

Decentralisation or centralisation? Education in Western Samoa 1992

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ABSTRACT

It is somewhat ironic that just as the New Zealand education system is in the process of decentralising, thoughts in Western Samoa are turning to centralising the education system, in the interests of economy, efficiency of operation, and better quality of education. The present situation in Samoa is that village communities build and maintain their own village schools, while the Education Department provides teachers and a very modest stationery grant to assist the operation of these schools. The question of centralising educational administration has been debated for some time in Western Samoa, but surfaced with renewed vigour following the disastrous effects of cyclones Ofa (January 1990) and Val (December 1991). An estimated 85% of Western Samoa's village schools were completely destroyed/made unusable by the latter cyclone (Observer, 1992) and now, almost a year later, schooling is still being conducted in village fales and church buildings throughout the nation because villages cannot raise enough money to re-build their schools. Given these circumstances, it is natural that attention should be focused on whether it is economically desirable or practical for every village (regardless of size) to have its own school, as is the present practise, and government's role in providing funding for new school buildings.

Introduction

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The decentralisation/centralisation issue

There is no agreement among commentators as to whether decentralised power, such as exists in Samoan villages today, is beneficial to or desirable for national development. Arguments against state involvement in village affairs include the view that centralisation undermines local autonomy and locks villagers into exploitative production relationships (Hirsch, 1989: 35). It has been argued that the formalised procedures of government work against popular involvement and that government support for community participation may result in a diminution rather than an increase in community involvement (Midgley, 1986: 38).

Advocates of state-run rural development schemes, on the other hand, base their argument on the need for an equitable distribution of scarce resources. To them, decentralisation represents: first, a wastage of resources which might be better used if nationally distributed; second, duplication of services as groups deliberately compete with each other or are unaware of one another's programmes; and, third, decentralisation is associated with a lack of continuity in programmes (Midgley, 1986: 156). It is further argued that a benefit of state-run programmes is that these teach villagers to identify with the 'nation'. Villagers learn their rights, duties and responsibilities as citizens: "Implied is a sense of belonging, of the village as an integral part of the state, of villagers as subjects rather than objects of state policy and of farmers as the 'backbone' of the nation" (Hirsch, 1989: 41).

Midgley outlines some options. The first is total state control and the equal distribution of assets, which implies a loss of local initiative and autonomy. The second is local autonomy, which may result in an unequal distribution of assets. Midgley concludes that a smooth working between both state and local institutions is the best method:

It is naive to argue that state involvement in social development is superfluous, and that local communities in the third world can solve the serious problems of poverty and deprivation wholly through their own efforts. But it is equally naive to assume that a cosy relationship between the centralized bureaucratic state and the local community will emerge and that political elites, professionals and administrations will readily agree to the devolution of their authority to ordinary people (1986: 11).

Both the benefits and disadvantages of decentralisation can be seen at work in Samoa today. The co-existence of a decentralised system of political authority within a centralised state system has on-going implications for the provision and administration of education.

The Samoan context: Educational dualism

The *faaSamoa* (Samoan ways) are grounded in rule by the chiefs. Traditional *faaSamoa* organisational structures have never been seriously challenged in the contact or the independence period. As a result, each village operates as an autonomous body under the leadership of the *fono o matai* (Village Council of Chiefs) and the Women's Committees. No business can proceed in the village without the approval of the *fono*, and in turn the *fono* is responsible for all village affairs. The Council maintains order, represents the village voice at district affairs, and liaises between the village and the national government. The essence of village autonomy is captured in this description:

Each village polity, is in a very real sense, an independent principality and while ceremonial links outside that principality are cultivated and respected, authority in the sphere of internal village administration and external political relations is jealously guarded by the village (Schoeffel, 1985: 105).

