

Evolution of Local Governance in Uganda and its Implications for Policy and Practice

<https://doi.org/10.36369/2616-9045/2024/v13i2a2>

Online ISSN: 2616-9045.Print ISSN: 2218-5615

STELLA KYOHAIWE

Uganda Management Institute

skyohairwe@umi.ac.ug

GERALD KARYEJJA

Uganda Management Institute

gkaryeija@umi.ac.ug

ALEX NDUHURA

Uganda Management Institute

anduhura@umi.ac.ug

Abstract

Uganda's local governance has evolved significantly since colonial times, gaining prominence in the 1990s through a decentralisation policy encompassing political, administrative, and fiscal devolution. While the policy initially brought numerous benefits, it has also faced challenges, leading to the retraction of some devolved administrative and fiscal functions. A review of narrative and systematic literature on Uganda's local government system reveals that effective devolution requires fiscal empowerment of local governments to enable meaningful planning and budgeting alongside clear frameworks delineating the roles of central and local governments. It also emphasises the importance of intensified community engagement over the continuous creation of new structures, fostering public confidence in governance systems and actors, and leveraging partnerships, stakeholder involvement, and innovative approaches to address complex societal challenges. The study recommends a paradigm shift from focusing on the numerical proliferation of local governments to empowering communities, confronting grassroots challenges, digitising local governance systems, and regenerating and rebranding local government institutions to enhance their relevance and effectiveness in policy and practice.

Keywords: Decentralisation, Local governance, Local administration, Administrative structures, Uganda



Introduction

Local governments play an important role in society. In public management and governance, local governance has been one of the most fascinating philosophies over the last four (04) decades. According to Smoke (2001) while subnational (local) governance has existed for some time in OECD countries, in developing countries, this new form of governance became more prominent in the 1990s.

The colonial and immediate post-colonial administrative experiences in Africa present highly centralised government systems following Max Weber's and his followers' bureaucratic ideologies. Max Weber's ideology placed much of national development initiatives and services including trade, industrialisation, and infrastructure development as responsibilities of a central government (Weber, 2023). Sometimes though, in centralised systems a few regional administrative units or other subnational administrative agents are permitted to execute limited central government functions and responsibilities.

With expansive population and increasing social service demands, declining economies and fiscal pressures, overtime, manifestations of massive public sector deficits, external trade imbalances and growing indebtedness as well as ineffectiveness and inefficiencies of delivering public services prompted the need for reforms in 1980s. These factors, reinforced by ideological underpinnings of new right politics and the wave of New Public Management ideas prompted public sector reforms (Pollitt 1990; Hood, 1991; Osborne, & Gaebler, 1992; Denhardt & Denhardt 2000). The subsequent Structural Adjustment programs (SAPS) in 1980s instituted measures to limit government controls and decrease its administrative scope by "rolling back the state". Economic measures to avert unrealistic government expenditure on social programs such as education, health and housing, massive layoffs of excess employees through retrenchment and restructuring, abolishing food agricultural subsidies, promoting cash crops, liberalisation of trade, devaluation of currency and privatisation of government-held enterprises were undertaken. Furthermore, administrative measures were introduced to reinforce economic strategies to improve efficiency, effectiveness, professionalism, representativeness, and democracy in civil service. These measures resulted into key reforms including private sector development, restructuring & downsizing, decentralisation, privatisation, contracting out, commercialisation, agencification, and liquidation of non-functioning public enterprises. The decentralisation and local governance systems, though implemented with variations in different countries, present some remarkable outcomes of these reforms.

This study explores the state of local administration before and after administrative reforms in Uganda. It aims at documenting the developments within the local government system. The narrative trend analysis is meant to assess enabling factors for effective decentralisation from a Uganda country context based on Rondinelli's (1986) theoretical framework to offer lessons for other decentralised systems.



Literature Review

Local government (LG) signifies the geographical stratification of administrative units under the principles of decentralisation. The mandate of local government administrative units in form of provinces cities, municipalities, districts and towns is to deliver public services such as education, health to the people at the grassroots. Under the guise of decentralisation, LGs should possess political, administrative and fiscal autonomy (Smoke, 2001; Schneider & Cottineau, 2019; Arcidiacono & Torrisi, 2022). Local government aims to deliver equity gains for those served at the centre and grassroots.

