

Decentralisation of Educational Administration as a Strategy for Achieving Equity and Providing for Diversity*

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The central assumption of this article is that the twin goals of equity and diversity in education can be achieved through the development process which results from decentralized administration. Equity and diversity are generally believed to be mutually exclusive or conflicting goals in the provision of education and other human affairs. But this paper will attempt to demonstrate that these two goals need not be contradictory; that, on the contrary, they can be complementary. I would like to define decentralization. In this paper it is any change in the organization and functioning of a governmental activity that involves the transfer of powers or functions from the national level to subnational level/s, or from a sub-national level to a lower one. Since educational administration is an important governmental activity and responsibility in most countries, it would share some of the common characteristics, trends and expectations of public administration in general, though certain peculiarities would differentiate educational administration from public administration. Thus in most countries, decentralization attempts have followed or were part of similar attempts in the area of public administration.

Let us look very briefly at the various degrees and forms of decentralization that are practised and the different views on decentralization expressed in the literature on this subject. Depending on the extent to which decentralization is implemented we may find that such attempts could be considered as devolution, delegation and deconcentration.

Devolution could take place within either a federal or a unitary governmental structure. In the case of a federal system, the structures, powers and functions of the different governmental levels are enshrined in the constitution whereas in the case of a unitary system these are included in

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the ordinary legislation. Of course there are other differences too between these two types of devolution. Usually, in devolution, powers of government are legally transferred to a lower level of government elected by the people. *Delegation* refers to a transfer of powers and functions to lower levels of government. Since this is only an administrative arrangement, these delegated powers and functions can be easily revoked. *Deconcentration* is the transfer of powers and responsibilities by purely administrative methods to local agents or representatives of the central government. In deconcentration, the lower levels of government simply act on behalf of and according to decisions of the central government. So, when we refer to decentralization, we should know exactly which of the above levels we have in mind. In this paper we look at decentralization as involving devolution rather than delegation and deconcentration.

Decentralization can also take the form of political, administrative and geographical decentralization (Wolfers *et al.* 1982). *Political decentralization* involves the transfer of power to enact laws and to make policy decisions from a national or central government to existing or newly created elected bodies at sub-national levels such as regional, provincial or district levels. This form of decentralization provides for greater popular or grass-root participation. Further, development efforts in these sub-national levels can be made more relevant to local needs and situations besides encouraging the commitment and involvement of local participants. *Administrative decentralization* essentially involves the decentralization of administrative control within the public service or educational system. Thus the officers of the sub-national offices are given more power to plan and implement programmes within the framework of national policy guidelines and directives. These officers usually have the necessary authority to carry out the assigned tasks. This kind of decentralization is expected to increase the efficiency and responsiveness of the administration to local needs, improve co-ordination and enable decision-making to be more relevant to local needs and conditions. But it may not necessarily provide for actual participation in decision-making. *Geographical decentralization* uses geographical and spatial dimensions as the primary basis, though political and/or administrative decentralization inevitably forms an integral part of this type of decentralization. However decentralization in the form of mere deconcentration or dispersion of sub-national offices would be purely geographical decentralization.

Decentralization and development

Development in general, and educational development in particular, take place in both centralized and decentralized systems of government. However, there has been increasing disenchantment with the role of centralized bureaucracies in their contribution to educational development (Dubbeldam, 1984; Gow & Van Sant, 1983; Kassam, 1984; Morris, 1984; Ro, 1984). There is a growing feeling that decentralized attempts would facilitate development relevant to the needs of the people (Collins, 1974; Conyers, 1981; Hill, 1980; Saxena, 1980; Sherwin, 1977).

The 'top-down' or 'trickle down' approach has been the dominant one during the last fifty years, especially during the first decades of independence of some former colonies. But the results achieved by these top-down and trickle-down approaches from the central office or department of education have been found to be minimal. Overcentralized approaches, among others, were found to be the reason for the inadequate and unequal development that has taken place.

Though development is taken to mean economic development, or growth in gross national product and so on, a much broader and more inclusive concept is the basis of this paper. Development is considered to be multi-faceted and not economic alone, taking place continuously at various levels and in various sections of a given society. It is also seen as people-centred and not merely product-oriented. Thus we should regard development as a holistic, integrated and interactive process. This view encompasses the concepts and goals of equity and diversity at the same time and as the results of meaningful and realistic development efforts. But a mere technocratic approach to development, ignoring the people for whom development takes place or the people who are involved in development, tends to set aside the simultaneous attainment of the goals of providing for diversity and achieving equity. Only a decentralized, people-centred approach to development can expect to have these twin goals as complementary rather than competing goals.

The role of decentralization in development

The role of decentralization in development is a very important one. The failures and disappointments with highly centralized approaches to development initiated and undertaken from national or central offices,

have resulted in a re-thinking of the development approaches adopted so far. Increasingly governments, international agencies, political groups and academics have started looking towards decentralization as a solution to a number of problems associated with development. At least three main categories of benefits are supposed to accrue from development through a decentralized approach (Commonwealth Secretariat, n.d.). These benefits are popular participation, improved development management, and the containment of secessionist groups.

