Workshop on Innovations in Governance and Public Service to Achieve a Harmonious Society

People’s Participation In Governance: Sri Lankan Experience In Education Management

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Abstract

This study is focused on identifying the factors affecting the management of public education service with people’s participation at grass root level for achieving societal harmony at that level. Students of social evolution have very clearly identified that today’s industrial society is held together by harmony among the constituents of such a society. Durkheim saw society as composed of social facts or social structures, which had a variety of functions for society. The harmony among these organs would result in a society where peaceful coexistence of various elements would be facilitated.

It is the role of the government through public administration mechanism to establish such a harmonious environment in a society. Major instruments of public administration can be identified as twofold. They are public policy formulation and public policy implementation. In a democratic country, theoretically, policy is formulated by the citizens of the country (through their political representatives) and implemented by the public servants for the purpose of establishing and maintenance of a satisfying environment for all the citizens of the country.

In this context one concept which becomes important is the concept of governance which is the process by which a society as a whole gets its problems solved and needs and demands fulfilled. In this sense good governance contributes to effective solution of social problems and fulfillment of social needs of all the members of a given society. If this does not happen and some individuals and groups get their needs satisfied while some others don’t, this will result in disharmony and internal conflicts in that society.

Scholars as well as practitioners of public administration are much concerned about the unhealthy state of public governance in many countries that are experiencing intra-national disharmony and conflicts at various levels of society in the Asian region and are interested about finding effective solutions to this problem. One of the common solutions identified by many a researcher for addressing this problem is “citizens’ participation in governance”. In Sri Lanka from the time of gaining independence various steps have been taken to promote citizen participation in various sectors of public governance.

In the present study the case of citizens’ participation in public education management has been studied through a qualitative research involving three urban schools, three sub-urban schools and four village schools. The principal, two staff members and two parents from each school had been interviewed in addition to the observations and documentation studies for the purpose of collection of data relevant to the case.

The latest circular giving formal recognition to School Development Societies(SDS) has been issued in 1982. Subsequently in 1993 another circular has been issued to establish School Development Boards(SDB). However, in 1995 a circular was issued to abolish SDBs and thereafter the provisions of the earlier circular, i.e., circular No. 02/1982 are in force. Under this circular, the Management Committees(MC) of SDSs hold full responsibility for the work of SDSs.

The present study has shown that the effectiveness of these tools of citizens’ participation in education management depends on two factors. i.e., commitment of the principals and the interest of parents to participate in school management. These again are based on more basic factors some of which are controllable by change agents while some are not. It is recommended that controllable factors have to be developed properly by change agents if people’s participation is to be made effective.

In this study an innovative model that has been developed by a school principal for efficient and harmonious functioning of SDS and MC could also be discovered. Here the parent members of the MC are elected from committee members of class circles instead of through elections in annual general meetings. This approach has resulted in greater harmony in the school community than the other method of electing the SDB membership.
A. Conceptual framework

We start our discussion of the subject with the definition of basic concepts under consideration. According to Spencer, “Society grows through both the multiplication of individuals and the union of groups. The increasing size of society brings with it larger and more differentiated social structures, as well as the increasing differentiation of the functions they perform.” (Ritzer:35) Spencer further theorized that “historically the individual societies have evolved from militant societies which are defined by being structured for offensive and defensive warfare...However with the emergence of industrial society, warfare ceases to be functional and serves to impede further evolution. Industrial society is based on friendship, altruism, elaborate specialization, recognition for achievements rather than the characteristics one is borne with, and voluntary cooperation among highly disciplined individuals. Such a society is held together by voluntary contractual relations and more important by a strong common morality.” (in other words today's industrial society is held together by harmony among the constituents of such a society.) (Ritzer:35). "Dirkhein saw society as composed of ‘organs’ (social facts), or social structures, that had a variety of functions for society.” (Ritzer:79). The harmony among these organs would result in a society where peaceful coexistence of various elements would be facilitated.

