

DECENTRALIZATION : OPTIONS AND ISSUES A MANUAL FOR POLICY MAKERS

H.M. Gunasekera

Decentralization: Options and Issues. A Manual for Policy Makers

By Edward P. Wolfers, Diana Conyers, Peter Larmour, and Yash P. Ghai

Published by Commonwealth Secretariat, 1981.

One of the most important developments in the third world countries in recent years has been the movement towards greater decentralization. This is likely to gather greater momentum in the '80s and '90s because of the increasing interest in regional and local level planning and development in these countries. The shift towards greater decentralization seems to have been prompted by several factors including political demands from below at local and regional levels, disenchantment with highly aggregative planning and development efforts by the central governments, the centripetal movement of economic power and benefits towards urban areas, and occasionally the ideological commitment of the central government towards such decentralization.

The South Pacific island countries have been no exception to these developments. In this region significant shifts toward decentralization have occurred in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, driven by the political aspirations of the people, from below.

The above volume may be regarded as a by-product of some of these developments. While the authors seem to be well endowed with firsthand experience on the case of Papua New Guinea, the volume itself is "a series of working papers which were produced to assist the members of a committee charged with making recommendations on the decentralization of government in Solomon Islands".

This committee, whose terms of reference covered various aspects relating to the "role of the Provincial Assemblies in relation to National Government on the one hand and (the subordinate) Area Councils on the other" was set up in December 1977. Its report was presented in final form to the Parliament in May 1979, and an Act based on this report was added to the Solomon Islands Statutes Book in December 1981.

One thing therefore that should be noted at the outset is that the volume is not a piece of work on the pros and cons of decentralization itself. Rather, it is a work on the advantages and disadvantages of different *forms* of decentralization. Thus, the work is most useful in a context in which there is already some sort of a commitment to decentralization. In such a context it serves as a useful guide for a systematic analysis of the merits and demerits of the alternative ways in which the various dimensions of decentralization, such as provincial boundaries, political structure, powers and functions, staffing arrangements, finance and planning, relations between governments, etc., may be designed. Hence the subtitle "A Manual for Policy Makers". The Manual is designed in such a way that each of the above topics is a chapter containing working papers related to it and preceded by a general discussion guiding the reader through the working papers. In addition to the above chapters the book also contains chapters on Special Issues such as control of land, implementation and legal framework.

As a first reaction one might tend to have reservations about the relevance of a manual prepared for a specific country - and a small one at

that - to other countries. It may be said, however, that such reservations while understandable are misplaced. For, while dealing with the specific case of the Solomon Islands, this manual approaches these specific issues through an uncomplicated theoretical framework which is highly useful, easy to follow, and above all, generally applicable. It is true that in decentralization, as in other areas, the size of the country *does* matter. There are, however, certain issues, as presented in this manual, which penetrate through the barriers of scale.

The manual rejects the currently wide practice of classifying decentralization into such forms as deconcentration, delegation, devolution, and de-bureaucratization, and also the tendency to distinguish among different forms of government according to degree of decentralization such as Unitary Federal, Confederal, etc. The reason advanced for this rejection is that the above kind of classifications seem to assume that only a few alternatives are possible and that all practical situations can somehow be compartmentalized according to these classifications. The fact, according to the manual, seems to be that there could almost be a continuum of different forms of decentralization.

The authors then go on to present a different classification, in terms of the aims which decentralization intends to achieve. This results in classification of three types which are, however, not mutually exclusive:

- (i) political decentralization involving transfer of political power from the national to legislative bodies at regional or local level;
- (ii) administrative decentralization involving transfer of powers from central administration to regional or local level administration; and

(iii) geographical decentralization which is different from the former two types in that it involves no transfer of powers but only a shift of administrative operations from the headquarters to places physically closer to the people.

In the case of the Solomon Islands, decentralization has been mainly political, although the other two types are also involved to the extent dictated by political decentralization. Hence this manual is mainly useful with respect to issues concerning forms of political decentralization. To a lesser extent, however, it also helps in throwing some light on issues of administrative and geographical decentralization.

The book is well written, the material is well organized and easy to follow. It is a very useful addition to the highly limited collection of manuals specially prepared for policy makers in the South Pacific. The book is also very useful for others who have an academic and a general interest on the subject of decentralization.

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