and where the culture is one of inclusion and responding from the bottom-up; where issues are open to discussion instead of reduced to an essential paragraph. Participatory governance is about the meeting of these two cultures.

Alatas, Pritchett and Wetterberg (2002) say that the backlash against state-centric approaches has led to an enthusiasm in development circles for new approaches, with the use of terms such as social capital; beneficiary participation; empowerment; community development, that aim to engage end-users in decision-making. They warn that the overly simplistic generalisation of "social capital/participation/empowerment leads to better governance" can leave questions such as for whom does governance improve unanswered. There is also the risk of casting participatory democracy as a trend, with an expectation of quick results. Colin Ball, formerly director of the Commonwealth Foundation, believes that participatory governance has already become fashionable among international development agencies, governments and institutions. When it becomes no longer fashionable, will it be abandoned by civil society, or demanded as a human right?

4.2 GOING BEYOND ELECTIONS

Colin Ball argumues that citizens are saying that while democracy is right, it is not all right: "'Don't just expect us to vote, tell us what we have to do, or even go through token "consultations" with us from time to time…' They are saying: 'Before and after we vote,

Local democracy in Trinidad and Tobago

Local government is regarded as an integral part of the state's political and administrative machinery. Decentralisation is a key tool to deepen democracy and promote the population's well being. The government of Trinidad and Tobago committed itself to the Quebec Plan of Action (see main paper, section 3.3) in recognition that citizen participation and effective political representation are the foundations of democracy, and that local governments have a significant role to play in this and the daily lives of citizens.

Local government's powers and capacity for action in Trinidad

Local government's capability to act has been described as low to medium, and is subject to intervention by central government. It has been reported that municipalities under the control of parties not in national government are frustrated when seeking to access funding and navigating the national bureaucracy. Generally, municipalities suffer from low levels of training of public officers, and low levels of efficiency. Because of the relatively small size of the island, many local problems reflect national situations and cannot be tackled at the local level alone, for example crime, poverty or illiteracy.

The system of financial redistribution to compensate for income inequalities among municipalities does not appear transparent. In fact, there is the appearance is that central government distributes finances to favour the party in power rather than on the basis of need, size, and demands on the resources of the municipality.

The level of participation by women in local government is an area of concern and action has been taken to increase their numbers and effectiveness, through training and community based support mechanisms. There are now 62 women councillors out of a total of 157 (39.5%) in the fourteen municipalities. There is one woman chairperson and two deputy mayors.

The political culture stifles a culture of excellence. In a political culture where party patronage is very strong, there is no system to reward excellence, productivity, and innovation or improvements in service delivery.

The Ministry of Local Government's powers flow from the fact that some 97 per cent of municipal revenue comes from central government undermines the autonomy of local representatives. Council meeting are held on a monthly basis at which representatives express opinions and discuss solutions. But ultimately proposals are voted upon according to the party whip.

Citizen participation in local government

Local government elections are held every three years. Since the two major parties virtually command about 40% each of the respective two major ethnic groups, the choice of local government leaders largely reflects this ethnic composition.

There are few channels for citizen participation in the governance of public services and development projects at the local level. Generally, citizens have to turn to the media to get attention to local plights such as poor access roads, market facilities, traffic congestion, that they may make public by blocking roadways, for instance. There is no mechanism for direct consultation with the population such as assemblies, council meetings, referenda or plebiscites.

Meanwhile, the ombudsman receives numerous complaints against municipalities. In 2000, local government recorded the second highest number of complaints, after the prison services. In 2001, complaints against municipal corporations alone were 121. In 2002, 162 out of 257 (63%) were against municipal authorities. Again in 2003 the highest number of complaints were against regional corporations – 106; and the Tobago House of assembly – 137.

The escalating numbers of complaints against local government bodies indicate a growing frustration in their ability meet citizens' expectations and needs. The only powers available to citizens are the few minutes they spend in the polling booths to elect local officials every three years. None of the municipalities have an official department responsible for citizen participation initiatives or community organisations.

In general, civil society organisations have limited influence on local government decision-making. They exercise this by lobbying the mayor, or members of council, to support a particular cause or initiative. There are no forms of citizen participation that establish obligations for the municipality.

Promotion of the sustainable economic and social development of communities

About half of the population in all the municipalities live below the poverty – in 5 of them, more than half live below the poverty line. Few local governments have medium- or long-term development plans that cover three or more years.

Moderate priority is placed on cultural affairs or programmes to alleviate poverty, disaster management. There is low focus on combating corruption, environmental stewardship, and access to technology or local economic development

There is low level of agreement with the local governments' development priorities among the civil society organisations, as party loyalty is given preference over serving the communities. As such, public satisfaction with the public services managed by local governments, especially, health, infrastructure, community sanitation or support for small businesses, is low.

The government committed itself to enhancing local democracy when it signed the Quebec Plan of Action. However, little has been done to translate this commitment into action. Local authorities, though administratively sound, have not been able to transcend party and ethnic politics.

It is to be noted that the government has produced a green paper on local government reform for public comment. A series of regional consultations has been started. It is hoped that these consultations will yield a transformation of the system of local government that will match the commitment

(Source: Hazel Brown, coordinator, Network of NGOs for the Advancement of Women, Trinidad and Tobago)

"there has been a growing realisation among development practitioners and policy-makers that traditional 'top-down' approaches to development have not delivered"

include us and our civil society organisations in the decision-making process; treat us not as mere voters or mere beneficiaries but as people who have much to contribute.'"