It is the role of the government through public administration to establish such a harmonious environment in a society. This has to be realized through maintenance of law and order and promotion of development using the instruments of public administration. The major instruments available to public administration for this purpose can be identified as twofold. They are, the public policy formulation and the public policy implementation.

In a democratic government, formulation of public policy is by the political authority, while implementation is done by public administration under the guidance and control of political authority. Political authority is the people's representative. Thus, theoretically policy is formulated by the citizens of a country and implemented by the public servants for the purpose of establishing and maintaining a satisfying environment for all the citizens of a country.

In this context another concept which become important is the concept of governance which can be defined as the process by which a society as a whole gets its problems solved, and needs and demands fulfilled. In this sense good governance contributes to effective solution of social problems and fulfillment of social needs of all the members of a given society. If this does not happen and some individuals and or groups do get their needs fulfilled while some others don’t, this will result in disharmony and internal conflicts in that society.

A nation as a society consists of multifarious subgroups based on elements such as language, religion, cast, employment, culture, level of education, etc. If the process of public administration fails in maintaining good governance, certain subgroups might feel dissatisfied and this can lead to social disharmony at one or more of social levels i.e., macro level, intermediary level and or grass root level.

In a democracy as mentioned earlier, public policy is formulated by the political authority which has been elected by the majority of the citizens. However, in this exercise if only the majority views and expectations are given consideration and minority views and expectations are not accommodated inevitably this would lead to minority dissatisfaction and could result in social disharmony and conflict at the macro level. Similarly at sub-national levels i.e., provincial, divisional, and or village levels, if political authorities at these levels formulate policies and or if public servants attempt to implement policies through various programmes and projects without giving sufficient consideration to the views and expectations of various stake holder communities and groups, that can lead to social conflicts at these levels.

B. Problems in reality

Many countries in the Asian region in reality are experiencing intra-national disharmony and conflict created by the gap between those who are governing and the governed at various levels of society. In Sri Lanka, the ethnic conflict existing for the last three decades between a minority group of Tamil extremists
and the national government is a classic example of this kind of social conflict at the macro level. At sub-national levels also one can identify many instances of conflict due to ignorance of minority group views in implementing various public projects and programmes.

Scholars as well as practitioners of public administration are much concerned about this unhealthy state of public governance and are interested about finding effective solutions to the problem. One of the common solutions identified by many a researcher is the ‘citizen participation in governance’.

Citizen participation has been identified to be of two types. One is passive participation where citizens just provide information and suggestions to public administrators for them to take, implement and be responsible for decisions. The other is active participation where citizens are involved in decision making, decision implementation as well as holding responsibility for their performance. In the present situation we are more concerned about active participation than passive participation.

According to Farrell “Citizen participation in the governance of public services is firmly back on the public agenda in Britain”. Box has identified “the emergence of the interest in community governance in America”. He identifies four eras of control in public organizations. They are the era of elite control, the era of democracy, the era of professionalism and now the era of citizen governance. In the era of citizen governance Box identifies “that the challenge is not only to achieve efficiency but to realize a community vision chosen and enacted by its residents.” (Farrell)

In Sri Lanka also from the time of gaining independence various steps have been taken to promote citizen participation in various sectors of public governance. These include mechanisms developed and established to obtain passive as well as active participation of citizens in public governance. Suggestion boxes and Complain books for example had been introduced to railway stations to obtain travelers’ participation in managing railway transport. Suggestion boxes also have been introduced to public institutions such as various ministries and departments. This of course is a passive mode of participation.

Active Participation

One example of involving citizens actively in public governance in Sri Lanka can be found in education management. In this paper the researcher intends to evaluate the case of School Development Societies (SDSs) as a tool of citizen participation in education management.

Education is one of the fields in which the Government of Sri Lanka has a significantly big investment. Presently there are about 10,100 Government Schools. The number of pupils in these schools is more than 4.2 million. The total number of teachers is around 187,000. The annual allocation for education exceeds Rupees sixteen billion.

