

**Devolution** is the statutory delegation of powers from the central government of a sovereign state to govern at a subnational level, such as a regional or local level. It is a form of administrative decentralization.

### **OBJECTIVES OF DEVOLUTION**

- Promote the democratic and accountable exercise of power.
- Foster national unity by recognising diversity.
- Give powers of self-governance to the people and enhance the participation of the people in the exercise of the powers of the State and in making decisions affecting them.
- Recognise the right of communities to manage their own affairs and to further their development.
- Protect and promote the interests and rights of minorities and marginalised communities.
- Promote social and economic development and the provision of proximate, easily accessible services throughout the country.
- Ensure equitable sharing of national and local resources throughout the country.
- To facilitate the decentralisation of State organs, their functions and services, from the capital to the local government.
- To enhance checks and balances and the separation of powers.

The objectives of devolution originate from real problems citizens face. They aim to put the people at the centre of power and to make the national and county governments accountable to the people.

### **PRINCIPLES OF DEVOLUTION**

- Local governments shall be based on democratic principles and the separation of powers.
- Local governments shall have reliable sources of revenue to enable them to govern and deliver services effectively.
- No more than two-thirds of the members of representative bodies in each local government shall be of the same gender.

## **ADVANTAGES OF DEVOLUTION**

1. Devolution, including substantial fiscal decentralization, provides a framework which facilitates and stimulates local sustainable development throughout all regions of the country, because of the following:

- Fiscal decentralization will reverse current practice which extracts resources from the periphery and concentrates these at the centre. Thus, more resources will be retained at the local level, and will help to stimulate local economies and be available to support local development initiatives.
- More functions will now be performed at the local level, thereby creating opportunities for locals with technical, managerial and leadership skills to remain in the region, thus reducing the rural-urban brain-drain, and enhancing local capacity to manage local affairs and spearhead local development.
- Devolution enables each region to take initiatives for their own development, as they see fit. In doing so, they will know of the opportunities, indigenous resources and comparative advantages on which development can be based. Development is therefore driven locally, rather than by external agents who are pre-occupied with many other priorities thus know little about local potential for development.
- Planning for local sustainable development is affected very likely to be realized, unlike the usual fate of centrally produced plans.

2. Devolution represents the most effective means of curbing excessive concentration of power at the centre, which is a distinctive feature of the existing governance model, and which is inimical to several basic tenets of good governance, e.g., openness, transparency, fairness and probity. Specific benefits include:

- Devolution creates many sub-centres from which power is exercised. It reduces the number of resources /aspects of national life that are directly controlled/influenced by central authorities, and hence reduces the extent to which central government is able to exercise dominance over all aspects of public affairs.
- Devolution leads to each region/locality being able to articulate its own interests/perspectives, which might differ from those of the centre or other regions/localities, thus creating a plurality of interests/perspectives. The centre will no longer monopolize public policy formulation, and new power centres will serve to promote/protect regional interests. Political representatives will

now have to show greater loyalty to the interests & views of their local constituents, rather than to the central party machinery.

- Conferring power to local jurisdictions to manage local affairs will make it more difficult for any single group, be it government or private interests, to dominate the national scene; and will increase chances that persons/groups of differing persuasions will occupy positions of power somewhere in the system.

3. Devolution facilitates greater popular participation in governance, as illustrated by the following:

- It brings government closer to the people, and thus enables citizens to be better informed and to better understand the conduct of public business. This facilitates the forging of a strong relationship between the governors and the governed and identification of the people with their government, which helps to reduce alienation from the political process. It also serves to reduce disruptive/anti-social behaviour by citizens in seeking to get their concerns addressed or taken into consideration.
- Placing responsibility for managing local affairs and for local sustainable development at the local level rather than central government will afford citizens greater access to, and ability to influence, the policy/ decision-making process. Civil society will now consider local government to be worthwhile partners, as they will be easily accessible, and will have the resources and authority to respond to representations.
- It provides a conducive environment for creation of a civic culture of cooperation, tolerance and trust among the various groups/elements which comprise the local society.
- Communities will find it easier to pursue their development objectives, and obtain support from local government, by their participation as a full partner in the local governance process. It facilitates/stimulates the growth/empowerment of civil society institutions and networks, as citizens perceive the benefits of working in collaboration with local government, to advance their interests. They will therefore organize themselves into appropriate organizational forms, to pursue that objective.