Decentralisation is conceived to comprise of three dimensions: political, administrative, and fiscal decentralisation and other literature sources include a fourth dimension of economic/market decentralisation. (Rondinelli, Nellis & Cheema, 1983; Smoke, 2001; Faguet, 2014). These forms characterise Uganda's decentralisation system in which political representation and legislative powers, administrative planning and policy execution powers, as well as judicial powers through political local councils' courts are exercised. There are economic powers for managing local finances and other resources in partnership with other state or non-state actors or through practices of the liberal economy (Ministry of Local Government, 2014). These forms and their characteristics are summarised in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Decentralisation Forms and Content

Form	Central Level Content	Local Level Content
Political Decentralization	Creating Structures and procedures for increasing citizens' participation	Elected representatives/political participation Multiple LG structures Legal powers for law initiation and enforcement Decision making Political accountability Empowering citizens to manage their affairs – build governance capacity
Administrative decentralization	<i>Deconcentration</i> of central government structures and bureaucracies <i>Delegation</i> of central government authority & responsibility <i>Devolution</i> of authority for decision-making, finances, and management to local government	Administrative structures and defined bureaucracies Managing own Human Resources – Separate, Unified, and integrated systems Obtaining Managing own assets Planning, Budgeting & public policy execution Monitoring, evaluation & reporting Administrative accountability – performance in service delivery Authority to make investment decisions
Fiscal Decentralization	Means and mechanisms for sharing revenues among different levels of government Central transfers adequacy & timeliness	LG Budget decision-making powers Determine Local revenue sources, find revenue mobilization strategies and make expenditure plans Financial accountability - accounting structures, and mechanisms
Economic/Market Decentralization	Liberalization, deregulation, privatization & partnerships - opening power for other players	Involvement of other institutional actors under local regulatory framework Co-production with Private organisations, NGOs, and communities Competition with other actors/players

Source: Olowu (2001); Cheema & Rondinelli (2007); Ryan & Woods (2015); OECD (2019)



Objectifying Decentralisation Reform

Decentralisation consists of measures that transfer a range of powers, authority, responsibilities, and resources from central government to subnational governments to shape public policy (Cheema & Rondinelli 2007). The transfer of administrative authority and responsibility for public functions extends to “quasi-independent government organisations and/or the private sector” as well (Halaskova and Halaskova, 2014).

The relevance of local governance in classical theories of John Stuart Mill 1911 and Hills 1974 maintain that local political institutions offer wide opportunities to participate and provide capacity to educate the citizens in the practice of politics and governance. Jones and Stewart (1985) consider local self-governance as essential for achieving efficient and effective services because of the local interests, knowledge and capacity to oversee the service delivery. There are higher probabilities to ensure a match between resources and diverse local needs, and that the closeness of the local authorities to citizens opens them to public pressure and limits the concentration of power. There is a possibility of cooperation for purposes of representation and social reform; relative autonomy of the locals with multipurpose institutions capable of providing a range of services, revenue collection and electoral accountability Local institutions and structures the districts, and counties are major vehicles for citizens’ participation in public affairs which strengthens democracy (Kjellberg 1995; King and Stoker 1996).

In other perspectives, decentralisation arise because central government offers services with poor outputs. The central government – the state – has been responsible for basic services such as health, education, water and sanitation, and that these services are increasingly failing especially regarding the poor people. The macroeconomic level analyses show a weak relationship between public spending and intended outcomes. For instance, health expenditures has no significant association with reductions in infant mortality; and education disbursements have weak relationship with primary school completion rates. The quality of these services is often extremely poor or the services are of limited magnitude, covering far less a population size than expected. While many reasons account for this anomaly, one significant argument is that the money does not often reach the frontline service provider (Ahmed, Brosio & Gonzalez, 2006).

Other theorists believe that the current networked context of local government no longer supports the traditional nature of bureaucratic administration and that basic services are consumed locally but they continue to be provided by central governments. The problems of service delivery are therefore associated with ills of bureaucratic governance including red-tape arising out of strict adherence to rules and procedures and from administrative hierarchy. There is a wastage of human and material resources arising from duplication of offices at different levels and government units (Ahmed, Brosio, & Gonzalez, 2006; Olsen, 2007; Scot, 2021). With the complex nature of a networked and more multiple government structures today, citizens at the grassroots have overtime gained capacities of managing their own affairs, are aware of their rights, and are relatively well informed through



modern communication technologies. Governance expertise is no longer a monopoly of the central government officials. At the same time, multi-stakeholding and power struggles amongst different groups of people in the process of multilevel governance is a source of conflicts over performance, mandates and normative standards. These are administrative dynamics justifying the de-bureaucratisation and the introduction of the post-bureaucratic reforms from 1980s to date.