The Presidential Commission on Youth had recommended that a great deal of autonomy should be given to schools, their Principals and their School Development Committees. The Commission also postulated a set of principles, which would ensure that the schools have a substantial degree of autonomy. Its view was that, “if the members of the School Development Committee are drawn from among parents, past pupils, staff, prefects and well-wishers, the school will have the opportunity to develop a sense of community—not only as a community in and of itself but also as an organic element of the village or town which it serves.” (Report, pp. 38,39).

The current circular, which gives formal recognition to SDSs was issued in 1982 by the Ministry of Education. The ministry of education Circular No. 1982/2 which came into force on May 01, 1982 cancelled the previous circulars that have been issued on the subject and provided a new set of rules regulations and guidelines for establishment and functioning of SDSs.

According to the 1982 circular every school must have a SDS. The objectives of a SDS are:
(a). Developing the schools to fulfill the educational expectations of the parents, students and the residents of the area where the school is situated, in accordance with the policies of the Ministry of Education.

(b). Developing the schools into institutions that are capable of making productive changes in the social, cultural and economic life of the people in the school areas.

For achieving the above objectives, the SDSs are empowered to perform the following functions:

(1). Educational activities:- Provision of library facilities, organizing of educational discussions, conferences, lectures and exhibitions; organizing external classes for students needing special attention; obtaining the support of parents and other citizens for creating an awareness of the education policy of the government in them.

(2). Cultural and social activities:- Developing programmes of activities for using traditional stories, customs, names of places, indigenous medical systems, information of historical places, and natural resources; Taking leadership in developing aesthetic education including studies in music, drama and literature; Involving in sramadana work and health and hygiene protection activities for developing the school area.

(3). Fulfilling the needs of the school organization:- Supply of teaching aids and furniture; construction and repair of buildings, payment of extra allowances to teachers and minor employees.

(4). Professional development of the principals and the staff-members and students’ welfare activities:- Providing financial support for professional development of the principal and staff members; Providing support for the participation in local and foreign education programmes; Helping school teams participating in local and foreign sports competitions and education tours; Providing financial support for sports meets and other functions of the school and students' welfare activities.

The membership of a SDS consists of the current students’ parents, current staff-members, representatives of past students’ associations and also well-wishers. All the qualified individuals other than the staff-members should obtain the membership of a SDS by paying a membership fee as stipulated in sec. 4 of the circular.

The circular also provides for appointing every year a management committee(MC) comprising of a number of members between 7 and 21 for managing the functions of a SDS during the year. This committee is authorized and responsible for managing all the functions of the SDS subject to the provisions of the circular.

This provision for establishment and functioning of MCs was further strengthened by the establishment of School Development Boards(SDB) through a proclamation made by His Excellency the President and Minister of Education and Higher Education by Gazette No. 701/12 of 12th February 1992. This Gazette provided for the establishment of SDBs consisting of the principal as the chair person, three teachers, three representatives of parents, three representatives of past students and one representative of well-wishers as members. This SDB was to be responsible for the management of SDS. However, subsequently SDBs were abolished in 1995 by the Ministry of Education Circular No. 02/95. Thereafter the previous circular, i.e., Circular No. 02/82 stands valid and SDSs are currently operating through MCs.

From the above account of objectives, functions and activities assigned to SDSs and the type of structure of the organization of SDS, one can clearly identify the government’s intention of promoting people’s participation in education management at primary and secondary school level. A detailed study of the provisions of the relevant circular will also clearly depict that SDSs would promote, public accountability and transparency, elimination of politically and administratively corrupt practices, dignity and decorum in public office, ethical communication in leadership, access to information, and social and ethical
responsibilities of public servants involved in education management, thus leading to a state of good governance in education management.

Field survey results
A qualitative study has been done by the researcher, covering a number of public schools in different socio-economic environments to assess the effectiveness of SDSs in these different environments. Especially the study covered three schools in urban areas, three schools in sub-urban areas, and four schools in rural areas. Data was collected through structured interviews from the principal, at least two teachers and three members of the SDS of each school in regard to the organization and functioning of SDSs and MCs.