Citizens are demanding to be involved. It is evident in the way civil society organizations throughout the Commonwealth have committed to educating citizens about their rights as voters and raising awareness about the electoral process. For instance, NGOs such as FECIV (Instituto de Educação Cívica) in Mozambique were involved in conducting extensive voting campaigns across the country for the 2003 local elections. Though turn-out was low, the youth participation was high. (Commonwealth Expert Group 2003)

4.3 ADDRESSING LOW VOTER TURN-OUT

This is not to say that increased citizen demands are necessarily reflected in voter turnout. Local elections in many parts of the Commonwealth continue to be plagued by low voter turnout. Turnout for English metropolitan councils in 1999 was 26.1%, only seven points higher than in 1973. A report commissioned in 1999 by the ODPM found that "Notwithstanding their relative importance, the recent record of participation at English local elections has been poor. Turn-out is much lower (often less than half the level) than at British general elections and compares unfavourably with sub-national elections in other advanced democracies."

In 2002 a poll conducted by Policy Exchange, a London think-tank, found that people felt councillors had little control over schools, hospitals or the police, all of which were aeas of prme concern. Forty-eight per cent said they would be more likely to vote if they had a role in deciding who ran their public services. Among people aged 25-34, 64% said they would be more likely to vote. It was suggested that this would increase electoral turnout from 25% to over 70%.

Regular elections provide citizens with an opportunity to express their will and determine the composition of government. To make sensible choices, however, citizens must be aware of an election's purpose, their voting rights and obligations, the range of electoral options, and the voting procedures. The Washington-based National Democratic Institute carries out democracy programmes in several Commonwealth countries.

Poor voter education results in low levels of participation, a large number of improperly cast ballots, a shortage of confidence in the election's integrity or in the legitimacy of the results. Cynicism toward elections may also develop when election officials do not fulfil past promises. Voter education is critical: an informed citizen is more likely to participate and claim ownership of the results.

New Zealand voter turn-out

In 2001 turnout in New Zealand local elections ranged from 45% to 57% depending on the type of local body (Kevin Taylor, The New Zealand Herald, 27 September 2004), the lowest since 1989 (except for regional councils, which had the second lowest). New Zealand has a system of compulsory voter registration and it can be seen that voting figures for local elections across the different types of local authorities have consistently ranged from 67% in 1989 to 45% in 2001. The fact that the law is not strictly enforced has led commentators to conclude that turnout in New Zealand is inflated by the fact that relatively large numbers of voting-age adults simply do not appear on the electoral register (ODPM Report, p. 78).

	1989	1992	1995	1998	2001
Regional councils	56	52	48	53	49
Territorial authorities					
City councils	52	48	49	51	45
City mayors	50	48	49	51	45
District councils	67	61	59	61	57
District mayors	67	61	59	59	56
Community boards	54	49	50	50	46

Source: Ministry of Social Development, 'The Social Report 2004' cited in White (case study) 2004.

4.4 STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING AND DEEPENING PARTICIPATION

How does one know when citizen participation has both increased and deepened to be 'democratic'? Can it be measured? If so, how? Estrella (2001) suggests indicators that would measure progress – participation, new styles of leadership, accountability and transparency, capable public management, and respect for law and human rights (cited in Logolink 2003). Another approach is the use of participatory methods (UN Habitat; PRIA report 2000; Commonwealth Foundation 2004).

The methods which have assisted citizens and community members to be actively involved in all stages of development projects – appraisal, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation – can also be used in governance. (Commonwealth Foundation 2004) Such

Local democracy in Uganda

Uganda's post-colonial history was marked by political and economic turmoil. In the period from 1966 there were coups, a war with Tanzania (1978/9) and a protracted guerrilla war (1981-85). By 1986 the economy was in shambles and the once capable civil service discredited and unable to deliver services.

Since then, the Government has undertaken reforms to assist the process of recovery and development. The major components of the policy platform were economic and social reform, decentralisation and continued reform of the civil service. Nevertheless, Uganda remains among the poorest countries in the world, with per capita income of only US$ 220.

2. The Local Government System in Uganda

The decentralisation policy, launched during October 1992, was enshrined in the Constitution (1995) and the Local Government Act (1997). The policy was designed both to improve systems of governance and to foster economic growth, both of which are considered essential to poverty eradication.

The main objectives of decentralisation include:

i) Transfer powers to the district and thus reduce the load on remote and under-resourced central Government entities
ii) Bring political and administrative control over services to the point where they are actually delivered, and thus reduce competition for power at the centre and improve accountability and effectiveness,
iii) Free local managers from central constraints and thus allow them to develop organisational structures tailored to local circumstances
iv) Improve financial accountability and responsibility by establishing a clear link between the payment of taxes and the provision of services they finance
v) Restructure government machinery in order to make the administration of the country more effective; and
vi) Create a democracy that would bring about more efficiency and productivity in the state machinery through the involvement of people at all levels.

Through decentralisation, significant powers, functions, responsibilities and resources were devolved from the central government to local governments. The local government system is based on the district, under which there are lower local governments and administrative units.