The endurance of traditional power structures in Samoa is no doubt due to the fierce local resistance against any efforts to change the *faaSamoa* (see for example Davidson, 1957: x) but also to the fact that both the German and New Zealand administrations governed by indirect rule strategies which directly reinforced these traditional faamatai structures (see Boyd, 1969). The

system of *matai* franchise introduced at Independence (whereby only the chief could vote, or stand for Parliament) further consolidated the power of the chiefly traditional structures and in so doing, directly limited the effectiveness of the new national decision-making body. For, whereas the nation concept is built on the need to 'look beyond kin' (Hezel, 1987: 62; Crocombe, 1987: 9) *matai* suffrage brought kinship interest and loyalties into national decision-making processes. The more recent trend for aid donors to by-pass national structures and deal directly with village institutions (see Siwatibau, 1985: 91) is another factor which effectively promotes and reinforces local autonomy.

The practise which evolved through the post-contact period, and which continues today, is that each village is responsible for meeting its needs.¹ For example, if a village wants a school, the villagers must provide the building and maintain it, and then the Government will provide a trained teacher. The principle of shared responsibility applies to the provision of health centres, and infrastructure such as roads, water services and electricity. In the electrification project of 1991 for example, villages provided and cleared the land in readiness for the government Electric Power Corporation workers to set the poles. Religious organisations follow a similar procedure. In this case, village congregations erect the church buildings and school facilities and the central church administration provides the spiritual leaders and school teachers for these institutions.

However, at the same time as village communities worked zealously to provide village schools, the German Administration (1900-1914) opened a primary school at Malifa (Apia) for the children of administration officials, urban settlers who had no 'village' links, and half caste families. In the trusteeship period the New Zealand administration opened senior secondary schools first in Apia (Avele College and Samoa College) and then in rural Savaii (Vaipouli). These colleges focused on New Zealand School Certificate and University Entrance examinations.

Thus a dual system of educational provision and administration was instituted which persists today. There are a number of obvious differences between the village and government schools. For the government system, buildings, materials and resources are totally provided by government. Further, because the government schools are close to the Education Department (physically and in terms of power also, one suspects) these schools enjoy better quality facilities than the village schools. English is the language of instruction in the government schools with Samoan as a subject of study, whereas in the village schools, Samoan is the language of instruction with English being a subject. As a result of these and other differences, students attending government schools enjoy a distinct advantage, particularly when it comes to sitting the national examinations which are conducted in the English language.

These differences have not gone unnoticed. In the 1920s and 1930s many Samoan families adopted European names so that their children would be admitted into the Malifa School (Moa Emele Fairbairn, 1992, pers. comm.), while today, the classes on the Malifa Compound suffer from serious overcrowding, as students commute long distances daily, or board with their town families, in order to attend this school. In recent years, village communities have begun to seriously question the fairness of government policies, such as I have described, which result in urban families enjoying superior facilities 'at no cost to them' while villages have to work for these themselves (see Fairbairn-Dunlop, 1991).

Local control in action: The implications for education

Decentralisation has ensured that effective decision making, hence self-determination, is still located within the villages. Village assets represent endless hours of tireless debating and joint efforts by families to work together on projects which will enhance village resources. The success of the 'shared' process of asset provision can be instantly seen as one travels through the villages. It is evident in the multitude of impressive churches, health centres and schools. These assets belong to the village: they fund their building, they administer them, and they operate for the good of village members.

From an educational point of view, the success of local autonomy can be measured in the availability of school places and in enrolment statistics. There are schools in every village, and school attendance is enforced by social sanctions and village laws. Although schooling is not yet compulsory in Samoa (this is a priority item on the present government's agenda), it is estimated that 98 percent of school-aged children attend school (Western Samoa Statistics, 1991).

A related point which is not so positive however, and which will be developed below, is that village assets have come to symbolise 'the strength of the village' - the more assets a village has, the more highly esteemed is the village. The ability to provide village amenities has thus become a highly visible criteria of community power, and has fuelled the vigorously competitive and rivalrous spirit which has always existed between villages. This has resourcing implications which impact at both village and national levels.

Providing village facilities is extremely costly. Village assets represent: concentrated and continuous fund-raising efforts by village families; remittances from overseas family members; and a commitment to large Development Bank loans which will take many years to repay (see Development Bank Reports). The fund-raising burden in some villages has been lightened by the injection of aid assistance direct to the village *fono*.² However, as it is the expectation that the labour and costs of all village projects be equally divided amongst village families, it is apparent that many families suffer real hardship in meeting their village obligations.