Following table summarizes comparable data in respect of these schools, which are identified by code names instead of their real names to maintain confidentiality. Urban schools are named as U1, U2, U3, suburban schools as S1, S2, S3, and rural schools as R1, R2, R3, and R4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Number Of Students</th>
<th>Number of Teachers</th>
<th>Number of MC Members</th>
<th>Funds in 2004 From</th>
<th>Participation in SDS activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>SDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U1</td>
<td>3242</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Rs. 150,000</td>
<td>60% 60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U2</td>
<td>3994</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>278,000</td>
<td>50% 50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U3</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>70,000</td>
<td>20% 40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>1365</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>200,000</td>
<td>65% 20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2</td>
<td>1030</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>73,000</td>
<td>50% 80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>50% 80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R1</td>
<td>1283</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>150,000</td>
<td>30% 50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>75,000</td>
<td>75% 75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R3</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>97,000</td>
<td>60% 75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R4</td>
<td>536</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>75,000</td>
<td>10% 75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of the three urban schools surveyed, the two schools U1 and U2 have the largest number of students and they have been identified as popular schools in the area. According to the principals of these schools, the levels of participation of parents and teachers in SDS activities are comparatively high (i.e., 60% and 50%). Generation of funds by the SDSs of these two schools is significantly higher than the provision of funds by the Government. They organize fund raising activities such as school fairs, carnivals, exhibitions, etc., as and when the schools need funds for development activities.

Maintenance and development of buildings, play grounds, and the school environment; meeting the costs of subsidiary services such as electricity, water, telephones, security and cleaning; upgrading of library facilities IT facilities and laboratory facilities are managed effectively by the SDSs.

As a result the popularity of these schools is growing and the demand for new admissions to these schools is on the increase.

According to the opinion of parents and teachers, the success of SDS activities is mainly due to the strong leadership of the two principals. These two principals have been able to get sufficient participation from the teachers, old students as well as the parents. Currently the school U1 has an average student density of 38 per teacher while U2 has 30 students per teacher. Majority of these students is coming from middle class and upper middle class families.

Compared to these two schools, the third urban school U3, which is situated within the administrative boundaries of the same city where U1 and U2 are situated, is identified as an unpopular school catering
to the poor. According to the present principal, until he was appointed to the principal’s post in August 2002, the output of the school had been deteriorating. Many students had left the school to join better schools and new admissions had been low. Even at present there is room for 80 more students. The student density is only about 17 per teacher, which is very low compared with that of popular schools indicating an under utilization of a valuable educational resource, i.e., teachers. All the parents except those of one or two students are poor, uneducated and earning their living on lagoon fishing or working as labourers of the Municipal Council. Their participation in SDS activities is as low as 20%.

However, according to the teachers the current principal is providing an effective leadership to improve the situation through SDS activities. As a result classroom development projects as well as a major project to develop the school playground are being implemented with voluntary contributions from community members. Although only a few parents participate in SDS activities, their commitment to these activities is significantly high. Out of the 20 staff members about 8 members participate in SDS activities to a satisfactory level. Again, according to some teachers, the recent upturn of SDS performance is mainly due to the strong leadership of the principal.

Among the three suburban schools surveyed under this study also, significant differences could be identified in respect of factors affecting citizens’ participation in education management. The school S1 which has a student density of about 30 per teacher has a 65% participation of parents and but only 20% participation of teachers in SDS activities. According to some teachers, currently the parent participation is also on a decline. For the last 8 years the school was headed by a principal who attained his retirement age of 60 years in September 2005. Being a person reaching the retirement age he seemed to have failed in providing a vigorous leadership to the teachers and parents in SDS activities. According to some parents and teachers he was an ideal administrator who followed rules and regulations strictly, but he lacked the initiative to energize the parents and teachers to participate effectively in SDS activities. Accordingly teachers’ participation was very low and parents’ also was a passive participation. Currently the school is under-staffed and is short of six teachers.