4. Devolution increases efficiency in determining service provision. In a decentralized, participatory system, citizens can influence decisions about service provision through mechanisms which enable them to indicate the type, level, quality and mix of services they desire, and the cost they are willing to pay for such services. This constitutes a type of market mechanism for

determining service provision in a manner which responds to the wishes of citizens and is sensitive to their willingness/ability to pay. This will not only optimize citizen satisfaction but is also an excellent mechanism for reconciling citizens expectations to the resources available and/or the price which they are prepared to pay for the services desired.

5. Devolution facilitates a better division of labour in the management of public affairs. The creation of strong local governments with the capacity to effectively manage local affairs enables central government to concentrate on higher level functions. This both improves efficiency and creates more effective checks and balances. A major weakness of public administration in the Caribbean is the neglect of high-level functions such as policy formulation, strategic planning, setting standards and monitoring, because central agencies are pre-occupied with operational level matters, while neglecting areas which could make a qualitative difference in public management. Devolution allows each level of government to focus on the aspects of public management which it is best suited to perform.

6. Devolution facilitates the tailoring of solutions for local problems to local conditions. Since each region is empowered to manage their own affairs, they will be able to tailor programmes or solutions to local problems to reflect the special circumstances or preferences of their respective regions/localities.

7. Devolution, manifested in a participatory style of local governance, fosters greater social cohesion and stability, and encourages reconciliation between local interest groups and a convergence around common interests. This process of participation helps to create the conditions for collaboration and working together as is indicated by the following:

- It brings the various stakeholders together and helps foster better understanding of each other, thereby reducing suspicion and mistrust and creating a framework for collaboration and cooperation.
- It provides a framework and conducive environment for reconciling conflicting interests, long-standing prejudices and other differences which have served as barriers in the past.
- It facilitates recognition of mutual self-interest, i.e., that the attainment of the goals of each group will only be achieved and sustained with the support of the other groups, therefore the need for cooperation.

- It helps to highlight and bring to the fore the commonality of interests, values, goals, and aspirations which are shared by the different groups, and which usually far outweigh any differences.

8. Devolution provides the opportunity for a wider diversity of innovations and increases flexibility of government in the context of changing circumstances. This is so because the decentralized, participatory model of governance mainstreams the many groups/citizens who were previously excluded and creates greater scope for local and community self-management. This means that the vast reservoir of talent, innovativeness, creativity, problem-solving capacity and leadership qualities which have previously laid dormant in the local population is now able to find expression, and can be applied to the problems, visions and aspirations of the local community, and will also be available to contribute to nation building. Such diversity/flexibility are important pre-conditions for significant policy and pragmatic changes.

9. Devolution facilitates the mobilization of local resources in support of the development process and enables value-added contributions to the provision of services and development efforts, which increases the total value of services provided, or development achieved, from the limited formal resources available. This happens because local people are able to identify and mobilize local/indigenous resources which would not be available to centrally run programmes, and because citizens are often willing to volunteer free labour and expertise, and other forms of in-kind contributions, in order to support local initiatives.

10. Devolution promotes pluralism and dynamism in the society. The fact that there are now other centres of power and influence, and that each has the authority and means of pursuing its special interest and perspectives, will invariably lead to greater pluralism and dynamism in the society.

11. Devolution broadens the potential for societal capacity building. Weak capacity is one of the main constraints to national development and good governance in the Caribbean. The authoritarian, over-centralized model of governance/public administration is a major inhibitor to capacity development, because it narrows the amount of people who are allowed any meaningful role in the process. A decentralized, participatory model of governance dramatically increases the opportunity for involvement and provides space for persons to contribute at several different levels.

12. A decentralized, participatory model of local governance fosters accountability, transparency & openness, and create pressure for the adoption of high ethical standards in the conduct of public affairs. Examples of how the model contributes to achieving these tenets of good governance are as follows:

- In this model, citizens/civil society play an active role in policy/decision-making in respect of service provision and other aspects of local governance, and therefore share information and have a good understanding of the issues and facts relating to such matters. This gives them the knowledge base to critically appraise the performance of local government in these areas.
- To induce civil society participation, local governments practicing this model will usually adopt measures to promote accountability, openness, & transparency in the conduct of their affairs, such as: coopting civil society representatives to their committees; opening meetings of Councils /committees to the public/media, and/or broadcasting their proceedings; holding town meetings; discussing budget options with citizens; publishing annual/periodic reports; etc.
- In such models, LSD Planning is a local responsibility which is carried out in a participatory manner, with civil society playing a prominent role. Civil society will therefore be full informed on the issues, trends, options, and prospects affecting or relating to the region/locality, and thus can use that knowledge to assess the state of local affairs, and performance of the authorities.
- The model allows for representatives of civil society to be appointed to carry out oversight functions on behalf of citizens, i.e., to examine transactions, enquire into use of public resources and the exercise of authority by public officials, and to report their findings to fellow citizens.