Local council elections and affirmative action

The Constitution of Uganda (1995) and Local Governments Act (1997), provide the legal framework under which the local council elections are conducted. The elections are organised at two levels namely the local government council, and the administrative unit council levels.

Under the principles of affirmative action, the law requires all councils to:

- have at least one-third of the total councillors as women (see Table 1)
- have youth representation
- have persons with disabilities represented (people with disabilities elect their representative through the electoral college)
- have executive committees, statutory bodies, and commissions comprise one-third women

Women are encouraged to vie for any political position.

Table 1: Women political leaders in rural local governments

Category of Leader	District	Sub-county
Chairperson	1	5
Vice Chairperson	20	14
Council Speaker	7	21
Deputy Council Speaker	34	520
Councillors	Over 33.3% of Councillors	Over 33.3% of Councillors

Delivery of services by the local governments

The aim of devolution is to ensure good governance through democratic control and participation in decision-making. Local governments initiate, co-ordinate, and implement their own programmes.

Decentralisation was envisaged to enable local communities to participate in and control affairs within their elected councils. It promotes consultation and participation of civil society organisations. Through these communities can participate in the planning and implementation of the delivery of services mandated to local governments.

On their part, citizens are required to carry out their civic duties namely:

- Prompt payment of taxes
- Be involved in the definition of development priorities in their areas.
- Participate in self-help projects
- Participate in council meetings at village level
- Demand for accountability and information from elected leaders
- Protect all public assets and the environment

Many achievements have been registered since the implementation of the decentralisation policy through the various structures set up in the local government councils.

Within each area, the highest political authority is the Local Council. Control of decisions and resources as well as participation in development planning has gone down to the local people enabling the poor to participate. Councils now mobilise and allocate resources according to their perceived needs.

Democratic practices have improved. There is better engagement between local leaders and civil society. Councils are empowered and make decisions for which they are accountable to all stakeholders. Social and political accountability has gradually awakened a sense of integrity in the population and there is now an opening for ethical conduct. A social code is therefore evolving which can have a positive influence on the attitudes of all citizens.

Great strides have been taken to achieve democracy, ensure good governance, and improve the provision of services. Elections of council leaders in free and fair elections are a regular occurrence. There is improved local decision-making, greater accountability and ownership of public investments under local government control. There has also been an improved local administrative and planning capacity. A range of innovative local arrangements for revenue and the use of public resources are in place. Challenges remain to consolidate the gains made so far.

Key obstacles to fuller local democracy

The factors, which contributed to the relatively modest turn-out of voters, vary from district to district. They include:

- Inadequate civic education in the rural areas where illiteracy levels are relatively higher compared to urban areas.
- Late delivery of polling kits, which led to some voters turning away without voting
- Insecurity especially in the Northern parts of the country
- Voter intimidation and hooliganism
- Voter fatigue and apathy

Despite progress, there are still challenges to the realisation of fuller democracy in Uganda. These include inadequate capacity in local governments, corruption, poverty, re-centralisation tendencies, inadequate information systems, lack of downward accountability, and insurgency/insecurity. Once these issues are tackled, further gains will be registered in good governance and local democracy.

(Source: Godfrey Mukwaya, Uganda Local Authorities Association Kampala, Uganda)

methods include participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and popular theatre. At the 'Citiez e World' Forum on local democracy (2003) the following strategies were advanced to increase citizen participation:

- Developing means of access to information, for example by using service kiosks, such as at Hann Bel Air in Senegal with the Local Democracy Centres, or by collecting the email addresses of citizens as in the town of Bromont in Canada;
- Set up systems for consultation and incorporate them in the institutional system;
- Involve the community;
- Changing legislative and regulatory frameworks;
- Reduce the digital divide, via training and literacy programmes;
- Building adequate back-office systems within administrations, as it would be futile to ask citizens to take decisions if the way in which administrations act does not change as a consequence;
- Lastly, use technologies adapted to situations, such as radio where access to the Internet is rare.

Research has shown that neither the scale of a participatory process nor geographical setting (urban/ rural) play a part in its success or failure. What does matter, according to the Participation Toolkit Partnership, is who starts the ball rolling and the nature of people's involvement. The most commonly used tool they suggest, of increasing popular participation in local governance is the public workshop, used in more than 80% of their case studies, in several countries including in South Africa, Tanzania, India, Kenya, Australia, Uganda and Zambia. They found that running workshops to share information and raise awareness is not very. More effective is using them to involve citizens in policy development and decision-making.

Though recent development literature has advocated the need for a shift towards participation and democratisation through bottom-up policies, the view on how deprivation is measured has remained largely technocratic and top-down in its evaluation. This paper argues that democracy has similarly been assessed in a top-down manner that focuses on democratisation at the level of the state, a view that is at odds with the rhetoric of bottom-up participatory democracy. This brings us back to the relevance of Sen's approach in discussing enhancing local democracy.