Enablers of effective Decentralisation

Previous studies identify and document several factors are known to be accounting for the success or failure of any of the above decentralisation approaches. This article chooses to focus on the thoughts of two literature sources, one by Rondinelli, Nellis & Cheema (1983) and the other on Dennis Rondinelli (1986) framework. Rondinelli, Nellis & Cheema (1983) suggested four broad categories of these key factors. First is the degree to which central political leaders and bureaucracies support decentralisation and the organisations to which responsibilities are transferred. This factor stresses the commitment to decentralising planning and administrative functions, the ability and willingness of the national bureaucracy to facilitate and support decentralised development activities, and the capacity of field officials of national agencies and departments to coordinate their activities at the local level. The second factor entails the degree to which the dominant behaviour, attitudes, and culture are conducive to decentralised decision-making and administration. Key concerns relate to the willingness of local officials to support and perform decentralised management functions, the quality of local leadership, the attitudes of rural people toward government, and the degree to which traditional customs and behaviour are compatible with decentralised procedures for planning, decision-making, and management. Thirdly is the degree to which policies and programs are appropriately designed and organised to promote decentralised decision-making and management. Related key variables include clarity and simplicity of the structures and procedures used to decentralise, the ability of the implementing agency staff to interact with higher level authorities, and the degree to which components of decentralised programs are integrated greatly impact the outcomes of decentralisation efforts. Lastly, is the degree to which adequate financial, human, and physical resources are made available to the organisations to which responsibilities are transferred. This poses challenge associated with failure of the central authorities to transfer financial, administrative, and technical resources to local agencies for several reasons which ultimately negatively affect local governments performance.

In the second theoretical framework, Dennis Rondinelli (1986) proposes a modified typology for the factors determining the successful implementation of decentralised service delivery programs. These are categorised as: a) Political and Administrative conditions, b) Organisational conditions, c) Behavioural and Psychological conditions and d) resource conditions. Rondinelli, under political and administrative conditions, considers a need for strong political commitment as well as the support from national leaders to



transfer authority and responsibility; the necessity for politicians and administrators to accept other actors outside direct control of in planning and management; and the need of a strong administration and technical capacity within central government to support and guide decentralised service delivery. He also calls for effective channels for political participation or representation of interested publics, clientele groups and intended beneficiaries.

Rondinelli also stresses the vitality of favourable organisational conditions that include appropriate allocation of functions between the centre and decentralised units; concise decentralisation laws and regulations and directives allocating distinct functions. He argues for flexibility to reallocation of functions in case of changes in resources and capabilities of decentralised units; simplified planning and management procedures for decentralised participation in service delivery; strong communication linkages between the centre and local governments; and the existence of diverse supporting institutions at the local level for effecting decentralised functions.

On Behavioural and psychological conditions, Rondinelli calls for the need to changes in the attitudes of central officials from control-oriented and paternalistic approaches to more facilitative, supportive, and interactive behaviour. He emphasises that there should be effective means of overcoming resistance and efforts to elicit support from local elites and traditional leaders for service delivery. He underlines the relevancy of creating a minimum level of trust and respect between government official and citizens in planning and managing service delivery programs and also observes the importance of creating and maintaining a strong local administration leadership and non- governmental organisations to sustain service delivery.

Lastly, Rondinelli accentuates the resource allocation factors that include a transfer of sufficient financial resources or authority to raise revenues to the decentralised units; training and other related programs for developing human resources capabilities in decentralised units; and having adequate physical infrastructure at local level for effective service delivery.

Methodology

The study is undertaken through narrative and systematic literature reviews of the developments in the local government system in Uganda. Information is obtained through a detailed appraisal of online information by ministries and government agencies, different studies, reports, and government legal and policy frameworks. The study adopts historical design in which the past and present local administration events and evidence are obtained from secondary sources and presented. The narrative approach in the literature review is intended to explain past events and provide context for the present local government in Uganda. Official records, government reports, and policies are the key reference documents used in this article. This literature review establishes decentralisation and local



governance trends, processes, structures, and challenges. Existing theories help in assessing Uganda's local government performance to date and are the foundations for the suggested improvements

Findings

Decentralisation and Local governance system in Uganda

The present Ugandan Local government system has a long history with legal framework and policy frameworks guiding local administration practice traceable from the colonial administration. However, a more extensive decentralisation and local government system in Uganda is witnessed from early 1990s after the coming into power of National Resistance Movement (NRM) regime that coincided with the developing countries administrative reforms in the public sector. The specific objectives for adopting a decentralisation form of governance were: i) Transfer real power to Local Governments and thus reduce the workload of remote under-resources central officials ; ii) Bring political and administrative control over services to the point where they are actually delivered, and thereby improve accountability and effectiveness, and promote people's feeling of "ownership" of programmes and projects executed in their local governments; iii) Free local managers from central government constraints and enable them to develop effective and sustainable organisational structures that are tailored to local circumstances; iv) Improve financial accountability and responsibility by establishing a clear link between payment of taxes and provision of services; v) Improve the capacity of local authorities to plan, finance and manage the delivery of service; and vi) Promote local economic development in order to enhance people's incomes . (Ministry of Local Government, 2006; Ministry of Local Government, 2014)

A summary of historical development and legal frameworks summarised in Four (4) major **phases** below.

