



The local government system in

Belize



Key facts

POPULATION (Census 2000): 240,204
AREA: 22,966 sq km
CAPITAL: Belmopan
LOCAL GOVERNMENT CONTRIBUTION TO GDP: 1.5-2%
CURRENCY: Belize dollar (BZD)
HEAD OF STATE: HM Queen Elizabeth II
GOVERNOR-GENERAL: Sir Colville Young
HEAD OF GOVERNMENT: Prime Minister Dean Barrow
FORM OF GOVERNMENT: constitutional monarchy
PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM: bicameral
STATE STRUCTURE: unitary
LANGUAGES: English (official), Kriol, Spanish, Garifuna, Maya, Plautdietsch (recognised)
NATIONAL ELECTIONS: last: 2008, turnout: 74.49%; next: 2013
LOCAL ELECTIONS: municipal: last: March 2009, turnout: 51.7%; next: 2012
village: last: April and May 2010, turnout: - next: 2013
alcaldes: Jan 2010, turnout: - next: 2010

SUMMARY

Belize is a unitary constitutional monarchy and bicameral parliamentary democracy with two levels of government: a state government and a single-tier local government. There is no constitutional provision for local government and the main governing acts are the Belize and Belmopan City Council Acts 1999, the Village Councils Act 1999 and the Inferior Courts Act 2003. The Ministry of Labour, Local Government and Rural Development is charged with overseeing the administration of three systems of local government in Belize. There are seven town and two city municipalities, 181 village councils, and 12 community councils. There are also 84 alcaldes (a legally constituted form of traditional governance predominantly practised among the indigenous communities of the Toledo district). As

well as receiving subvention from central government, both village and municipal councils can raise revenue from licence fees and fines for failing to comply with by-laws. Municipal councils also raise approximately one-third of their total revenue from property tax. Municipal and village councils' responsibilities include: maintaining streets and drains, sanitation and waste disposal, parks, markets and cemeteries. Rural councils ensure that sound environmental practices are adhered to by all persons within the village or community and have several other areas of responsibility.

1. CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

Belize is a constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy. The head of state is HM Queen Elizabeth II who is represented by a

governor-general of Belizean nationality. Belize's parliament comprises a House of Representatives and a Senate. The 31 members of the House of Representatives are directly elected by the first-past-the-post system. The governor-general appoints the leader of the majority party as prime minister following national elections and s/he heads a cabinet whose members are also appointed by the governor-general on the advice of the prime minister. Additionally the governor-general appoints the 13 members of the senate: six on the advice of the prime minister, three on the advice of the leader of the opposition and three as suggested by non-governmental organisations. Elections to the House of Representatives are held at least every five years and the president of the Senate is elected by the Senate members.



Table 1. Distribution of councils and population

District	Number of authorities			Population	% rura
	Town and city councils	Village and community councils	Alcaldes		
Belize	2 (inc. 1 city)	32	None	68,197	21.5
Cayo	3 (inc. 1 city)	36	None	52,564	49.6
Corozal	1	27	None	32,708	75.9
Orange Walk	1	24	None	38,890	65.3
Stann Creek	1	25	4	24,548	64.1
Toledo	1	49	80	23,297	81.4
TOTAL	9	193	84	240,204	52.3%
Largest population	Belize City	-	-	49,050	-
Smallest population	Punta Gorda-Toledo district	-	-	5,000	-

Source: Statistical Institute of Belize, Population: Belize Census 2000

2. LEGAL BASIS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

2.1 Constitutional provisions:

In August 2009, the government of Belize approved a national policy on local governance that recommends the inclusion of local government in the constitution.

2.2 Main legislative texts:

Acts governing local government include:

- Belize City Council Act 1999, repealing an earlier Belize City Council Act
- Belmopan City Council Act 1999, establishing from March 2000 the council for the capital city, previously administered by the Reconstruction and Development Corporation
- Town Councils Act 1999, repealing the earlier Local Government (District Board) Act
- Village Councils Act 1999, defining the role and powers of village and community councils
- Inferior Courts Act (Part VIII) (2000-2003), defining the role and powers of alcaldes.

3. STRUCTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

3.1 Local government within the state:

Belize has two levels of government: central government (including the districts) and a single-tier local government.