Sen emphasizes five freedoms – political freedom, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security – that are necessary for enhancing the capability of people to live the lives they want to lead. The barriers to these freedoms are termed 'unfreedoms' and include "poverty, malnutrition, poor sanitation, tyranny, poor economic opportunities, social deprivations, poor public facilities, intolerance, communalisation, ethnic centricity, repressive state apparatuses, lack of education, absence of health care, lack of security, and corruption". (Khosla et al. 2002)

In the effort to remove unfreedoms, Khosla et al. suggest that "vital roles are played by markets, market-related organizations, governments, local authorities, political parties, civic institutions, educational facilities, media, opportunities for free speech and public debate, social norms and values about childcare, gender issues as well as treatment of the environment." Clearly what is needed is a change in the way poverty, and democracy and development are addressed. Khosla et al suggest that the evaluation of unfreedoms cannot be done in a top-down manner but must include the views of the "subjects of evaluation to determine their perceptions of unfreedoms". As illustrated by the table, they look at conventional top-down methods of measuring 'unfreedom' and suggest democratic alternatives.

The premise of these alternative measures is to broaden and deepen the way in which 'unfreedoms' are accessed. They can also be useful tools with which to assess the performance of governments, both central and local. The top-down approach, which only focuses on the role of the government, has not been successful, either in reducing poverty or enhancing democracy. However, while this has been recognized, there still remains a gap between rhetoric and implementation: citizens are yet to realize the tangible benefits of local democracy.

The Department for International Development (DFID) in the UK recognises this, and puts forward a number of solutions:

1. Enable the poor to participate in the decision-making process, and to benefit from urban development.
2. Develop the capacity of local actors to manage pro-poor urban development and regional growth.
3. Support national governments to strengthen the legislative and regulatory framework within which city based development takes place.
4. Strengthen efforts by the international community to support the urbanisation process, which involves the participation of poor people.
5. Improve DFID's and others' capacities to address the urban challenge through information support, and knowledge and research development. (cited in Khosla et al. 2002)

It cannot be denied that governments throughout the Commonwealth are committed to deepening democracy in their countries. To this end, they have been working with international agencies such as DFID, UN-HABITAT, UNDP, the World Bank, and international development NGOs to devise workable strategies to strengthen the structures of democracy. It has been accepted that top-down approaches are not sufficient. This is remarkable because most of this change has occurred only within the last decade. Leaders will have to do more however, if they are to convince citizens of the sincerity of their intentions. The next section will look at what will need to be done if local democracy is to flourish in the Commonwealth.

Instruments of freedoms:	Technocratic, top-down, quantitative evaluators	Democratic, bottom-up, subjective evaluators
Political freedoms	• Persons imprisoned • Voting rights • Access to written, electronic, broadcast media • Access to libraries • Women in government, police, etc. • Access to telecommunication	• Constraints to voting • Constraints on legal access • Constraints on access to law and order services • Nature of land title • Constraints on access to information • Whether Constitution or national law promotes the right to adequate housing • Other housing related rights (including gender sensitive) • Institutional arrangements between central and local governments and balance of power between them
Economic facilities	• Male female employment • Income • Earned income share in family • Loans from banks • Youth unemployment rate • Children in employment • Women's GDP per capita	• Percentage of family income retained by women • Loans from money lenders • Individual disabilities • Constraints to mobility • Access to credit • Constraints on women to seek employment • Access to training facilities • Access to transport • Access to markets • Recovery of dues
Social opportunities	• Life expectancy • Birth and death rates • Contraception rates • Infant mortality • Maternal mortality • Infant immunisation • Access to health services • Access to safe water & sanitation • Birth attended by health personnel • Population per doctor • Underweight babies • Malnourished children • Calorie intake • Adult literacy • Means years of schooling • Primary enrolment	• Access to alternative medicine practitioners • Access to fuel • Stability of dwelling • Domestic injuries • Exposure to pollution • Constraints on water access • Constraints to school attendance • School drop out rate • Unattended children • Working children under 10 • Children per class • Children per teacher • Distance from primary school • Areas considered as dangerous or inaccessible to the police
Transparency guarantees		• Settlement of transacted work • Time spent on bondage obligations • Facilities to report crime • Presence of women in police station • Non formal payments for services, shelter and work • Regular independent auditing of municipal accounts • Published contracts and tenders • Sanctions against faults of civil servants • Laws on disclosure of potential conflicts of interest • Civil society involved in alteration in zoning • Civil society involved in major public projects
Protective security *Source: Khosla and Samuels: 2004*	• Catastrophic deaths • Destroyed houses • Destroyed schools and health centres • Epidemic cases • Density of population before and after calamity • Existence of shelters	• Access to communication networks • Access to emergency food programmes • Duration of migration • Distance of migration • Nature of resettlement • Emergency and delay • Constraints to access to shelter

5. Current capacity

The global environment today is characterised by an unprecedented level of geo-political complexity, technological advances and security threats. In such an atmosphere of uncertainty, the trend has been to regard local government as the sphere of government best poised to offer citizens security and sustainable livelihoods at the level of their communities. The structures of local government are therefore faced with the challenge of re-positioning themselves to survive in this new world. It will not be enough to merely speak of the reform of institutional structures; what is needed are new concepts of how decisions are made; and new approaches to the role of leadership. This will require a re-examination of roles of everyone involved, from the ministers and local government policy-makers, to the citizens themselves. Each will have to search for new ways with which to contribute to the process of improving governance within their community.

What has been the impact of decentralisation in the Commonwealth? What are the norms of local democracy in the Commonwealth?

There is a strong commitment throughout the Commonwealth to enhancing local democracy. Genuine decentralisation is the means by which good governance in the local sphere can be best achieved. The type of decentralisation used differs both within and across states, and governance structures. In some countries of the Commonwealth there is no decentralised system of government. In others the system of local government is so heavily reliant upon central government that it is merely an extension of it.