Moreover, it is apparent that in many cases projects undertaken under the rubric of 'village autonomy' may not represent money well spent. For example, 'village need' is not always the major factor determining whether a school is built, or what size the school should be, as seen in the following case:

A village with a total population of under 1000 opened a magnificent ten-room school block in 1985. Only three or four rooms of this block have ever been properly furnished or used, and the village is still fund-raising to repay the building loan. It may have been wiser to build a smaller block (more appropriate to the population of the village), and spend the remainder of the money on books and desks, for example. The 'size' of the facility could probably be justified if the school were opened to the children of the neighbouring villages. But it is highly unlikely that this will happen because villages intensely dislike sharing their facilities with other villages. The neighbouring village has just begun fund-raising to upgrade its school, and it is highly probable that this village will try to build a school of similar or 'more grand' proportions than the one described.

When one closely examines the motives for acquiring village assets it appears that in many cases 'village esteem' rates higher than the desire to improve a community's quality of life. A comment frequently heard is 'x village has an x. We must get one', whereas the basic question should be 'do we need such an asset?'. In effect, a competitive spirit has developed between villages, so that sometimes unnecessary or unnecessarily elaborate facilities may be built. In this process, the emphasis appears to be focused more on 'getting the facility' than on making sure the facility functions well.

This situation also impacts on national resources. The Education Department has extreme difficulty staffing the large number of schools which proliferate under this system:

There are enough teachers to 'cover' all the children of Samoa on a 1:35 ratio. But the present system means that the teachers we have are badly distributed through the system ... we are committed to staffing many very small rural units (ibid).³

The fact that each small school must have senior administrative positions as well (a principal, deputy principal, for example) seriously inflates staffing costs also. In this situation, 'it would make good economic sense to join two neighbouring village schools together' (ibid).

Conclusion

The duplication of village facilities, and facilities lying unused or under-utilised because of a shortage of trained staff or suitable equipment, must contribute to a poorer national schooling service. A submission presently being discussed by Cabinet aims at 'rationalising' the school system, and a committee is exploring strategies whereby this process might be achieved. Amongst other measures, this paper proposes that the government build a series of district schools through the country, rather than each village building its own school. Although this proposal represents a more economic use of national and village resources, past experience has shown that there are problems associated with such a unifying exercise. For example, the Education Department adopted a similar programme in its efforts to spread secondary educational opportunities through the rural areas in the early 1980s. To this end, District Junior Secondary Schools were set up in strategic villages. While the shared use of district resources worked well in some areas, it was not very long before other villages began building their own Junior High Schools. As one parent commented to me: 'it was a long walk to the Junior High School in the next village ... on the dusty road ... so we built our own'.

Today in Western Samoa, each village identifies its own development agenda, be it schools or a road, and then works to fulfil its programme. The recent havoc caused by two cyclones, however, is forcing a more objective assessment of the economic as well as social and cultural implications of maintaining local autonomy and customary ways. Some form of national planning which integrates village needs more closely into national schemes may be essential in the interests of the equitable distribution of services and the better use of scarce national resources.

Notes

1. This system of shared provision is very similar to that operating in New Zealand under the Maori school system (see Barrington & Beaglehole, 1974).
2. For example, when a Savalii village needed funds to rebuild its school, it was approached by a logging company which wanted to log the village rainforests. When a Swedish conservation society heard about this, it quickly entered into a covenant with the village. By this agreement, the society gave the village a total of \$150,000 over a three year period, on the understanding that the village would protect the rainforest for the next 50 years. The money was used to rebuild the school.
3. This is not only a problem for the Education Department. At least six health centres were opened in rural villages in Savalii and Upolu in 1989. The government was unable to staff these and gazetted the notice that villages should stop building health centres (and support the District Hospitals), or be aware that government could not take responsibility for staffing the village centres. Yet villagers continued to fund-raise for and build health centres.

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