3.2 Ministerial oversight:

The Ministry of Labour, Local Government and Rural Development has responsibility for overseeing the administration of the three systems of local government in Belize, namely: municipal, village and alcalde systems. The Department of Local Government has a Head of Department with direct responsibility for municipalities, while the Department of Rural Development is headed by a National Coordinator of Rural Development with responsibility for villages and communities. Specific responsibilities of the ministry include:

- The provision of legislative and regulatory oversight to the local government sector
- The provision of administrative and legal advice
- The promotion and coordination of interaction between the public, private and NGO sectors
- Providing support to programming and budgeting through financial and technical assistance
- Monitoring and evaluating progress on activities within the sector.

The national policy on local governance in Belize which was approved by the central government in August 2009 is providing guidance and direction for the systems and practices of local governance. The aim is to ensure greater equity, efficiency, effectiveness and transparency in the delivery of local government services to people in rural and urban communities. Current initiatives under the policy, in partnership with the UNDP and IBRD (World Bank), include enshrining local government in the constitution of Belize and the revision of all local government legislation with the aim of providing greater clarity to the roles, responsibilities, powers and rights of local government. The formal demarcation of boundary lines for all municipalities and villages across the country is also being implemented under this policy as are capacity-building programmes for municipalities and village leaders.

3.3 Council types:

There are four types of council in Belize: city councils, town councils, village councils and community councils. The two city councils – Belize and Belmopan – plus the seven town councils cover the urban population in the six administrative districts of the country. The 181 village, and 12 community, councils represent the rural population across the districts. In the district of Toledo and other parts of south Belize,

there is an alcalde system that operates alongside village councils.

3.3.1 City and town councils are responsible for the management of urban municipalities in accordance with their respective Acts. The councils are required to meet on a monthly basis under the leadership of an elected mayor. Mayors (other than in Belize City) have an executive role and are designated as the chief executive officer of the council. All councils must elect a deputy mayor from amongst the councillors. The mayor, after consultation with the councillors and the city (or town) administrator, allocates portfolios of responsibility to other councillors. Working committees can be set up to assist with some portfolios. Portfolios cover a broad range of issues including environmental protection, town zoning, tourism and recreational planning.

3.3.2 Village councils: These began in the 1950s and were formalised by the Village Councils Act 1999 which legalised their role and authority to administer village affairs. Villages are declared by ministerial order and one qualification for village status is a minimum of 200 voters. The council is required to meet at least once every quarter and has discretionary powers to appoint committees. Decisions of village committees will be subject to the approval of their council.

3.3.3 Community councils: Any area not included in a city, town or village can be declared a community and recognised by ministerial order. The community must then set up a community council that works in the same way as village councils.

3.3.4 The alcalde system is named after the alcalde, or local magistrate, operating at the village and community level and is practised in the southernmost parts of the country by the indigenous peoples of Belize. This system is administered through the Inferior Courts in accordance with Chapter 77 of the laws of Belize and implemented by the serving alcalde and the deputy alcalde with the assistance of five voluntary village police officers. An alcalde differs significantly from a village chairperson in that the alcalde has a judicial role. As a village or community leader, s/he has the authority to decide who lives in the village, and can also call for a communal cleaning (fajina) of the village. While it is mainly Mayan communities, including the Mopan and Ketchi groups in southern Belize, who practise this form of local governance, the alcalde jurisdiction is not limited to Mayas. Any rural community can adopt the alcalde system as long as the citizens request the relevant authority to implement it. The Inferior Court



headed by the alcalde is charged mainly with maintaining law and order and is authorised to hear and pass judgement on petty crimes committed within its jurisdiction.

4. ELECTIONS

4.1 Recent local elections:

The latest local government elections were held as follows: March 2009 for municipal councils, April and May 2010 for village councils, and January 2010 for alcaldes.

4.2 Voting system:

Local government elections are conducted using the first-past-the-post system. Municipal elections are held every three years with councillors elected by majority vote and mayors elected directly in a separate mayoral election. Village council elections are also held every three years, with the chairperson elected in a separate vote alongside six other councillors. Recommendations for alcalde are usually, though not necessarily, the result of elections at local meetings, and the appointment by the government is for two years.