Another sub-urban school S2 has shown a better record than the above. More than 90% of parents of the students of this school are in the low-income category and employed as labourers or in lagoon fishing. Their participation rate is estimated to be 50%. But the teachers have a very high participation rate of 80% according to the principal. The school had been able to implement a number of projects such as health clinics, 60th school anniversary ceremony, construction of a new class-room for grade 1, with funds raised through school fairs organised by the SDS. This SDS has been able to raise an amount of funds larger than the amount of funds provided by the Government. Some teachers attribute the success of the SDS activities to the strong leadership and commitment of the principal.

The other sub-urban school S3 that was surveyed under this study, is in a declining state. S3 in the past has had a good recognition as a popular school and it has a good laboratory for science students, a good library, the largest playground in the area and also many other facilities. However, the rich parents in the area have admitted their children to popular urban schools and today S3 has only 187 students while it has building space for more than 500 students. The parents of the current students are of low-income category. Therefore, according to some teachers, although they are concerned about the education of their children, they are unable to actively participate in SDS activities due to lack of financial resources needed for the development of the school. All the parents have got the membership of the SDS. But the participation rate is only about 50%. This again is in the form of passive participation. Currently the school is headed by the vice-principal, who appears to be feeling helpless due to the lack of much needed physical resources and active support from parents and teachers. The school has a very low student density of 10 per teacher.

The other category of schools that were under consideration in this study are the rural schools. Within this category 4 cases have been studied. The school R1 has 1283 students and 52 teachers. The principal is satisfied with the level of participation of the teachers, parents and other community members in SDS activities that have promoted the smooth functioning of the school. On the other hand the teachers as well
as parents and other community members are satisfied with the leadership provided by the principal in SDS activities.

In addition to the funds provided by the Government the SDS collects sufficient funds to meet the expenditure on school development activities. During 2004 a number of projects including the construction of a wall around the primary section, painting the whole wall with wall pictures, procurement of sports items, conducting a number of educational conferences, has been implemented by the SDS with community participation.

A satisfactory situation could also be observed in the cases of two other rural schools R2 and R3. The school R3 is a primary school having only 265 students from Grade 1 to Grade 5 and 10 teachers. But the SDS of this small school is very active and carryout several projects that integrate the school with the broader community. Here also the principal is happy about the high level of participation of parents and teachers in SDS activities and in turn the parents and teachers are satisfied with the direction and guidance provided by the principal.

But the school R4, a senior school situated just half a mile away from R3 is a case of poor performance. Discussions with the principal, some teachers and some parents highlighted the negative community culture existing in the school community as a major cause of this poor performance. In this rural community majority of families are poor and uneducated and they are not much aware of or much concerned about the education of their children. On the other hand, the high-income earners who are a minority in this community have a latent dislike of poor children being educated. Although the teachers of the school have a high level of participation in SDS activities, in this negative cultural environment the results are not satisfactory. The SDS has not implemented any development activity in the school environment during the recent past.

**Finding and Conclusions**

From the above analysis of the ten cases of SDSs, a number of factors affecting the effectiveness of citizens’ participation in education management can be identified. One major factor is the strength of leadership of the school principals.

A school principal who has a strong leadership normally provides a vision for the school and strengthens the staff and the students with a strong commitment to the vision. In turn passes the massage to the parents and well-wishers who in turn rally round the school for its development. Within the framework of guidelines provide by the circulars they establish institutions to develop the school and participate in education management. They don’t follow the regulations and instructions given in the circulars blindly, but develop innovative approaches within the framework of rules and regulations to get the best result. An example of such innovative approach identified in the study is as follows.

In the case of the school U1 that has been identified as having a very effective SDS, the MC of the SDS is not been elected freely in the Annual General Meeting of the SDS as instructed by the circulars. But parent representatives of the MC are selected from the committee members of the class-circles. In each parallel class in each grade, there is a class-circle consisting of the class teacher, parents of the students in the class, and the subject teachers of that class. Each class-circle forms a committee for a given year, comprising of the class teacher as the chairperson and five parents one the secretary, another one the treasurer and the other three committee members. All the groups of five parents in class committees of parallel classes meet together and nominate one representative of the parents of the students of that grade for the membership of the MC of the SDS for that year. These 13 nominees are presented to the AGM of the SDS for information and approval.

