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**Decentralization and service delivery**

It is common for those who work for international financial institutions to rally against provincial autonomy and the 18th Amendment. We refer to a similar piece by Hanid Mukhtar ‘Promoting Efficient Service Delivery with Decentralization’ for the World Bank in 2013 because it contains some good ideas about “bottom up” accountability.

There is a disconnect between the service delivery goals for citizens and political compulsions, and it leads to decentralization being undermined even when there is devolution to the lowest level of governance. The 18th Amendment has devolved powers to the provincial tier that is beyond the reach of common citizens at the community level. Therefore, there is a need for accountable local governments to work at the level where citizens interact with the state.

Decentralization need not be only political but also should have service delivery objectives along with the fiscal and administrative ones. In Pakistan, devolution had political aspects – and attempts to decentralize did not make efforts to take into account other aspects, particularly service delivery.

With the return of democracy in the country in 2008, the elected governments ignored devolution – as there has been a pattern that authoritarian governments opt for decentralization by bypassing the provincial tier, the democratic governments are not prone to devolving power to the lower tiers, preferring instead to govern through the centre and the provincial governments. The 17th Amendment that provided the legal cover to devolution lapsed in 2009. Later on, the local government elections were held by the provinces often on court orders; yet the devolution to the district and lower rungs of government remains sporadic and inconsistent.

Another reason why political dispensations are not prone to local governments is that the constitution of Pakistan formally recognizes the federal and provincial governments, and political parties are organized around those two tiers. The party leaderships work with national and provincial level politicians and a limited number of political workers. It would create managerial problems for the party leadership to work with a host of local level politicians in addition to the national and provincial level politicians.

In terms of providing a devolved service delivery to citizens after the 18th Amendment, there are some important factors that create a hindrance. First in order are capacity issues. Provincial governments may lack the capacity for the skills that are essential for service delivery. Until provincial governments come to speed in terms of their capacity; services to citizens may continue to suffer.

Even in the past devolution models, line department workers such as health and education were provincial employees and the district nazim had little control over them. Even when some oversight of salaries was given to the district level, there was not enough budget provided for recurrent and developmental purposes, leaving the lowest tier of government not enough control over the devolved functions.

Moreover, the district governments themselves also had 'misaligned priorities'. In the past when services such as education and health were devolved to the district tier, the local governments continued to focus on civil works and infrastructure projects rather than service delivery. Not enough budget was spent on health and education, and infrastructure remained a priority which shows the limitation of the functioning of local governments even when service delivery is devolved to them.

Also, the devolution to the provincial tier under the 18th Amendment remains incomplete. The devolved ministries of education, health and agriculture amongst others are duplicated at the federal level despite the 18th Amendment. This leads to confusion in roles and responsibilities. Many functions of the devolved ministries were not transferred to the provincial tier.

In terms of the way forward, the Council of Common Interests (CCI) should play a more active role. The CCI, National Economic Council and NFC should be activated so that they can help streamline governance structure and coordination. The overlapping functions between various tiers of the governments must be done away with so that there is better accountability of each tier of government. Local governments and other tiers should have complete control over their functions without the intrusion of higher tiers of government. The CCI must also work on 'national fiscal goal'”. There should be a tax policy and tax administration reforms to mobilize revenues for decentralization.

The local governments must have the human, institutional and financial resources and control to perform their functions. A system similar to a 'Citizens Report Card' should be introduced at the local government level to assess the performance of service delivery and promote healthy competition between various local governments.

There is a need for a new model of decentralization that integrates the administrative, political, and financial functions and better aligns the priorities of the provincial and local governments. Through the provincial assemblies, there is a need to create “autonomous provincial authorities” so as to provide critical services like education and health to the citizens.

These service delivery authorities should be governed by autonomous boards consisting of local leadership in their respective fields. These authorities should be created at the sub-tehsil level and members of provincial assemblies should be the chairpersons of these local level authorities and work with the local leadership. These autonomous service delivery authorities should have control over their functions and should be held accountable 'bottom-up'.

The real issue is that national leadership in all fields should work to promote citizens' interests in such a way that people are facilitated and provided services when they interact with the state on a daily day basis.

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