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Improving the quality of municipal service: cases on administrative reforms in the UK and Sweden.

Introduction

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"
"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.
"I don't much care where — " said Alice.
"Then it does not matter which way you go," said the Cat.
" — so long as I get somewhere," Alice added as an explanation.
"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."[1]

I would like to start my work with a dialog from Lewis Carrolle because this exact dialog clearly illustrates the situation of organizational reforms in any bureaucratic system. The conversation between Alice and the Cat could as well take place between, for example, an administrator and a consultant arguing on a forthcoming reform. Any changes start when somebody has the idea that it would be good to change something. It is not necessary to spot a specific problem — there are always unsolved problems in all organizations, whether they are municipal, private, or in the public sector. The problem must be identified and diagnosed first, and the goals should be established next.

The intention to change might originate in an ideology or, alternatively, may lead straight to decisions and plans for change. Then action starts: plenty of talk, various decisions, letters and documents, resistance and protest, meetings and informal debates. Sooner or later some external forces are brought in the already developing process and reform. At this point, when the initial problems are overcome, the reform may be called a successful one. But if such an attempt is unsuccessful, frustration and chaos will precede a speedy return to old forms and processes. Thereby, it is necessary to evaluate the quality of the municipal service in the concrete district and then decide what effective strategy to choose.

What is the quality of the municipal service?

"As the quality of urban life is increasingly and inextricably bound with governmental decisions on public services, municipal service performance has been one of the leading public issues and thus has drawn considerable attention from the municipal management and scholarly professions."[2] In the past few years, there has been a growth of efforts by social scientists to assess the quality of city government and the services it provides. It does not matter about what country we are speaking,

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[1] Lewis Carroll. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Chapter VI. Pig and Pepper. p.36.
[2] Doh C. Shin. The quality of municipal service: concept, measure and results.p.2.

because "the wave" of reforming the public and municipal service takes place practically in any modern society. Based upon the models constructed in the XIX century, municipal service now must be undoubtedly adjusted to the present situation. Therefore the quality of the present municipal service must be thoroughly studied, evaluated and brought up to the mark. So, now it is clear that in assessing urban municipal services, the concept of quality is employed as the basic concept.

What stands behind the term 'quality'?

Those who are working in quality of life research know very well that 'quality' is a slippery concept because it has both an evaluative and descriptive use. "Used descriptively, the term refers to attributes of things rather than mere quantities of things. Used in an evaluative sense, it refers to the value or desirability of things which is directly proportional to degree."[3]

Similarly, quality is used in the present work and represents the perception or feeling that a service is good, right or enjoyable. Considered from this perspective, the term is rather subjective because in this case quality can only be measured as a person himself experiences it.

Another important theoretical matter is the concept of municipal service. The services provided by the Local Administrations can be defined as "services offered to the population of cities, settlements, and villages by enterprises of the communal service system to meet the material-domestic needs of the population. In many cities and settlements, general-purpose municipal enterprises provide water, electricity, gas, and other services to industrial enterprises as well."[4] Therefore, the evaluation of municipal services can be more useful and objective. Considered from this perspective, municipal services are more likely a community-level phenomenon rather than an individual-level phenomenon. Thereby, the quality of municipal service is the collective experience of the citizens of an urban community.

How can we improve the quality of the municipal service and build an ideal model?

In my opinion, before constructing an ideal municipal service model, it is very important to analyze the local government systems that often serve as a role model for other countries.

Firstly, it is very important to understand what local governance reforms were implemented in Europe generally. In the older democracies within the developed countries local democracy got a great push with democratisation and general liberalization which mostly took place in the late XIX — early XX century. Although in some of these countries decentralisation of political structures at the local level already existed before this period. Decentralized administrations were less autonomous and often dominated by a small local elite. The general enfranchisement brought mass participation and the election of councils and mayors.