Some countries have a long-established history of decentralisation while others, such as many of the African countries moving towards multi-party democracy are trying to find ways of formally incorporating decentralisation into their systems of government. The small states, like those of the Commonwealth Caribbean and the Pacific, have structures of local government which are struggling to function effectively under difficult conditions. Each state, regardless of the quality of its local democracy is faced with threats to their democracy on the regional and international levels, such as the loss of preferential access to some international markets, declining terms of trade, the internal and cross-border displacement of citizens, the ever-growing inequality of wealth within and between countries, or the frightening implications of the narcotics trade.

One of the effects of this wide spectrum of change has been a focus on the importance of good governance. International donors and development agencies shifted from their emphasis on the market and liberalisation as tools for development, to good governance as the tool for democracy. Citizens also began to advocate for better governance. These changes contributed to the contexts in which the discussion on decentralisation and local democracy is located.

For most of the world's citizens, having a significant voice in public decision-making is a new experience. With few exceptions Commonwealth countries inherited centralised government systems from the nations that colonised them. They maintained this emphasis on central government decision-making after they achieved independence. As a consequence, local governments who have the means to bring decision-making closer to people "have often lacked the autonomy and resources to develop into competent, efficient, responsive institutions." (Anderson 2004)

Decentralisation is a global phenomenon and most Commonwealth countries have embarked on it, with varying degrees of success. This chapter assesses the impact and feasibility of decentralisation in the Commonwealth. Looking to the future, the

5.1 HOW FEASIBLE IS DECENTRALISATION?

The primary rationale for decentralised governance is that it strengthens democracy by increasing participation, "especially by those social groups at the local level that have traditionally been excluded from the government's decision-making process and policies" (Souza 2001).

Decentralisation is a process that must be given careful thought before it is implemented, and it must be tailored to the local environment. A larger issue is the question of the capabilities of citizens, central government and local government authorities, who must work together to create an enabling environment for decentralisation.

Democracy, of course, cannot be deepened without the real involvement of citizens in decision-making processes; indeed this must be one of the ultimate aims. The concept of citizen participation can easily lose meaning, becoming instead as Rosenbaum says, misused for political purposes; for "increased participation is not the same as increased democracy". (cited in Stone 2002)

5.2 BUILDING CAPACITY

Decentralisation must be seen in the context of the major social and economic problems faced by a community. Because citizens do not act in a political vacuum, policies need to be weighed against their ability to empower citizens to take on the challenges they face. If practices have no consequences for the shared well-being of citizens, participation under those circumstances amounts to little. (Stone 2002) In other words, if people cannot see the tangible benefits of their participation, they will not be inclined to be involved.

One of the biggest obstacles to greater citizen involvement is the lack of trust that citizens feel towards their government. Citizens say 'yes, you tell us to speak, you put legislative measures in place to give us voice, but you ignore us anyway; why should we participate?' The feeling that the government is not listening may be real or perceived but the fact is that it remains a hurdle to be overcome if democracy is to be truly deepened. As Miller (2002) says, citizens are likely to harbour a great deal of mistrust about the motives, sincerity and the good intentions of

"New Localism" and local democracy in the UK

Local government in the UK has been subject to significant change effected by the 2000 Local Government Act. The Act sought to address the challenges presented to a central government keen to quickly drive through improvement in local government public services: a perceived lack of accountability, slow decision making, poor quality services and a resistance to change.

The Act took a managerialist approach, introducing new political management arrangements which separated a powerful executive committee or executive mayor from backbenchers. The 'backbench' role was to hold the executive to account through new scrutiny arrangements and have an enhanced role as community representatives at local level. The option of a directly elected mayor received little public support, and in 2002 there were only eleven such mayors elected.

New localism

The past two years have seen the emergence of 'new localism', which essentially argues that decision making and budgets should be moved to the most appropriate local level, within a framework of national minimum standards. Senior figures in central government have acknowledged that while a centralist approach may have been necessary in the early days of the new government, the next stage of delivering service improvements must acknowledge the importance of local knowledge, priorities and accountability. In addition, a new role for local accountability has been seen as a way of re-engaging local people and re-building failing trust in public institutions.

New localism can sometimes seem a confused concept. It has been used to mean different things to different political ends. Some see it as a means of by-passing local government, setting up new democratic structures within specific services at the local level, for example health or the police. Alternatively, others use it as a means of arguing for a stronger role for local government; a more municipalist model that does not allow a strong role for other local agencies.

While the details of New Localism are argued out abstractly by policy thinkers and politicians, local councils and in government policy are realising a more localist world. There is a genuine, widespread recognition that local players understand both local priorities and the means of tackling them better than the centre. Key to this is not that the council is in charge nor is it by-passed, but a situation where the council provides community leadership ensuring that local players join up to identify their priorities and work together to deliver them.

England and Wales are now seeing an increasing number of initiatives designed to enable joined-up government at the local level. Areas can set up Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), inclusive of all the key players within a locality. These are now being developed into more powerful models, including a smaller Public Service Boards within the LSP, which can take a more corporate approach. Early policies such as Local Public Service Agreements, which involve local government and its partners negotiating a range of local and central targets with government and receiving grant according to their achievement, are being developed into a 'second generation' model that gives a stronger emphasis to local priorities. Inspection is being developed in order to reflect a more holistic view of life within a locality, as opposed to the council's delivery of specific services, and the Government's recent announcement on Local Area Agreements commits to nine pilots where local bodies will be given significantly more freedom over the spending of local money in the achievement of their local priorities.