### **DISADVANTAGES OF DEVOLUTION**

1. Inter-regional inequalities may increase, and thus widen intra-national poverty gaps and foster politically destabilizing forces. Since different regions are differently endowed in terms of natural resources, level of economic activities, land values, etc. some local jurisdictions will generate more revenue than others and afford their citizens more or better-quality services than is provided in poorer jurisdictions. The need for equitable distribution of available resources, to avoiding such disparities, is frequently advanced to justify centralization. That argument fails to recognize the significant incentive that is created, and development benefits derived, when regions are allowed to take initiatives towards their own development and can benefit from any gains made. At the same time, the potentially destabilizing effect of too wide disparities

between regions cannot be overlooked. The challenge to decentralization programmes is therefore to devise arrangements which allow each region to undertake such initiatives as they see fit, and to benefit from these, while putting in place mechanisms to safeguard against extreme disparities between regions.

2. Devolution can bring higher risks of resource/power capture by local elites or special interest groups. Without adequate safeguards, there is a risk that powerful or well-placed local elites may be able to capture the resources/powers allocated to or conferred on local authorities and use these resources/powers for their own benefit /interest. It is therefore essential that in formulating the decentralization arrangements, provisions are included to prevent the process being high jacked by any single group or small elite.

3. A frequently advanced argument in support of centralization is that of economies of scale. The burden of this argument is that central delivery of most services is usually more efficient, particularly in relatively small states, because of likely savings arising from reduced overheads, bulk purchasing, and other areas of cost savings. To the extent that this is valid, it would represent disadvantage of decentralization. However, such claims of increased efficiency and cost savings are usually proven to be more imaginary than real, as factors such as elongated chains of command/supervision, remoteness from the scene of action, inability to apply solutions which best fit the local situation, all lead to higher costs which offset, and savings realized. Furthermore, the value of local involvement is lost, and that also carries a price. On balance, it seems that decentralization is more likely to greater efficiency and is more cost-effective. However, there are situations in which some degree of centralization will lead to greater efficiency. The ideal approach may be to identify those aspects of any activity which could benefit from centralization, e.g., bulk purchasing, high level expertise, research & development, et and separate them from those that are more efficiently managed at the local level, e.g., choice, implementation and service delivery.

4. Misuse of authority due to inadequate supervision/weak accountability mechanisms constitutes a real risk of devolution. This can happen if central government supervision/accountability function is removed due to the new autonomous status of local governments, but no alternative mechanisms for accountability are put in place. It is therefore imperative that particular attention be paid to the issues of oversight/accountability in conferring greater autonomy on local governments. This could include legislation to ensure transparency and openness in the conduct of local affairs, and new mechanisms for

accountability, such as the empowerment of civil society entities to undertake watchdog functions. It should be noted however, that where devolution is within the framework of participatory local governance, the risk of weak accountability is minimized, because invariably the civil society partners will insist on and provide such mechanisms.

5. Inadequate implementation arrangements can lead to disparity between the revenue available and the mandated responsibilities/functions of local government, which could render them ineffective and/or bring them in disrepute/discredit. There are many examples of hastily conceived schemes for decentralization/ local government reform, which are not well thought-out, and which have failed or brought discredit to the concepts because of deficiencies in planning or implementation arrangements. A key requirement of decentralization is therefore careful planning and implementation arrangements. Given the complex nature of most decentralization/local government reform initiatives. A pilot approach is often prudent.

6. Devolution creates the potential for conflict between local and national interests. With each region having the means of identifying and articulating its particular interests, differences between local and national interests are sure to emerge. Such conflicts are not necessarily harmful, as it can serve to ensure that in arriving at any policy or course of action, the interests and concerns of all regions are taken into consideration and suitably addressed. However, if not properly managed they could become extremely destabilizing, and therefore an important aspect of any decentralization arrangement must be an appropriate framework for resolving such conflicts.

7. Devolution represents a more complex form of governance. Creation of several levels of government brings complexities as to role and functions, relationships, and revenue and power sharing. The most controversial issue is usually related to finance and mandates. Definition of roles and functions of, and relationships between the different levels of government or operations, is critical to a successful exercise.