Phase 1: The Pre-independence and independence era (1955-1964)

This phase consisted a number of legal and policy frameworks that guided the administrative processes. These included: District Administration Ordinance 1955, Local Administrations (Amendment) Ordinance 1959, 1962 constitution and the Local Administration Ordinance 1962.

The District Administration Ordinance made an attempt to create a strong local administration by devolving some powers to local authorities giving them significant responsibility over service delivery and allowing them latitude to elect district council members and collection of local revenue. However, the central government retained power over borrowing and expenditures. The technical personnel also remained reporting to the central line managers.



With coming into force of the Local Administrations (Amendment) Ordinance 1959, Colonial Governors were given power to appoint chairmen and members of the appointment board. Subsequently there was 1962 Constitution, that created local administration system which was demarcated into 4 provinces: region, Central /Buganda Region; Western region (Ankole, Toro, and Bunyoro); Eastern/ Busoga region; and Northern region. Below the provinces were District, county, subcounty, Parish and village administrative units. The Local Administration Ordinance 1962 was also enacted and this granted significant powers to local councils' composition for tax collection, land administration, local roads maintenance, rural water supplies, agriculture extension, primary and junior secondary education, dispensaries and preventive health services. The shortcoming with the provincial governance system was that it created variations in their relationship with the central government where by the central region had a federal status and exclusive powers over customary and traditional matters. Other challenges were that Western and Eastern region also had quasi-federal status and regulated powers for local services provision based on agreement with central government while in the Northern region & other areas, functions were centrally determined.

Phase 2: Post-Independence era & Re-centralisation of local administration 1964-1987

This phase was governed by a number of frameworks including the Urban Authorities Act 1964 and the Local Administration Act 1967. From 1964-1971, most of the local functions were recentralised. The legal frameworks gave the minister responsible for Local Governments extensive powers over local administration including determining a number of local councils, approval of local elections and bylaws and dissolving councils. The authority of centrally appointed District Commissioners for planning, financial matters, and maintenance of laws and order was increased.

From 1971-1978 (the President Idi Amin regime), Decree ruled the country and it was divided into ten provinces which were directly ruled by military governors. The provinces encompassed the existing local council tiers of the district, county, sub-county, parish and village councils. The provinces were later abolished in 1979, reverting to provisions of the Urban Authorities Act of 1964 and Local Administration Act of 1967 until the coming of power of the National Resistance Army in 1986.

Phase 3: Extensive decentralisation and local government system (1987-1997)

Local Administration structures and processes during this period were guided by four (4) crucial frameworks that included The Resistance Councils and Committees Statute of 1987, the Resistance Councils Statute of 1993, The 1995 Constitution, and The Local Governments Act, 1997.

The 1993 statute devolved powers to local governments to promote democracy and improve service provision; Provided for principle of non-subordination to promote autonomy of lower local governments from higher local governments; and laid a foundation for decentralisation policy. The 1995 Constitution restored local governments

powers to manage resources and participation of citizens. Article 11 devolved the Local Government's powers and functions; Article 194 provided for Local Government Finance Commission (LGFC) to advise the President on distribution of revenues between Central and Local governments, between local governments, on central government grants and local government revenue sources. The Local Governments Act 1997 [amended from time to time] consolidated the decentralisation policy. It provided for distinct roles of central & local governments [Schedule 2]; provided for Affirmative Action of marginalised groups – including women, youths, disabled, and elderly; and specified local governments fiscal transfers – conditional, unconditional and equalisation grants. The Act grants local governments powers to raise funds from local sources and the sharing of local revenue among local governments.

Phase 4: Implementing, consolidating and deepening decentralisation (2006 - to date)

This period is largely guided by the Decentralization Policy Strategic Framework (DPSF) 2006 and Local Government Sector Investment Plan (LGSIP). The frameworks aimed at facilitating more effective policy implementation DPSF provides a comprehensive and coordinated approach to implementing decentralisation. They are meant to reinforce interlinkages between Ministry of Local Government and other key actors including Local Government Finance Commission, Local Government Associations, Government agencies, Local Government partners, NGOs, and CBOs. LGSIP describes in detail the totality of what it takes to implement decentralisation policy (Ministry of Local Government 2006).