This direction of policy making represents a move towards a new community leadership role for UK local government. As the uniquely democratic and over-arching body within a locality, councils are well-placed to lead on the joining-up of all local agencies, and the agreement of local action. As much research has shown, beyond specific freedoms for local government, the key to achieving improvements in services locally and a healthier local accountability lies in freedoms for other local players to work with local government. There is still a long way to go in achieving real local autonomy, and councils and their partners remain subject to significant targets, ring-fenced funding and inspection from the centre. However, progress is certainly being made.

With so much attention focussed on freedoms for councils and their partners, the question of decentralisation within local government boundaries has also risen. Many advocates of New Localism are strong in their belief that decentralisation cannot stop at the town hall, but that councils themselves must consider how to move their own services and governance closer to the multiple communities that exist within their own boundaries, each with their own sets of needs and aspirations. Just as the 'one size fits all' approach is outdated for central government, so must councils take a more responsive and flexible approach.

Overall the evidence from different devolutionary experiments, ranging from devolution to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly to devolution of different forms to local neighbourhoods, suggests that the more functions which are devolved, and the more the public perceive these bodies to have real power and autonomy, the more effective they are in addressing the local democratic deficit. Further devolution, both by central and local government, will put this to the test of local democratic engagement, active participation, representation, consultation and the traditional ballot box.

The impact of decentralisation on the quality of local services will also become increasingly evident as the incremental approach to increasing autonomy to local government and its partners develops. The picture is complex and long term: no one is suggesting that autonomy will automatically deliver higher quality services. Decentralisation is linked to long term development and building of organisational capacity, trust and new ways of working among local institutions, confidence within institutions with increased autonomy, and the attraction of high quality managers and representatives. As the New Localism agenda develops and is turned into policy and action, the keys to a healthier and more effective local democratic picture in the UK will become increasingly evident.

(Source: Anna Randle, Head of Organisation, New Local Government Network)

"local governments who have the means to bring decision-making closer to people "have often lacked the autonomy and resources to develop into competent, efficient, responsive institutions"

governments in allowing them a meaningful say in managing their local affairs. Often, mismanagement and poor governance on the part of the central government lies behind the loss of trust.

The Commonwealth Foundation has found that Papua New Guinea, a country rich in natural resources failed to invest much of the revenue generated from these resources into the provision of services or the development of the infrastructure, resulting in underdevelopment and reliance on international aid for service provision. This has contributed to a general loss of faith in, and personal withdrawal from, the political process and community affairs; non co-operation with the state, theft of public and private property, and an increase in disorder such as ethnic violence, and violence against women and children. (Commonwealth Foundation 2004).

The HELP Resources Bureau and the Baua Baua Popular Education Troupe have initiated a process of dialogue between citizens, civil society groups and the government. The tools used to build the capacity of all partners include popular education involving theatre, song and community dialogue; popular and participatory workshops with small groups of local leaders and activists; certificated studies for community based service providers and computer self-study. (Commonwealth Foundation 2004)

The public is also not often aware about the nature and potential role of local government, and about the working of government in general. "The response to this would be extensive public education and awareness building programmes." (Miller 2002) Additionally, traditional forms of governance may conflict with the Westminster-based system used by governments. Research has shown that the use of workshops is the most common medium.

On the Pacific island of Vanuatu, citizens face problems of limited government resources, widespread corruption and the need to blend Northern and traditional forms of decision-making. For most citizens, the most relevant arena of decision-making is the village and there is little understanding of how this relates to national decision-making. This was dealt with through the use of learning circles, small groups of between 5-15 persons. The areas covered include the key concepts of democracy, the rule of law, political competition and good governance; decision-making in the local, national and regional spheres; and active citizenship and the role of citizens' organizations and advocacy. (Commonwealth Foundation 2004)

As has been stressed throughout, an essential ingredient of a vibrant local democracy is a strong local government. Elected representatives and the staff of local authorities, in addition to the public, are needed to create a functioning local authority. But in some instances, both the elected representatives and the staff may be under-equipped to deal with the changing governance environment in which they must function. Or they may have been appointed to their posts in reward for supporting the ruling party, and as a result, be reluctant to implement any policy that could appear to challenge central government policies.

Facilitating the participation of citizens in policy making decisions requires a major re-think from senior officials, and of the governing culture; and a change in emphasis from top-down to bottom-up management.

5.3 THE NEED FOR APPROPRIATE DECENTRALISATION

Despite widespread successes, models of participatory local democracy are confronted by a number of pertinent criticisms. Fung and Wright (2001) highlight these:

i. The democratic character of processes and outcomes may be vulnerable to serious problems of power and domination inside deliberative arenas by powerful factions or elites.
ii. External actors and institutional contexts may impose severe limitations on the scope of deliberative decision and action. In particular, powerful participants may engage in 'forum shopping' strategies in which they use participatory processes only when it suits them.
iii. These special-purpose political institutions may fall prey to rent seeking and capture by especially well-informed or interested parties.
iv. The devolutionary elements of deliberative democracy may balkanize the polity and political decision making.
v. Empowered deliberation may demand unrealistically high levels of popular participation, especially in contemporary climates of civic and political disengagement.
vi. Finally, these experiments may enjoy initial successes but may be difficult to sustain over the long term.