4.3 Elected representatives:

Belize City Council is comprised of a mayor and ten councillors, while the City of Belmopan and the towns have a mayor and six councillors. All councils must elect a deputy mayor from among the elected councillors.

4.4 Women's representation:

The National Women's Commission of Belize, set up in 1982 as an advisory body on women's issues, made recommendations in 2001 for improving women's access to political leadership and increasing women's participation in politics. The government is promoting the participation of women in local government elections and local government associations with the goal of achieving parity with men in positions of leadership. In the alcalde system, women are traditionally excluded from voting in the elections and in meetings. The Political Reform Commission, while not condoning this, has recommended that any change to this practice should be made by villagers themselves.

5. SYSTEMS FOR COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

5.1 Legal requirement:

All city and town councils are legally mandated to conduct public meetings at least once a month. For village councils, all meetings are open to the public unless directed otherwise by the chairperson. The National Association of Village Councils (NAVCO) along with its district-level counterparts is legally empowered to consult with

village councils and villagers on matters concerning their welfare.

5.2 Implementation:

The national policy on local governance mandates the ministry to hold regular consultations with all local government entities, civil society organisations and interest groups. This is conducted through the Local Government Monitoring Council which is spearheaded by the director of local government and includes membership from public, private and civil society organisations.

5.3 E-government:

There is no e-government strategy.

6. ORGANISED LOCAL GOVERNMENT

There are three levels of organised country-wide associations of local government:

6.1 Mayors' Association of Belize (MAB):

Mayors' Association of Belize (MAB) represents the mayors of all the city and town councils. Membership is voluntary and is funded by contributions made from council funds and by the ministry. The association is a forum to discuss issues of common interest and to promote dialogue with central government.

6.2 Village council associations:

Under the Village Council Act 1999, village councils are required to have a district association of village councils (DAVCO) in each of Belize's six districts. Together they form the National Association of Village Councils (NAVCO). The composition and conduct of the association is governed by ministerial order. The association is funded by contributions from each district association's funds and subventions from the government.

6.3 The Toledo Alcalde Association (TAA):

The Toledo Alcalde Association (TAA) was established in 1992 with the objective of promoting the alcalde system and for addressing issues of concern to members. The national policy on local governance in Belize has adopted a resolution that the government should legitimise the alcalde system. The Ministry of Local Government has since developed a draft Bill and consultation is ongoing with the TAA.

7. INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS

The chief executive officers of each government ministry are responsible for working with local government on areas of mutual concern.

8. MONITORING SYSTEMS

The chief executive officer in the Ministry of Local Government holds the title of Accounting Officer with general oversight for the accounting systems. S/he is accountable to the Public Accounts Committee of the House of Representatives. In one city council, a financial controller to provide financial oversight and give advice has been appointed.

Through the Office of the Auditor General, auditors scrutinise the financial affairs of both municipal and village/community councils. There is a unit within this office dedicated to the auditing of all the 195 villages and communities.

The Office of the Ombudsman was created in 1994 to investigate complaints against government bodies, individuals and elected officials.

9. FINANCE, STAFFING AND RESOURCES

9.1 Locally raised revenue:

Village councils receive revenue from licence fees for various activities including trade and from fines from non-compliance with by-laws. They can also fundraise for specific projects. Municipal councils similarly receive funds from licences and penalties, as well as a significant proportion from property taxes, which accounted for approximately one-third of all municipal revenue in 2007/2008 (see Table 2).

9.2 Transfers:

On average, central government provides municipalities with around B\$33 per annum per municipal resident since the fiscal year 2004/2005, but this average is not evenly distributed across municipalities. The subvention received by each municipality has been relatively stable on a per capita basis, with the exception of Belmopan and San Pedro where it has declined consistently, reflecting the substantial population growth in these municipalities.

9.3 Local authority staff:

City and town councils must appoint a city or town administrator to assist the mayor in the day-to-day management of the council. In Belize City, this administrator is the chief executive officer. All councils may appoint staff and have the power to discipline and dismiss staff and to determine pay and conditions. Village councils can appoint support staff for the efficient administration of village affairs and determine their duties and pay. Salaries of elected representatives and officials of local government are the responsibility of the municipalities.

10. DISTRIBUTION OF SERVICE DELIVERY RESPONSIBILITY

Councils have a statutory duty to provide 'rules and good governance' for their local areas and to provide certain basic services.