Within this phase, the government made the Local Economic Development (LED) Policy (Government of Uganda, 2014) that aimed at: i) increasing business support by encouraging local investment centers; ii) Enhancing growth of the private sector investment in local governments; and iii) Increasing locally generated revenue through direct taxes and local governments own revenue generating ventures. The LED policy emphasised partnerships between local governments, the private sector and the community in developing the localities collectively through identification, mobilisation, management and initialisation of local resources. The policy, however, lacked a clear local strategic framework for implementation, resulting in multiple interpretations and variations in the implemented activities. Also, there was poor mobilisation of all stakeholders for meaningful engagement to achieve expected policy outcomes (Government of Uganda, 2014; World Bank Group, 2016).

Several government initiatives to improve local economy have been implemented over the last two decades with limited impact though. Such programs include *Entandikwa scheme* of 1995—a credit fund to reduce poverty and facilitate the small scale entrepreneurs; *Bona Bagagawale* (“Wealth/prosperity for all”) of 2006, through a Micro finance support to micro-projects); and *Operation Wealth Creation* of 2013 - an intervention to facilitate transformation of subsistence farmers to commercial farmers through community mobilisation, agriculture input distribution, plus promotion of technological and enterprise



development. These poverty eradication and wealth creation initiatives were inaugurated under the decentralised system aimed at improving the well-being of rural communities, enhancing food security, and increasing farmers' incomes. The bigger beneficiary target was marginalised people, particularly the women, youth and people with disabilities.

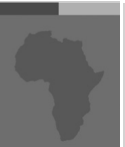
To consolidate and deepen decentralisation further, a Parish Development Model (PDM) initiative was inaugurated in 2022. PDM is a program for deepening decentralisation and citizen participation in local economic development. It is a multi-sectoral approach to create socio-economic transformation of the 39% of Ugandan subsistence households into the money economy, based on the parish/ ward as the epi-centre for development. Initial target is to inject Uganda shillings 100m (25,000USD) to each parish countrywide. PDM takes a Whole-of-Government Approach (WGA) in ensuring coordinated service delivery at the grassroots level- based on 7 pillars - Production, Storage, Processing and Marketing; Infrastructure and Economic Services; Financial Inclusion; Social Services; Mindset change and crosscutting issues; Parish Based Management Information System; and Governance and Administration. PDM therefore adopts the theoretical assumptions of Whole-of-Government Approach which normally comes in form of the joint activities performed by diverse ministries, public administrations and public agencies in order to provide a common solution to particular problems or issues, and involve some form of cross-boundary work and restructuring (Peters, 1998, Ministry of Local Government 2021, UN 2012).

The PDM is meant to: a) provide incentives and support to smallholder farmers to use their land more productively to boost household incomes. b) strengthen, coordinate, monitor, and report on Government programs; c) promote Local Economic Development by guiding and supporting beneficiaries at the village level on economic activities to undertake through extension services; d) increase community/citizen participation in development (planning, monitoring & implementation) and socio-economic activities; and e) promote mindset, change in the community; f) establish common user equipment and infrastructure for production and value addition; g) Sustainably manage the environment and natural resources and enforce compliance by local leadership.; and h) Scale-up innovative extension models such as nucleus farmers. In its infancy, PDM is faced with some implementation contestations including: lack of clear legal and policy frameworks to guide implementation during initial stages; multi-stakeholder coordination; inadequate infrastructure to support local initiatives, inadequate funding, corruption, jumbled implementation structures, inadequate capacity of beneficiaries, and limited markets. The close monitoring and evaluation of the progress of PDM activities is expected to provide lesson for improvement.

Decentralisation Dividends

- ***Political decentralisation and local government structures***

The highlights on the institutional frameworks above and the key reforms introduced subsequently in local governments clearly indicate devolution as a mode for



decentralisation policy in Uganda. The entire process entailed the creation of political units at local level and substantially transferring decision-making, financial and managerial authority as well as apportioning mandates, powers and responsibilities to these quasi-autonomous units that include the districts, Municipal Councils, Municipal Divisions, Town Councils and Sub-counties that have corporate status. It also created administrative units as centres of administrative coordination. Administrative devolution enabled creation of a local government system with clear structures and devolved political powers and functions. The emerging local government structure is illustrated in Figure 1 below:

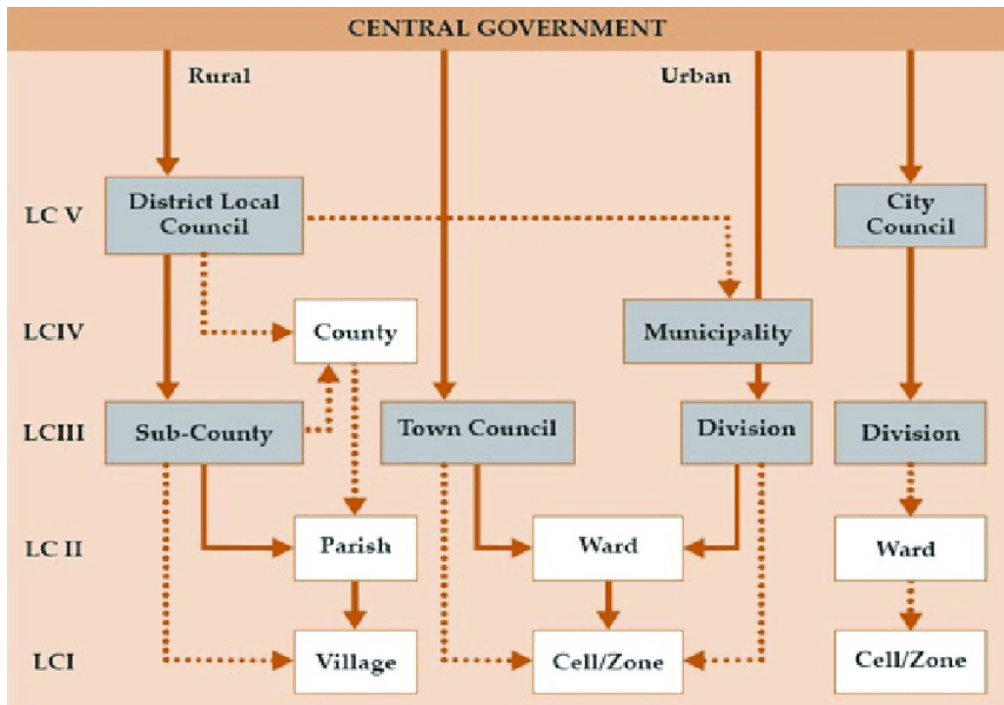


Figure 1: Local governments structure in Uganda . Adopted from Muguzi & Kafuuma (2020)

Note: The white shades denote Administrative Units (AU) while the grey shades denote Local Governments (LG)

The Local Council system has 5 levels as presented in Figure 1 above. Uganda’s political decentralisation enabled creation of a complex local government distinctive structures comprising of: Rural councils and Urban councils; Local governments and Administrative Units; Higher Local Governments (district, city, municipal councils) and Lower Local Governments (city divisions, municipal division, town councils and sub-counties). Within the local governments, there are also Administrative Units comprising of Wards and Cells/Zones/Villages whose main function is to assist local governments in administration of areas under their jurisdictions.



The numerical gains of political decentralisation have been well-registered overtime in form of increase in numbers for local governments councils. For instance, a district council that has been a major unit of post -independence administrative structure in Uganda has witnessed numerical increase from 39 districts in 1990 to 135 in 2023 (Singiza & Visser 2011, Government of Uganda, 2006). The urban councils have equally increased in numbers as indicated in a snapshot of the local government councils in Uganda in the last 3 decades in table 2 below:

Table 2: Summary of Local Councils' Statistics in the last 30 years

Rural LG	Number		Urban LG	Number	
	1990's	2023		1990's	2023
Districts	39	135	Capital city	1	1
Counties		312	Cities	1	10
Sub counties	900	1496	City divisions	4	25
Parishes*	5225	10,717	Municipalities	13	31
Villages/cells*	44402	70,626	Municipal Divisions	-	89
			Town councils	88	580

Villages/cells as well as Parishes/Wards for urban and rural councils are combined in the statistics of reference. **Sources: Decentralisation policy strategic framework (Government of Uganda, 2006); The Electoral Commission, (2022)

- **Local government political leadership**

With decentralisation, each local government has a council of elected members with an executive committee, and a Chairperson for district/Subcounty council or a Mayor for City Council, Municipal council, City division, Municipal division and Town councils. The functions of each council and of central government are distinguished and well stipulated under Part IV of Local Governments Act 1997 (*Second Schedule*) suggesting a clear distinction of the roles and functions between the national and local governments. The elected councillors have a duty to make laws, to approve budgets, take other political decisions and oversee service delivery being executed by administrators.

Political decentralisation in Uganda is hailed for enabling democratisation through election of local leaders for all levels of local councils. The citizens have been enabled to choose their representatives periodically through Universal suffrage. Local councillors have been elected regularly since 1990s and are responsible for political decision making, overall supervision of technical staff in respective local governments and legislation of byelaws and ordinances.