6. Conclusion: towards a framework for local democracy

Local democracy, particularly the strengthening of local government and wide citizens' participation, including women and youth, is an important way to promote democratic values and deepen the democratic process. This can be achieved through careful and well-planned decentralisation that devolves power to local government institutions that are accountable, transparent and representative. To this end, Commonwealth governments can deepen democracy by providing the necessary financial resources to ensure that public sector decentralisation is viable and that local government is able to contribute effectively to the realisation of the MDGs. *(Making democracy work for pro-poor development: a report by the Commonwealth Group of Experts 2003)*

Based on the work of Professor Sen and others, there is a growing recognition of the linkages between freedom, democracy and development. These linkages are especially strong when applied to local government, the sphere of government that is closest to the people. Consequently, there is now a realisation that the millennium development goals are best delivered at local community level and the presence of democratic local government will facilitate this process and help the pursuit of pro-poor development policies.

Early in the 21st century democratic empowerment and good governance are high on the agenda. Drawing on recent political statements and policies by the Commonwealth, the United Nations and other governmental organisations, and on the policies and practices of local government itself, a number of core principles and related policy issues can be derived:

1. Recognition of the sphere of local government and good intergovernmental relations

Local government is part of the State and a distinct sphere of government, alongside central and provincial government, and good relations between the three spheres of government are essential.

Many countries have given explicit legal as well as constitutional recognition to the distinct role of local government and the trend is towards accepting the principle of subsidiarity whereby decision-making powers are undertaken at the most appropriate level, whether local, provincial or central. This will mean that local government has autonomy in areas which fall under its responsibility, including for staff recruitment and conditions.

It is important that close cooperation exists between the three spheres of government, even if political control is exerted by opposing parties in the respective legislatures. The responsible national/provincial minister of local government will have a key role in promoting partnerships. Special structures or institutions for intergovernmental relations such as regular local/central partnership fora or committees, where central/provincial government ministers and officials consult with their local government counterparts on specific policy issues are central to effective intergovernmental relations. National or provincial associations of local government are a further means to facilitate dialogue.

2. Democratic local elections and community empowerment

Local democracy is an important foundation for democracy and deepening local democracy will entail widespread public participation in local affairs a responsibility to respond to its citizens and communicate openly with them.

Local democracy is the system adopted by a majority of countries, including small states. The internationally established principles underlying democracy apply equally to local government elections. These relate to the factors impinging on the credibility of the electoral process as a whole, the existence of the conditions for free expression of will by the electors and whether the results of the elections reflect the wishes of the people. Other critical issues impacting on democratic processes, institutions and culture include the rule of law, freedom of expression, including a free media and freedom of association and the free operation of political parties at the local level.

There must be an overall emphasis on encouraging modern and representative systems of local democracy although the actual practices such proportional voting or direct election of executive mayors may vary. It is also essential to promote a culture of democratic renewal which ensures effective decision-making within local councils, with close cooperation between councillors and council officers, and especially between mayors/council leaders and chief executives.

Encouraging voter awareness and public participation is an integral part of the democratic process and fundamental to the process of deepening local democracy, especially where voter turnout is low. Public participation in local affairs should be encouraged at all times, for example through such mechanisms as neighbourhood committees, participatory budgeting and where feasible e-government, seeking to promote a 'new localism' which goes beyond the formal structures of the town hall and the ward committees.

3. Equity and inclusiveness

Local democracy can promote equal opportunities, racial equality, political and religious tolerance and ensure that it is inclusive of all of the community.

Local democracy provides the means to reconcile political diversity and reach out minority groups who may otherwise be alienated. Local government must seek to advance gender equality, full and equal participation of both women and men and a genuine and effective partnership between them, for example by making special provision for the representation of women councillors in line with agreed international targets. There should also be provision for the representation of groups representative of the local community, including vulnerable groups such as slum dwellers and the disabled.

The pursuit of equity and inclusiveness will entail working closely with civil society organisations and the private sector, including informal business, and forging special partnerships with them. In some countries this will also entail direct links with traditional leaders, notably in rural areas.

4. Accountability and transparency

Local democracy provides opportunities for greater accountability and transparency.

Having an elected local government structure means that democratic scrutiny can be exercised at a level that is potentially more accessible than central or provincial government. Elected councillors must abide by the highest standards of public service and be fully accountable to their electorate. This should include the declaration of interests. Equally chief executives and their staff must show professional commitment and integrity. This should be supported by agreed codes of conduct for both councillors and council staff.

Transparency will be facilitated by openness in council procedures such as publication of contracts/tenders and budgets and accounts and ensuring an independent audit of the annual accounts. A facility to receive and respond to citizens' complaints, to provide information on corruption, for example through an anti-corruption commission, will further encourage openness and transparency.

Ensuring proper professional rates of renumeration and good conditions of service for council staff and appropriate financial compensation for councillors will serve to counteract financial malpractices and unprofessional conduct.