The term 'developed countries' here refers to the older democracies in Western Europe, North America, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. The Western

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[3] McCall, S.: 1975, 'Quality of Life', Social Indicators Research 2, 229-248. p.231.
[4] The Great Soviet Encyclopedia, 3rd Edition (1970-1979). © 2010 The Gale Group, Inc.

European types can be divided into three: namely, the Anglo-Saxon, Northern and Franco-southern type. [5]Additionally after the breakdown of former socialist regimes Eastern European countries developed strong decentral structures at the municipal level in their new democracies. Nevertheless in most countries control from above was still strong. The so-called Franco-southern type includes countries such as France, Italy and Belgium and the former authoritarian regimes such as Greek, Portugal and Spain. In the Anglo-Saxon type consisting of the UK and Ireland, local government mostly had a low constitutional status but less control in day to day policy making. The Northern and Middle European group consisted of the Scandinavian countries such as Denmark, Sweden and Finland, while Middle European countries such as Austria, Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands where "the government had a high constitutional status, was less controlled from above and showed a high degree of local autonomy".[6] The older North American and Oceanian countries differ from the Anglo-Saxon local democracies. Although built on English or Commonwealth traditions of local government, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand implemented strong federal systems and in general strong local autonomy, broad functions and discretion. In this chapter we will not focus on the new democracies in Eastern Europe.

We will discuss countries that represent the older democracies and the economically richer countries. The idea is to analyse those local government systems which often function as a role model for other countries. Some of these countries represent the former colonial powers which implemented their own political systems and administrations during and at the end of their colonial rule. From this perspective, the UK and Sweden are attractive because they can be considered as European "prototypes" of different local government patterns with regard to their historical starting conditions and recent reforms. Firstly, it would be right to look into some discinctive features of each country mentioned above.

Historically, England's local government level can be characterised by "a plethora of single purpose agencies managed by boards that were appointed or elected in various ways".[7] During the XIX century and well into the XX century, England was the European model of classical, multi-functional local government.

As far as Sweden is concerned, this country is unitary with traditionally decentralized and strong local government structures, which, since the 1990s, has further decentralized political and administrative structures.

Sucj local government systems as in England and Sweden are historically based on the principle where the elected local council possesses comprehensive powers that comprise deliberative decision-making as well as the executive direction and control over the administration and implementation of local government tasks. "This has given rise to the traditional government by committees concept, giving each

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[5] Hesse, Joachim Jens/ Sharpe Laurence J. (1991): Local Government in International Perspective. Some Comparative Observations. In: Hesse, Joachim Jens (Ed.): Local Government and Urban Affairs in International Perspective. Baden-Baden: Nomos: 353-386.

[6] Kersting, Norbert/ Vetter, Angelika (Eds.) (2003): Reforming Local Government in Europe. Closing the Gap Between Democracy and Efficiency.

[7] Skelcher, Chris (2003): Governing Communities. Parish-Pump Politics or Strategic Partnerships? In Local Government Studies 29 (2003),4: 1-16. p.10.

sectoral committee comprehensive, monistic, both deliberative and executive competence."[8]

In general, reforms in the Anglo-Saxon countries and Northern country family have concentrated on the government-by-committee system, the main weakness of which was based upon the historically collective, egalitarian decision-making by councillors acting in sectoral commissions. So, let's have a more detailed review of the reforms which were implemented in England and Sweden recently.

Administrative reforms in England

For centuries the monistic English local government was characterized by a committee system, and all the reforms in the conservative government were focused on the administration. With the New Labour reforms the political structure changed dramatically. The structure of the reform consisted of two main parts: 1997–2001 and 2003–2004. "The labour government favoured executive mayor form including direct election of the mayor"[9].

