



Book Review

Comparing Local Governance. Trends and Developments

Bas Denters and Lawrence E. Rose (eds.)

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The book of B. Denters and L.E. Rose originates in the tradition of cross-national analyses at the sub-national and especially the local level by scholars in public administration and political science. The authors want to illuminate whether or not local government across a broader spectrum of political systems has gone through a process of fundamental transformation during the past years. To answer this question the editors followed a strategy that draws upon a number of country experts. Each national expert contributed a chapter around a set of previously formulated research questions. Previous versions of the country studies appeared in Dutch as journal articles in *Bestuurswetenschappen* in 2002 and 2003.

The book consists of 15 chapters. In the introductory chapter, Denters and Rose argue that during the last decades the nature of democratic local government has changed considerably. They identify five major trends (and associated challenges and changes) all of which have had an impact in this regard. These trends are urbanization, globalization, Europeanization, the rise of new substantive demands and the rise of new participatory demands.

Chapters 2–13 contain country reports by the various country experts. The cases include Australia, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Nordic Countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden), Poland, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. This mix of countries provides, according to the authors, a broad basis for observing and assessing important trends and developments relating to local government and local governance at the beginning of the new millennium. Chapters 14 and 15 aim to provide a broader cross-national comparison relating to two central issues. In Chapter 14, Goldsmith provides an overview of changes in intergovernmental relations — both horizontal (between different local governments) and vertical (between various layers of government) — focusing on the impact of urbanization, globalization, and Europeanization trends, as identified in the introduction. Chapter 15 provides a similar overview of the evidence pertaining to the challenges posed, and



changes caused, by the rise of new substantive and participatory demands. This chapter offers a cross-national analysis of patterns of change in the relations between the various public and private agents that are engaged in efforts to deal effectively with the challenges arising within local communities. The challenges are, according to Denters and Rose, of a dual character. On the one hand, substantive demands require improved local problem-solving capacity and more effective forms of community leadership. On the other hand, there are calls for democratic reforms that will assure greater openness, access, transparency and accountability within local government. Meeting these challenges surely is no small task.

Comparing Local Governance focuses upon major changes and continuities in different systems of local government in a number of selected Western countries. The underlying question is whether the observation by various British scholars that a shift from government to governance has occurred recently, could be generalized to other parts of the Western world. In other words: are the councils activities replaced by public decision-making, which increasingly involves multi-agency working, partnerships and policy networks that cut across organizational boundaries? The editors conclude that in many respects this shift is an international phenomenon. They state that if contemporary local political arenas are contrasted with the prevalent model of local government in the Western world of the early 1980s, three important changes can be distinguished: a widespread adoption of NPM and public-private partnerships; the involvement of organized local associations, interest groups and private actors in policy partnerships; and the introduction of new forms of citizen involvement.

In the last section of the book Denters and Rose state that from a normative point of view the evidence presented in the book raises important issues regarding the future of local democracy. In terms of functional effectiveness and efficiency, it remains to be seen how the emergent systems of local governance will fare in tackling the problems of local communities. In terms of democratic quality, a proliferation of accountability mechanisms and participatory channels can be observed, yet it remains unclear whether various parts of this new democratic infrastructure will be compatible. If this is not the case, it will, according to the authors, be crucial for the future of democracy to find a well-balanced mix of democratic institutions. According to Denters and Rose, the domain of local governance will therefore undoubtedly remain the focus of considerable debate for the years to come.

This book is a gold mine for all those interested in comparative local politics. It can without any doubt be used as a handbook for students in courses in comparative local politics. Furthermore, it consists of a number of interesting national contributions. The only problem will be that in a few years time, due to the further developments on the local level in the different countries, this



book will be outdated. I would therefore encourage the editors to update this work in a few years.

The authors have sought to overcome the limitations of a single authored volume by drawing on the expertise of a group of national experts. The advantage of this formula is that each author has access to a wide range of research and source material. The disadvantage is that the volume is not truly comparative, even though the editors managed to solve this partially in the two final chapters, which provide a broader cross-national comparison.

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