Table 2. Aggregate revenue and expenditure for municipal governments 2007/2008

Revenue in Belize dollars 2007/2008		Expenditure in Belize dollars	
Government transfer (total)	11,743,222	Admin and operational total	4,215,724
Grants/capital contribution	7,443,396	Salaries total	2,907,473
Subvention	4,299,826	Administration	1,282,709
Local tax (total)	14,995,191	Maintenance	256,542
Liquor fee	722,660		
Property tax	12,104,552	Infrastructure	n/a
Trade fee	2,167,979	Capital expenditure	n/a
Traffic fee	n/a		
Charges for services (total)		Service delivery (total)	3,933,640
Miscellaneous/other	9,394,578	Miscellaneous/other	171,028
TOTAL	36,132,991	TOTAL	8,551,391*

* excludes capital and infrastructure expenditure

10.1 Town and city councils:

Town and city councils' responsibilities include street maintenance, drains, refuse collection and the maintenance of public parks, markets and cemeteries. All urban councils must set up a utility coordination unit to coordinate the activities of the bodies providing electricity, water and sewerage, gas, telephone and other utility services.

10.2 Village/community councils:

Village/community councils similarly have responsibility for the maintenance of streets, drains and the sanitation of the village, and the maintenance of public parks, markets and cemeteries. They are tasked with encouraging and assisting cooperation on economic and social development and general welfare. They run community centres, and assist village people in making representations to government when there are problems with certain centrally administered services like school supplies, primary healthcare and the provision of agricultural extension services. They must also ensure that sound environmental practices are adhered to by all persons within the village.

References and useful websites

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www.statisticsbelize.org.bz
Belize Census 2000
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3. IMF statistics www.imf.org/external/data.htm
4. Local Government and Rural Development
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5. Belize national government www.belize.gov.bz
6. Belize local government website
www.belize.gov.bz/ct.asp?xItem=705&ctNode=568&mp=27
7. National Association of Village Councils
www.navco.org.bz
8. UNDP Human Development Report 2010
<http://hdr.undp.org>
9. Town Council Act
www.belizelaw.org/lawadmin/PDF%20files/ca%20p087.pdf
10. Belize City Council Act
www.belizelaw.org/lawadmin/PDF%20files/ca%20p085.pdf



Annex A. Summary of service provision in different spheres of government

Service	Delivering authority			Remarks	
	National Government	City/Town Councils	Village & Community		
GENERAL ADMINISTRATION					
Police	■				
Fire protection	■				
Civil protection	■				
Criminal justice	■				
Civil justice	■				
Civil status register	■				
Statistical office	■				
Electoral register	■				
EDUCATION					
Pre-school	■				
Primary	■				
Secondary	■				
Vocational and technical	■				
Higher education	■				
Adult education	■				
SOCIAL WELFARE					
Kindergarten and nursery	■				
Family welfare services	■		■	Village councils assist in general welfare.	
Welfare homes	■				
Social security	■				
PUBLIC HEALTH					
Primary care	■				
Hospitals	■				
Health Protection	■				
HOUSING AND TOWN PLANNING					
Housing	■				
Town planning	■	■			
Agriculture Land planning	■				
TRANSPORT					
Roads	■				
Transport	■				
Urban roads	■	■		Urban public transport and urban roads are managed by the city/town Councils.	
Urban Public Transport	■				
Ports	■				
Airports	■				
ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC SANITATION					
Water and sanitation			■		
Refuse collection and disposal		■	■		
Street management		■			
Cemeteries and crematoria		■			
Environmental protection	■				
Consumer protection	■				
Other environmental services		■	■		
CULTURE, LEISURE AND SPORTS					
Theatre and concerts				Theatre and concerts are managed by the national government. Museums and libraries are managed by the national government.	
Museums and libraries		■	■		
Parks and open spaces		■	■		
Sports and leisure	■				
Religious facilities					
Other cultural facilities	■	■	■		
UTILITIES					
Gas services					Utilities, including water, provided by statutory corporations.
District heating					
Water supply			■		
Electricity					
ECONOMIC					
Agriculture, forests and fisheries	■				
Economic promotion	■				
Trade and industry	■				
Tourism	■				
Other	■				

■ = Discretionary service by the local authority