- ***Gains from administrative decentralisation***

Administrative decentralisation involves the creation of administrative subnational units and delegation of decision-making powers to execute the decentralised functions (Kyohairwe, Karyeija, Nkata, Muriisa, & Nduhura 2022). To ensure effective administrative decentralisation in Uganda, the Uganda 1995 constitution (Article 176) and the Local Governments Act 1997 (Part IV-VII) give powers to local governments to employ persons in their service; and to oversee the performance of persons employed by the central government, to provide services in their areas, and to monitor government services and projects implementation within those areas. The local governments also obtained powers to plan and implement central government policies and programs.

- ***Fiscal decentralisation and managerial autonomy***

Fiscal decentralisation allows local governments to develop, approve and execute their own budgets; raise and utilise resources according to their own priorities in line with legal provisions; and utilise conditional, unconditional, equalisation or any other grants from the centre in line with central government guidelines and local priorities. Administrative decentralisation also enables local councils to generate their own revenues and make investment decisions. On the other hand, central government primarily focuses on policy, financing, planning, coordination and oversight. Financially, the fiscal decentralisation framework was meant to provide financial autonomy of the local governments.

Uganda's decentralisation policy initially gave leverage to local governments to make strategic and operational plans, budget, mobilise financial resources for their local expenditure priorities. The budgetary powers and procedures are guaranteed by the provisions of Local Government Act Chap 243 (Sections 77 and 79) and Articles 190-197 of the Uganda constitution. The law stipulates rights and obligations of local governments to formulate, approve, and execute budgets and plans. The budgets are expected to reflect all revenues locally collected or received from central government to be appropriated yearly following national priority program areas. Local government councils must keep proper books of accounts and other records and produce statements of final accounts at the end of each financial year. Within the fiscal decentralisation framework, sources of financing service delivery have largely been grants from central government, locally generated revenue and donor funding.

To facilitate the execution of decentralised financial duties, several organs and structures have been put in place for administrative enforcement. These include among others Local Government Finance Commission (LGFC), Revenue and accounting regulations, Local Government Public Accounts Committee, Auditor General's office, and internal audit unit. There are additional specialised units and agencies for combating corruption and increasing accountability at the national level and local levels. Administrative decentralisation also allows local governments to appoint approved statutory bodies; hire,



manage and discipline personnel; manage their own payroll; and implement approved development plans.

Defects of decentralisation in Uganda

Notwithstanding several above gains of local governments administration system in Uganda, a number of challenges are detectable in the implementation of the decentralisation policy. The changes in the local government structure from 1960s to date may be attributed to administrative flops that necessitate continuous reviews of institutional frameworks and structures. From Dennis Rondinelli (1986) framework and in relation to this study findings, the challenges that continuously stifle the decentralisation policy performance in Uganda as well as areas of improvement, are discussed below.

- ***Political decentralisation glitches***

Over the years, progressive decentralisation structures and activities became more complex than initially imagined. The quest to make services nearer to the grassroots in search of efficiency, effectiveness, accountability and responsiveness stretched nearly to unaffordable limits regarding manageable resource capabilities. The intensity of the decentralisation policy that had commenced with vigour had slowed down due to numerous challenges (Mushemeza 2019).

Besides, decision-making of development programs is increasingly becoming less dynamic than originally envisioned. Citizens' power to effectively hold local leaders accountable is limited due to fragile civil society characterised by weak cohesion and individual or limited group capacities to monitor and evaluate the government programs.

In some cases, strengthening of the political power of lower tiers of government has led to mistrust and conflicts between the two government levels. There seem to emerge fears especially for central government politicians to feel jittery about the potential consequences of strong local governments that may antagonise the political national agenda as a result of political capture within these lower tiers.

While the citizens, local government leadership, and staff cherished the decentralisation policy, they were discouraged by the low prioritisation and incongruent national counter-planning framework that worked against the policy. The legal framework felt regressive and incomprehensive in driving the extended decentralisation, and it fell short of full coverage of all the objectives of decentralisation as laid down in the policy. For instance, emerging issues and new service delivery approaches in the Local Economic Development policy 2014 needed rigorous review of the existing development strategies and processes. It is also noted that some provisions of the Public Finance Management Act 2015, the dormancy of Joint Annual Review on decentralisation since 2016 and lack of a central unit dedicated to deal with the emerging impacts or omissions of the decentralisation policy weakened the Local Governments, and greatly affected their operations, and functionality.



