

Local governance and democratic renewal

Lucyna Rajca
Jan Kochanowsky University
lucynarajca@interia.pl

The beginning of the 21st century witnesses a shift towards another set of ideas concerning the management of local matters. This is a vision of local governance, defining a new role for local government. Network decision-making has serious implications for the practice of liberal representative democracy. In the new approach local government authorities take the steering position, trying to encourage other actors to engage in political processes. This entails a lot of both challenges and chances for local government. An important question appears: will the emerging system of local governance be effective in coping with problems of local communities? The reforms of local government introduced in England in 1997-2010 were predominantly implemented according to the concept of local governance. The main purpose of the reforms was democratic renewal. The terms “empowerment”, “engagement”, “inclusion” and “consultation” have become political terms indicating a shift towards a more inclusive and open form of governance. Democratic renewal was reflected in the many initiatives including directly elected mayors and substantial changes in the system of political management; reinforcement of the role of councillors in a community; granting the role of community leadership to local authorities; transferring the power to promote well-being; extending partnership structures and the requirement of co-operation in a partnership; introduction of solutions orientated at improvement of ethical standards; changes in electoral procedures and experiments with the neighbourhood management and engagement, empowerment and community participation. Apart from reforms of structures of representative democracy, in the years 1997-2010 the government promoted forms of participatory and deliberation democracy. A lot was expected from local government. It was supposed to represent interests of the local community; to fulfil both the strategic role of “shaping the area” and to promote democracy, educate and support democratic engagement, create a forum for public debate and reach the excluded and marginalized social groups. Local politicians had a great role to play in the programme of democratic renewal. Taking the scale of the project of “democratic renewal” into account, it is perhaps not surprising that the governmental reform programme has not produced expected results. In spite of the many reforms, initiatives and funds, political and civil involvement of citizens has not increased. Turnouts at local elections as well as control of authorities by the society have remained at a low level. The actions taken for the purpose of empowering citizens, such as discussion forums, citizens’ juries, participatory budgeting, strategies of sustainable development for communities, facilitating participation in elections, referendums, petitioning, assessing public services, interviewing citizens, surveys, public meetings – have not led to the final outcome of subjective empowerment measured as citizens’ sense of influence on decision making. Implementation of the concept of governance has not proved a good (effective) means to become an alternative to democratic procedures. Local governance is a conception intended to rouse creative and deliberative abilities of local communities and a way to overcome the division between the governing and the governed in representative democracy. However, it is very difficult to implement it because of such hindrances as citizens’ apathy, the existing culture of administration, or a trend towards centralization.

Although weak position of English local government and lack of “the rooting of governance” in the society undoubtedly had an impact on implementation of the concept of local governance in England, it is noteworthy that the theory itself suffers from substantial weaknesses. This does not mean that networks are not viable nowadays. This means that networks can only complement bureaucratic authority, but not replace it. At the beginning of the 21st century local government and other organizations of the public sector seem to apply a complicated and unstable mixture of all the three styles: hierarchies, markets and networks. Research is necessary covering the question how hierarchy, networks and market solutions can best be combined; in which fields of public matters and in what circumstances each of these methods is most suitable. The network model can be applied, for example, to solve complex social problems, in a situation of necessity to obtain additional legitimation for decisions and of dispersion of responsibility.