According to the principal of the school U1 this method of electing the MC members through class-circles has created a highly harmonious environment in the school community as well as among parents ensuring a fair representation of all the parents of students in the SDS. Instead, if the members of MC were elected directly in the AGM of the SDS, various groups having political and other interests could have intervened and conflicting situations could have arisen resulting in social disharmony in the school.
community. The above model, according to the principal has created a highly effective and efficient SDS that involves to a satisfactory extent in decision making as well as decision implementation in regard to management of education services of the school.

The second element that can be identified as having an impact on the effectiveness of the SDSs is the interest of the parents in SDS activities. The rate of participation of the parents in SDS activities and the degree of activeness in their participation depend on a number of more basic factors. These can be identified as their awareness, community culture and socio-economic strength.

Rich parents send their children to popular urban schools that are provided with highest level of facilities by these rich parents through the respective SDSs. In most of the village areas poor villagers who are burdened with problems of poverty are neither capable nor interested in the management of schools catering to their children’s needs. They expect the totality of education services to be provided free by the government. In this environment there is minimum participation of citizens in education management.

Thus the operational model that could be identified in this study can be shown as follows:

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Vision of the principal
Leadership strength
Commitment of the principal
Awareness
Community culture
Socio-economic status
Interest of parents, well wishers
Effectiveness of SDS
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Appropriate combinations of principals’ commitment and relevant citizens’ interest can result in excellent institutions of citizens’ participation in governance in the case of education management. This in turn happens through the interaction of five more basic elements, i.e., vision and the leadership strength of the principal and the awareness, community culture and socio-economic status of the parents and wellwishers. Although the socio-economic status of the citizens and the community culture are beyond the control of change agents, the other three factors, i.e., vision and leadership strength of principals and the awareness of citizens, can be affected by the change agents to some extent.

In the Sri Lankan situation it was noted that, not many teachers, parents and other community members have access to relevant circulars issued by the Ministry of Education, but are verbally informed about these by the principals at the meetings of SDSs. These circulars are addressed to the principals of schools and supervising officers of the Department of Education. At the school level these circulars are kept in a file handled by the principal or a senior teacher. Thus the only formal source of awareness available to the teachers, parents and other community members is the oral presentations of the principals at staff meetings and SDS meetings. As a result, although the SDS system had been in existence for more than 25 years majority of the citizens has no comprehensive awareness of it. This could be one major factor leading to poor participation of citizens in education management in Sri Lanka.

In this regard, lessons can be learnt from the experiences of other countries that have been successful in achieving high level of peoples’ participation in education management. For example, in Victoria, the Department of Education has reached the common citizens through general publications such as ‘Making the Partnership Work’ and ‘Bringing Learning to Life’ available to general reader via Community Information Service or the Communications Division. Its website also provides current information about the system to the general public at minimum cost. 1998 publication of Making the Partnership Work starts with the following statement made by the then Minister of Education, Victoria. “You simply cannot run a good school without a good council. It is the school council that, sets the vision; determines the priorities;
establishes the mechanisms to ensure that accountability is in place; and ensures that the school is responsive to the local community." (Department of Education, Victoria).

This kind of statement highlights the commitment of the policy makers to the system and generates an interest in the reader as a policy implementator or a beneficiary to get some awareness of the system. In the Sri Lankan situation also, some innovative approaches are needed to create sufficient awareness in the citizens of the system established for peoples' participation in education management.

The other important element having a significant impact on the success of citizens’ participation in education management is the visionary leadership of the school principals. Even with participation of poor uneducated parents as in the case of R3 discussed above, the visionary leadership of the principal can result in the school getting integrated with and having an effective impact on the school community. In this respect, appropriate leadership training provided to principals, senior teachers as well as community members could yield good results. It is the responsibility of the Department of Education and higher education institutes such as teacher training colleges and universities to provide this kind of training to relevant parties.

References

2. Farrell, Catherine M., Citizen Participation in Governance, Public Money & Management, January – March 2000,