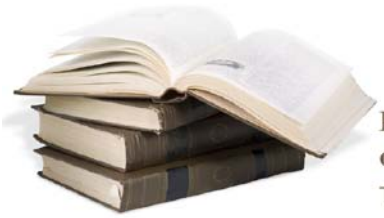

Encyclopedic Dictionary
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DECONCENTRATION

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Deconcentration is a term used to describe the process whereby a central organization transfers some of its responsibilities to lower-level units within its jurisdiction. This process redistributes the balance of power and authority between the central administration and the other units in varying proportions (Aucoin and Bakvis, 1988). A certain amount of confusion may arise from the fact that in English-language literature deconcentration is often presented as being a subcategory of administrative decentralization. However, it should be kept in mind that the latter term refers to the transfer of responsibilities by a central entity to peripheral bodies having their own legal personality, rather than to those under its authority. The potential for confusion is increased by the fact that deconcentration and decentralization may take place simultaneously and interact in ways that resist clear definition. That being said, it is generally recognized that, in principle, the two processes should be implemented at the same time so that they can mutually reinforce one another (Diederichs and Luben, 1995).

Deconcentration may be based on function – for example, when an independent service unit is created by the central administration – or have a geographical basis – for example, when a degree of decision-making capacity is granted to various administrative units across a given territory (Gélinas, 1975; Cour des comptes, 2003). The latter type of deconcentration receives more attention than the former in a context where political and territorial decentralization is being promoted.

The advantages offered by deconcentration are similar in part to those associated with decentralization: actions based on deeper knowledge of local particularities and clienteles; decisions better adapted to local contexts and taken more rapidly; and state-encouraged involvement and collaboration on the part of local actors. On the other hand, deconcentration may also lead to diminished uniformity, slackened control and the sidestepping of certain issues, with units in the hierarchy trying to shift responsibility to one other.

Ultimately, the success of deconcentration depends largely on the degree of autonomy enjoyed by the entities to which responsibilities have been transferred. This autonomy can vary considerably along a continuum, with centrally concentrated decision-making power at one end and, at the other, independent decision-making powers granted to lower-level entities for different aspects of management (e.g., organization, resources, activities, external relations, etc.) (Aucoin and Bakvis, 1988). Front-line managers are very aware that they do not all have the same amount of influence with respect to these various aspects (Lonti, 2005).

The criteria used to frame choices concerning the appropriate degree of autonomy are unable to produce hard-and-fast or convergent prescriptions. However, according to Aucoin and Bakvis (1988), the following criteria should be taken into account: coordination and integration, uniformity and standardization, economies of scale, particularity and specialization, flexibility and responsiveness, and efficiency and effectiveness. In applying these criteria, consideration should be given to available technologies, especially those related to information and communications, and to the organizational culture and distinctive characteristics of each territory.

The implementation of any deconcentration process may meet with resistance from two main sources (Brown, 1986; Aucoin and Bakvis, 1988). The first is the central administration, in which various units may be reticent about losing control and public servants may feel anxious about losing the advantages of their location and professional mobility. The second is related to the workings of the political system, in which the principle of ministerial responsibility, coupled with direct relations between elected officials at various levels, encourage central government leaders to closely monitor all developments occurring across the territory. The media tend to reinforce this trend and thus to disregard local responsibilities.

Deconcentration is above all a process that is internal to each public administration. When it is implemented among several ministries at the same time and in a concerted fashion, the result may be a change in relations between the central government and its lower-level units as well as better-integrated public action. For Albertini (1997), this process involves a "shift from a type of deconcentration that is *granted* by a central administration, that is *sectoral* in scope and that is instrumental in *design* toward a kind of deconcentration that is *assumed* jointly by different levels of administration, that is *interministerial* in terms of content and that is *managerial* in terms of method or approach (pp. 2-3, our translation). This observation, which concerns the situation in France, could no doubt be applied to other contexts. For instance, the coordination of regional public action relies particularly on mechanisms for interministerial collaboration, such as Quebec's regional administrative conferences (*conférences administratives régionales*, or CARs). It also involves concerted action initiatives and the mobilization of regional actors. This in turn requires the aligning of deconcentrated entities with decentralized entities.

The importance given to the concept of political and territorial decentralization in society-wide debates, government policymaking and international agendas probably explains to some extent the lack of research focused on deconcentration in comparison with decentralization.

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