Howvere, most of the cities installed the cabinet with leader option. "The Local Government Act of 2000 has taken a quite radical step abolishing the sectoral standing committees altogether, transferring their functions to an executive committee (cabinet) as the only remaining decision-making/ executive body — with the leader who is elected and can also be removed by a majority vote in the council — coming close to a local 'prime minister'"[10]. The cabinet of executive councillors, a largely independent governing body within local government can be seen as moving towards a dualistic form. The new forms of local government have undoubtedly strengthened local political and administrative leadership by introducing a "strong and individualised form of leadership".[11] Although centrally guided performance management control over the local authorities has been mitigated to some extent, it continues to exemplify the centralist control which British central government exercises over the local government level and which has no parallel in other European countries.

Aministrative reforms in Sweden

Sweden was historically a rather rural country with over 2000 small towns and villages. Most of the local decisions were taken by direct democratic community meetings and their local activities were handled by laymen or, in other words, by common people.

The local government reform has been gradually going on since the 1980s. While leaving the traditional government-by-committees system with sectorally responsible executive committees largely untouched, it focused, firstly, on politically streamlining council decision-making structures by electing the chairmen of the standing committees and particularly the leader of the main committee by council

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[8] Humanities, Social Sciences and Law: Local Governance Reform in Global Perspective. 2009, 35-75, p.52.

[9] Oels, Angela (2003): Evaluating Stakeholder Participation in the Transition to Sustainable Development: Methodology, Case Studies and Implications forPolicymaking.: LIT Verlag.

[10] Rao, Nirmala (2005): From Committees to Leaders and Cabinets. The British Experience. In: Berg, Rikke/ Rao, Nirmala (Eds.) (2005): Transforming Local Political Leadership. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan: 42-58.

11 Lowndes, Vivien/ Leach, Stephan (2004): Understanding Local Political Leadership: Constitutions, Contexts and Capacities. In: Local Government Studies 30 (2004) 4: p.557.

majority vote, thus ushering in what has been labelled a "kind of parliamentarism"[12] or "semi-parliamentarism". Second, leading councillors on the standing and main committees now have full-time, salaried positions. While the process of "de-collectivisation" and even "individualisation" of council decision-making in Swedish local government has made progress, more far-reaching "hierarchisation" or even "monocraticisation" of political and administrative leadership are still disregarded, if not abhorred, as incompatible with the prevailing compromise-oriented political culture. Hence, Sweden's local government system continues to be a world "with many actors and few leaders". [13] Moreover, it constitutes a remarkable example of "soft" version of indicator-bases performance management which is rooted in a local government "bottom up" initiative (thus contrasting sharply from the centralist "top-down" approach of a performance management scheme in Great Britain).

Conclusion

In most of the developed countries, the end of the XX century is associated with a period of broad administrative reforms. With some exceptions, most countries introduced integration strategies heading to bigger communities and often causing a loss of local identity. Despite global trends and strategies national party politics such as decentralisation strategies and fiscal reforms often interfered with the relationship between the national and local levels. There seems to be a tendency that the bigger cities are often under the political control of opposition parties. In the UK the conservative government at the national level tried to reduce functions and the autonomy at the local level to restrict the oppositional influence.

The separation of power as a strategy to define new roles of local administration, and council is a kind of a trend for local government in most countries. In most developed countries, such as UK and Sweden observed above, it can be shown that the local level is growing because of new social welfare policies.

In all countries, municipal town planning initiatives were often reduced because of low funding for new projects. Furthermore, these projects or public programs should not just work but work for the advantage of the community. Many, if not most, public programs and reforms in the municipal service does not meet the real needs of all people. Thereby, it is very important to understand who benefits and who loses from this or that government action. Such understanding is thus another basic consideration of program quality and the success of the municipal reform.

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[12] Strǫmberg, Lars/ Westerstehl, Jǫrgen (1984): The New Swedish Communes, p.39

[13] Based on the materials from Montin, Stig (2005): The Swedish Model. Many Actors and a few strong Leaders. In: Berg, Rikke/ Rao, Nirmila (Eds.) (2005): Transforming Local Political Leadership. Houndmills: Palgrave: 116-130.

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