A democratic approach to development not only involves people in that process, but also enables the development benefits to be equitably distributed. The usual assumption is that central initiatives automatically enable distribution or redistribution of development benefits equitably. The experiences of many countries have shown that this is not true and that the realization of more meaningful equity is possible only through decentralized development efforts (Bray, 1984; Ro, 1984; World Bank, 1975).

The concept of equity incorporates ideas of justice and fairness. These, therefore, are bound up with value judgements as to how wealth, income or education are fairly and equitably distributed. These ideas influence policies, resource allocation, delivery of service, evaluation of outcomes, etc. In centralized development efforts, experience has shown that the local capacity for development is not equal and that inequity of benefits of development result from it.

However, centralized planning and implementation were undertaken, in the belief that these would equitably distribute development benefits. But these central initiatives have not achieved the expected goals. What may be required then is the building up of local capacity for development (Sapra, 1986). This is possible only with local effort and grass-root level participation in the development process. This also becomes a 'learning process' for these people. Coombs (1984) calls this 'community-based development'. It calls for

an educational process — a process by which disadvantaged people discover more about their own potentialities and power, about the factors that are inhibiting the improvement of their status, and about what they — as individuals, as families, and as larger groups — can do to overcome these obstacles (Coombs, 1985).

It is believed that this kind of learning process facilitates the development

of new insights, attitudes, information and behaviour patterns that would be conducive to, and form the basis essential for, further development.

These concepts of 'local capacity building', 'community based development' and development itself as a learning process pose challenges to the educational policy-maker, educational planner and educational administrator to reconsider their traditional attitudes and approaches to educational development. The new situation demands that schools and educational systems redefine their limited role to take into account the wider perspective of the community itself. It also calls for greater integration of non-formal and informal learning into formal learning situations. The 'intergenerational equity' referred to by McMahan (1982) may be better achieved not only by equitable financing and allocation mechanisms but also by approaches that enable whole communities to learn and develop in an integrated fashion.

Integrated development

Traditionally, centralized administration has led to uni-sectoral and linear approaches to development. For instance, the Ministry or Department of Education concerns itself only with the development and provision of educational facilities and services. As a result, no doubt, education systems have experienced expansion in a quantitative sense. But in a qualitative sense — in terms of the quality of life itself, which may not be sufficiently reflected in all the statistical data and other documentation — education may be said to have not achieved the objectives of overall development and qualitative improvement. This has to be expected when central ministries are functioning in isolation but trying to achieve the common goals of development. It is now generally accepted that better co-ordination and unified approaches at the sub-national levels are possible when some of the functions of national or central ministries are decentralized to these levels by the necessary devolution of powers. Integrated rural development projects assume co-ordination of the functions of several ministries with related and complementary functions through their decentralized bodies or units. Thus decentralized units through their integrated approaches improve the quality of life of the people and pave the way for achieving equity.

Decentralization and diversity

Diversity is a fact of life in many developing and developed countries. We must not merely live with it but enrich it, provide for it and at the same time develop it as a unifying element and force. The notion that diversity in a society is an impediment to development, and that by any means this diversity should be done away with, is rejected in this paper. I think educators and educational administrators should accept this diversity as a healthy and enriching factor in a society and find ways and means to bring about unity, and not uniformity, out of this diversity. Very often diversity in a population may be due to ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural and locational differences. These differences can contribute to one another and thereby enrich the whole social life and development of that society. Obliterating the differences may appear a quick and easy way to bring about unity through uniformity and standardization. But many nations have found that this is a dysfunctional, and at times, a disastrous approach. Hence, decentralized development strategies should encourage the provision for diversity, and at the same time through national goals, policies and financing set the direction and pace of development leading to the achievement of the twin objectives of equity and diversity.

Disregarding the provision for diversity and development with equity as the only focus or dominant aim has led to social and political instability and even divisive tendencies (Bray, 1984; Premdas and Steeves, 1985). Though narrow economic costs alone would suggest a highly centralized approach, the social cost of ignoring and not providing for diversity may be much greater. Hence the need for providing for diversity through imaginative and realistic approaches to decentralized development is stressed. In this respect administrative decentralization alone may not be sufficient, unless political decentralization also accompanies it (Conyers, 1975; Oberst, 1986; Steeves, 1984; Tordoff, 1981). Even as a part of a general scheme of decentralization, implementation of both administrative and political decentralization has been advocated (Walker, 1975), and this conceptual model could guide efforts at administrative and political decentralization in developing countries too.

Conclusion

Equity and diversity are twin goals to be achieved through education.

These are generally regarded as mutually contradictory goals, and therefore it is thought that achievement of one of these goals would seriously impair the realization of the other. But this paper has refuted this general assumption and suggested that these are complementary goals to be pursued in any efforts of educational and national development. Further it was argued that these twin goals could be achieved only through decentralized and integrated development efforts rather than solely centralized approaches from central ministries or departments. In fact the challenge for the educational administrator lies not in pursuing either equity or diversity and neglecting the other, but in trying to achieve these two goals at the same time.

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