

## On decentralization III

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Decentralization, as we have seen in the past two columns, pursues two objectives: broadening and deepening our democracy by opening up channels for citizen participation in government and providing more effective tools of governance to tackle our problems. On a long-term basis, this implies fundamental change in individual attitudes toward the community and toward citizen responsibility, which are essential to a healthier, more peaceful, and more progressive society. We should travel down the road of decentralization toward these goals.

Many matters have to be addressed to bring about this fundamental change. In response to one of my previous columns, Milagros Mayoral, a spirited, civic-minded citizen from Ponce, wrote to me inquiring about geographic (ward) representation in the Municipal Legislature—not required by law but provided by political necessity—and voting in primaries. She felt at a loss because she didn't have adequate information on these matters.

Communication is of the essence in the practice of democracy. So is education. We can't assume our citizens are knowledgeable in the processes of participatory democracy. Broadening and deepening our democracy implies education and effective communication at local levels. This must be part of our strategic plan for transforming our passive representative democracy into a proactive participatory democracy.

The larger the cities, the more complex their problem of communication because it involves the mass media, and Puerto Rico's mass media is structured on a centralized basis, leaving little room for communication on local issues. The local daily, a feature of most American and European cities and towns, is nonexistent in Puerto Rico. Our centralized mass media is supplemented by weeklies at the local level and by local radio in some municipalities. The Internet, however, presents an excellent alternative. As in other matters, its possibilities must be consciously pursued by enlightened leadership at the local level.

Decentralization requires a vision, a will, and a process. It started as a bipartisan effort through the Law for Autonomous Municipalities, and bipartisan it must remain if it is to succeed. When this law was approved, we envisaged that the smaller municipalities would be assisted toward autonomy, particularly in land use and planning, through technical assistance and grants from the Municipal Affairs Commissioner's Office, an office set up to assist and regulate the municipalities in their administrative and fiscal affairs. This produced some results, and it remains an important tool to ease the way toward decentralization in the smaller municipalities. But more-effective initiatives are springing up.

In the Central-Eastern Corridor of the island, running from Cayey through Caguas to Naguabo, the private sector, the regional universities and technical / professional colleges, and the municipalities have joined up as the East-Central Technological Initiative. The legal instrument in a nonprofit corporation called Inteco by its Spanish acronym, on whose board are represented the municipalities of Cayey, Caguas, Gurabo, San Lorenzo, Juncos, Las Piedras, Naguabo, and Humacao, together with the Ana G. Mendez University System, the Cayey and Humacao campuses of the University of Puerto Rico, a representative from the technical / professional colleges, the Puerto Rico Industrial Development Co., Avant Technologies, Vernet, Microsoft Caribbean, MTS, Lehigh Press, and Nypro.

This structure fits in perfectly with the proper policies for the development of Puerto Rico. Our universities and businesses must join to concentrate on the skills of our people. It is the role of universities to educate students rather than train them for the specific needs of business. But it is important that students leave the universities and colleges with skills that are relevant to employers.

The principal goal of Inteco is the economic development of the central-eastern region of Puerto Rico through research & development and the creation of new enterprises. Around the world, companies are moving away from a system in which most of their research & development is done in their own laboratories to one in which they actively seek to collaborate with others in a new form of open innovation. The best forms of knowledge-transfer involve human interaction, and Inteco's structure encourages more frequent and easy communications between businesspeople, academics, and local government.

Inteco's objectives must be pursued through appropriate planning at the regional level. An overarching master plan is required to integrate all the necessary resources in the eight municipalities involved. Inteco is an appropriate tool with which to undertake such a plan. Optimally, the Planning Board should participate in whatever plan Inteco develops, and eventually it could adopt this plan as its own.

The regional plan would be the framework for the *Planes de Ordenacion* that must be adopted at the municipal level. These plans may be adopted for one municipality, for two or more, or for all eight municipalities together. Toward this end, the municipalities would enter into agreements among themselves and must obtain the endorsement of the Planning Board.

Caguas already has in place its own *Plan de Ordenacion Territorial*. Caguas and Inteco, therefore, can take the lead in preparing and coordinating the *Planes de Ordenacion* for all of the municipalities in the Central-Eastern Corridor, since Caguas and Inteco can bring to bear all the professional and technical assistance necessary for the smaller municipalities to elaborate their own plans.

Once the *Planes de Ordenacion*, which include the uses of land and the program of public works for infrastructure, are in place, Inteco can provide the technical services necessary to establish the several permitting offices of the municipalities or a regional permitting office, which the participating municipalities can create according to the Law for Autonomous Municipalities.

Efficient permitting is essential to economic development. Under the Law for Autonomous Municipalities, the processing and evaluation of permits can be privatized. Inteco is ready to provide these services for all the municipalities in the Central-Eastern Corridor. This represents important savings, essential for the small municipalities in processing their own permits, quality control, and efficiency in handling the permits, which will make possible the economic activity for the development of the region.

The issuance of permits itself can't be privatized. The authority to issue permits must be exercised by a public official. This can be a local permitting office for each municipality, one for several, or one for all eight of them. The officers would be appointed by the municipalities' respective mayors and would answer to each of them.

However, these officers needn't have a bureaucracy under them to process the applications, obtain the endorsements, conduct public hearings, and evaluate the cases according to zoning plans and regulations. That type of work can be privatized to Inteco so the permitting officer can decide one way or another according to a full report before him or her.

Inteco is the type of decentralizing initiative we sorely need in Puerto Rico. It structures participation of the public and private sectors in moving forward a whole region of the island. The Law for Autonomous Municipalities makes this possible. It is a tool open to creative uses, providing mechanisms for incorporating citizens into the task of governing. In my next column, I will discuss other methods of decentralization and participation provided by this law.