



2nd Global Conference on Business and Social Science-2015, GCBSS-2015, 17-18 September
2015, Bali, Indonesia

Diminishing Obligations of Local Government: Effect on Accountability and Public Trust

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Abstract

Local government responsibilities are diminishing, in which the financial dependency of local government towards the national government and the lack of accountability in disseminating their local duties to the public worsen the situation. In return, public trust towards government also affected. This paper measures public trust towards local government and the instillation of ethical accountability within local government to improve trust. Statistical results confirm that ethical accountability has a positive influence on trust. The model contributes to a better understanding of accountability, in particular, ethical accountability as a significant mediator factor in order to attain public trust in local government.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of the 2nd GCBSS-2015

Keywords: local government function ; national government ; public trust ; accountability ; ethical accountability

1. Introduction

Central government controls on local government, whether in a unitary or federal system of government can be seen in the dissemination of duties and powers between the two governments. They moved from centralized to decentralized local government in most countries provide opportunities for local government to function without tight

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scrutiny from the central. Equal divisions of powers where the power are balanced between the central and local government are seen as effective tools for efficiency in local government administration.

However, this balance of power between central and local government are subject to pendulum swing. Studies showed that most countries experience unequal distribution of power in countries that 'claimed' to have a balance of power, decentralized local government and unfortunately most of the powers go to the central government. Reports done in 1996 to 2009 in English government sees that although there are distribution of power between central and local government, but the power are not balance in which it is skewed towards the central government (House of Common, 2012). Irish local government also showed the dependency on central government, particularly in finance (Spotlight, 2012), whereas Japanese local government sees the dependency on central government particularly in finance and administrative support to carry out projects (Hong, 2013).

Moreover, the dependency of local government towards the central due to financial constraint and advice may tamper with the service delivery function of the local authority. Although local government exist as compliment to the higher government, in which in turn, can generate public support to the state and central government, the functions of local government still blurry and complex. Moreover, studies showed that public trust towards government is subject to level of performance by the government at all level, and in particular, the field government in disseminating services to the public (Fard & Rostamy, 2007; Cheung, 2013). In this sense, accountability of public servants becomes a measuring tool for satisfied or dissatisfied results of service delivery (Ahmad et al., 2005)

The paper attempts to investigate the level of public trust towards local government in which it also depends on the level of accountability of the staff of the local authority in delivering their duties. Meanwhile, qualitative analysis helps to provide the investigation on the functions of local government, whether the transfer of local government powers to the central government affect public trust and accountability.

2. Literature review

Initial function of local government was to provide town service and tax collection in most countries. From then onwards, the growth of local authority function become bigger and the entrusted responsibility is more apparent to local public. The UK local government sees the undertaking of important services from central and non-governmental organization in the 19th century (UK, 2000). Most countries see the variety of function for local government based on history and the nature of the environment for each territory (Cuomo & Perales, 2011; Brackertz, 2013). Critics said that local government power was gradually lost to central government and in some instances, its hold true to the saying.

In some cases, the transfer of some services to central or national government are apparent, such as in the UK, while in others, the role of the central and national government are expanding in which states and local government act in accord to the central such as in the US. However, the home-rule authority given to local authority in the US provides some leeway for the local government. "Home-rule in a broad sense describes those governmental functions and activities traditionally reserved to or performed by local governments without undue infringement by the state. In its more technical sense, home-rule refers to the constitutional and statutory powers given local governments to enact local legislation in order to carry out and discharge their duties and responsibility" (Cuomo & Perales, 2011, 44). South Korea experienced a more restricted power and autonomy in playing their duties, although constitutional arrangement provides detailed list of local government function. The central government still holds final decision powers on the functions more than two thirds compared to local government. Furthermore, the scope and responsibility of central and local government remain blur and complex (Choi, et al., 2013)

On the other hand, Malaysia's Local Government Act 1976 (Act 171) is the act enacted detailing the administration and functions of local government for Peninsular Malaysia. Local government is under the state jurisdiction, and subject to state control. The legislation of Malaysia and South Korea are quite similar in which both are detailing the functions of local government into obligatory and discretionary functions. However, Malaysian local government has transferred some of the obligatory functions to central government such as health, safety and water.

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