5. Adequate financial resources

Local government requires adequate funding in order to fulfil its mandate

Decentralisation involves local government having responsibility for the delivery of key services. It must therefore have the financial resources to do its work so as to avoid being in the position of having an 'unfunded mandate'. This should be addressed through an equitable combination of transfer payments and powers of raising funds locally through taxation, user charges and borrowing. Accompanying this should be local discretion over expenditure. Local government will also need to ensure that it is in a position to collect a high proportion of local taxes and levies, so as to maximise its mandated income.

It is recognised that in some areas local councils will not have the revenue base to secure the necessary financial resources. It will therefore normally be the case that the national/provincial government will operate a system of local government resource transfers from a central budget to those councils in need of support. Where such a system operates, it should be based on mutually agreed and transparent criteria, set well in advance and without any political strings attached.

Local government should also have access to funds from international sources including international development agencies and, as appropriate, the international capital market.

6. Localising the MDGs and performance delivery standards

Democratic local government has responsibility for implementing the MDGs at local level and for ensuring effective delivery of key services

Service delivery needs to be geared to the requirements of the local community and, taking into account the democratic mandate to serve all of that community, local government should as necessary operate a pro-poor policy, for example pro-poor pricing policies for key services such as the supply of water.

The prioritisation and delivery of the Millennium Development Goals at local level is primarily the responsibility of local government, acting in accordance with its democratic mandate. In localising the MDGs, it needs to work closely with other partners including central/provincial government, international development agencies, civil society and the private sector. This may entail negotiating local government service partnerships and sub-contracting service delivery to external agencies.

Citizens expect efficient and cost effective delivery of services. Local government requires a clear vision statement and the acknowledgment of citizens' rights of access to basic services, for example through a citizens' charter. Establishing performance standards for key services provided such as water supply, electricity, sanitation, solid waste management, health and education and making these available to the local community is essential. There should also be a means of monitoring local consumer satisfaction and responding to this.

THE ROLE OF THE COMMONWEALTH AND THE CLGF

Commonwealth countries have been in the forefront of many of the reforms and changes in the area of local democracy and many innovations have been implemented in a wide range of institutions. Commonwealth Heads of Government have given political recognition of these trends and the Commonwealth Secretariat and a number of other Commonwealth organisations are actively promoting democratic values and good governance. Commonwealth Heads of Government have given political recognition of these trends and the Commonwealth Secretariat and a number of other Commonwealth organisations are actively promoting democratic values and good governance. The Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit, for example, is conducting a project this year on Commonwealth cooperation with the United Nations for development; this focuses on the contribution the Commonwealth can make to achievement of the MDGs.

CLGF, which brings together local and central/provincial government, is the organisation recognised by Commonwealth Heads of Government as having responsibility for the promotion of local democracy and good local governance. It will continue to advocate good intergovernmental relations and democratic reforms and seek new political mandates to further this work in collaboration with the Commonwealth Secretariat, UN Habitat, European Union/African Caribbean

and Pacific institutions and other partners.

CLGF has a number of programmes designed to assist its members in undertaking democratic reforms, hold local elections and build up their institutional and technical capacity. It also undertakes research into the structures of local government and facilitates the exchange of experience among senior local government practitioners, for example under its Good Practice Scheme.

The 2003 CHOGM called for resources for the CLGF's activities in support of local democracy and good governance. It welcomed the Commonwealth Secretariat's collaboration with the CLGF to promote best democratic practice. In accordance with this mandate, CLGF is currently seeking resources to develop its capacity in this area with a view to:

- establishing a Commonwealth Local Democracy Unit to advise, support and inform member countries seeking to deepen local democracy and to guide CLGF's programme of work to support and deepen local democracy amongst its members
- providing selected technical assistance to encourage local democracy/good governance and, where appropriate, monitoring local elections.
- holding policy dialogues, especially at regional level
- disseminating good practices and innovations in policy

The 2005 Commonwealth Local Government Conference 'Deepening Local Democracy 'organised by the CLGF, will provide an opportunity to further the strategic thinking and policy dialogue at senior decision-making level and agree key policy positions. Likewise the 2007 Commonwealth Local Government Conference 'Delivering Development through Local Leadership' will provide an important forum to take forward key issues such as how to localise the MDGs.

The 2005 conference will contribute to the development of a Commonwealth policy on local democracy. CLGF intends to use the outcomes of the event to develop a framework for local democracy, which will be used to measure and underpin the role of democratic local government in the Commonwealth. It will also enable CLGF to provide the Commonwealth Secretariat and other Commonwealth bodies with greater information on the nature of local democracy.

LOCAL DEMOCRACY ENHANCING FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS

In conclusion it is appropriate to return to the five freedoms defined by Professor Sen and to relate them directly to the principles of local democracy as set out above:

- *Political freedom* – enhanced by recognising the sphere of local government , holding local elections and ensuring community empowerment through policies to promote equity and inclusiveness

- *Economic facilities* – encouraged by local government having adequate financial resources to implement local economic development strategies and provide basic infrastructure

- *Social opportunities* – achieved by localising the MDGs, including pro-poor development strategies and implementing performance delivery standards

- *Transparency guarantees* – promoted by democratically accountable local representatives
- *Protective security* – facilitated by local responsibility for civil disaster management and post conflict reconciliation through an inclusive political culture

Deepening local democracy will serve to strengthen further the democratic process and promote good governance and will encourage the pursuit of pro-poor development strategies in pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals.

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