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**“DECENTRALISATION AND COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE: DEALING WITH THE
COVID- 19 CRISIS”**

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Link to paper: <https://www.lawetjusticia.com/volume1-issue1/decentralisation-and-collaborative-governance-dealing-with-the-covid-19-crisis>

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As the COVID- 19 crisis engulfs the whole world, with more than half of the world’s population experiencing lockdown measures, every country across the globe is trying its best to control the spread of the disease. While appreciating the bold and timely decision of Indian Government of enforcing a nationwide lockdown with utmost alacrity, holding the lockdown and trying to manage the economic crisis has been a particularly harrowing task for the Government.

From the perspective of controlling the epidemic, state governments have been on the frontline to ensure effective and systematic implementation of the policies by vigilating the movement of people, food, and funds. Kerala’s strict enforcement of the four-step protocol of test, trace, isolate and treat has been most effective in flattening the COVID curve. Odisha has implemented the principles of federalism and decentralisation in full stride and it has successfully formulated policies to resolve the local concerns by empowering the Panchayats and the Sarpanches by providing financial assistance. Though there have been some path-breaking decisions by a few states, India collectively as a nation has been forced to confront its own set of problems ranging from lack of funds for the states to zero preparation in management of displaced migrant workers. Most of the State’s are jostling with the Centre for funding and finances. States have been hindered by the lack of resources due to the federal setup of the government and the extremely centralised fiscal distribution system. This forces us to have a hard look at the system of Governance being followed in the nation. India being a Quasi- Federal Nation, the power is majorly centralised especially when it comes to finances. Also, resorting to the Disaster Management Act has further centralised the administration. The

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appropriate question to ask here would be “Can the Centre maintain control better than the States?”. The approach of unified Command- and- Control maybe was the need in the beginning of the crisis to get a general stability, however, there is now a need for decentralisation of powers.

As has been observed by Ms Yamini Aiyar, President and Chief Executive of the Centre for Policy Research, the impact of COVID-19 is extremely localised and clubbed with the varied health-care capacities of different states. A uniform central approach for each and every state cannot be expected to give an effective solution, rather a more agile and differential approach is required. The inability of the states to acquire funding without going through long drawn processes, which in turn affect the supply of essentials and medical instruments is a major challenge. Another drawback of the unified Command- and- Control approach is the utter lack of coordination between the Centre and the States. Lack of discussion and deliberations with mutually acceptable outcomes, have at many times left the states underprepared and thereby incapable of dealing with the crisis. One of the recent examples being the confusion and uncoordinated railway operation of the Shramik Special trains going to Maharashtra.

All the chaos caused in the recent past could have been avoided by some basic alterations in the administrative set-up. Decentralisation has become a siren song for handling any disaster or crisis as decentralisation and disaster risk management complement each other. Specifically, in the case of COVID crisis, the risk has manifested locally and requires grass-root level risk-capacity development which can only be achieved when decentralisation is made a norm and not an exception. In a study conducted by the UN on disaster risk reduction, it was recommended that in order to have effective risk governance, strengthening local level preparedness, clarifying the role of Local Self Governments, and encouraging vertical integration among communities is a must. There is no straight-jacket formula of determining what level of decentralisation will be effective, but a combination of centralisation and decentralisation might work in the Indian set-up. Both should not be taken as contradictory but should be considered a complementary process.

The Central Government has successfully set up an integrated and comprehensive national level management system which can be decentralised; however, a more collaborative approach will be required to consolidate vertical as well as horizontal interests. Keeping in line with this approach, the Centre of Policy and Research has come up with a call for setting up a National Empowered Emergency Disaster Council which will consist of all the Chief Ministers, Senior Central Ministers and Prime Minister. A setup like this would facilitate easier coordination

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between the different levels of the government and give way to a more collaborative governance. If structured and implemented properly, it can smoothen out most of the structural and administrative issues that the nation is facing right now.

A unified system of command and control gives a level of assurance to the National leaders of control and administrative efficiency. However, a disaster which is as widespread as a pandemic, requires that the administrator on the forefront have flexibility and freedom of operation. For this timely distribution of funds and allocation of essential resources are critical. The national command and control structure's role would primarily require liaising for import of essential commodities, maintain balance of the frail economy and taking foreign policy decisions to supplement the national effort towards fighting the pandemic. Once resources are available on the last end of the administrative ladder effective measures can be instituted sustainably to overcome the pandemic.

The COVID- 19 crisis has brought to front some deeply entrenched structural issues in the Indian federal set up. Maybe this is a wakeup call to move away from a quasi- federal setup to a more cooperative and collaborative federal system to make India a more resilient and efficient administrative state.