- ***Threats to local administrative function***

Whereas administrative powers and duties have been decentralised in Uganda, making of independent administrative decisions and implementing policy actions is challenged by political interference and a feeble rule of law. This is partly attributed to some level of informalization of government structures and drifts from explicit and visible structure of relationships, roles, processes and principles for objective and rational decisions. Rather, informal norms and behavioural patterns are increasingly being witnessed in powers systems, communication networks, sociometric dynamics and working arrangements that dominate the local governments administrative scenes. Concrete role-conflicts, and infights appear amongst political leadership and administrative staff of decentralised units or among central government and local governments functional administrative structures. (Mushemeza 2019; Kyohairwe et. al., 2022)

More considerable challenges are associated with collusive corruption among the local government's technical and political leaders. The multifaceted corruption tendencies involve embezzlement, bribery in contracts and employment, fraud, exploitation and extortion among other habits, and compromises in law enforcement. Corruption practices negatively impact on local government performance.

The newly created and long-standing local governments require continuous capacity building relevant for staff and political leaders to match the changing trends in administration and general administrative environments. This proved hard to resolve in two broader ways: 1). Local councillors are characterised with great variations in education, gender, age and other social backgrounds. They have a 5-year term of office with regular elections and ceaseless turnovers of some massified incumbents every electoral term of office. Building capacities of such local political leaders therefore is repetitive activity for different participants, a challenge for knowledge continuity and utilisation. 2). Capacity building for civil servants in the rapidly changing social- economic and political environment requires a lot of dynamism and resources as well as the super capacities of those responsible for delivering the new learning and possible innovations.

Compounding the above narratives is the recentralisation of some fiscal aspects of the local government and some key administrative staff that include the Chief Administrative Officers and their deputies and Town Clerks which have implications on leadership trust and local autonomy (Kyohairwe et. al., 2022). The "shared administration" in which central governance controls and manages top local government officials including the Chief Administrative officers, Town Clerks, and their deputies challenges bureaucratic hierarchical structures, reduces levels of devotion, and distorts coordination processes between the central and local levels. There are interferences in reporting mechanisms and the decreasing authority of the local governments over the resources including local revenue collection and utilisation. Some district staff structures continue to operate with inadequate staff especially in new districts due to wage bill ceilings by the Ministry of Public



Service. The filling of vacant positions at the local level is approved by the centre. There is a limited local revenue base, a high dependence on central government transfers, and inconsistency in allocation of both conditional and unconditional grants. Operational financial shortages and limited staff incentives consistently affect staff morale and contribute to substantial staff turnover with local government employee's defection to the private and civil sector employee market space (Mushemeza 2019). Moreover, the assumptions that central government officials' workload would be reduced with the creation of local governments remains to be proven through valid studies with adduced evidence.

- ***Challenges relating to local governance environment***

Local governments operate in a feeble organisational environment that is greatly influenced by the state of the its local national and international context. There are many factors: national and international actors influence, national regulatory frameworks, emerging technologies, and other crosscutting issues like climatic changes, gender, youth and the changing demographic character (Onyach-Olaa 2003).

Diverse actors partnering with the Ministry of local government in the decentralisation process include DANIDA, World Bank, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNCDF, DFID, African Development Bank (ADB), and International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). Others include Irish Aid, European Union (EU), Belgium Survival Fund, USAID, Islamic Development Bank, Austrian Embassy, JICA, Royal Netherlands Embassy, SIDA, ICEIDA, CIDA, and GIZ. These international actors are instrumental in local government funding and capacity building. At the local level the role of Uganda Local Governments Association (ULGA), an Urban Authorities Association of Uganda (UAAU) in the implementation of decentralisation is evident in interpreting and operationalising the decentralisation policy programs (Ministry of Local Government, 2014). While these actors contribute material resources, funding, and other support to the local governments, their interests and conditionalities for development usually differ, and their approaches conflict with each other and the government over time. Their independent interventions cause inconsistencies in monitoring and evaluation of the overall performance of local government

The dynamic digital revolution on the other hand demands staff to acquire advanced skills for technology use, adaptation of e-governance and network governance. Envisioning effective adoptive technology practices in a decentralised rural setting and even in some far countryside urban centres with limited internet and power access let alone the fixed mindsets of some traditional bureaucrats is a hard-to imagine feeling. Climate change on the other hand is characterised by regular disasters that are beyond a local governance scope control. The nature of problems encountered in local governments today are "wicked" in nature, increasingly complex to a level where local governments plans, strategies and actions may not resolve. These problems share a range of characteristics extending beyond the capacity of any organisation to understand and respond to



stakeholders having a common agreement about the causes of the problems and the best way to tackle them. By their nature, the wicked problems have no definite solutions and any attempts to address such problems often lead to unforeseen consequences (Basu, Srivastava, Mulyasari & Shaw, 2013; Head & Alford, 2015; Hudson, 2019; Tselios & Tompkins, 2021). Many wicked problems are often social and cultural. Solving them involves changing the behaviour and/or gaining the commitment of individual citizens through compulsory measures like legislation, fines, taxes, and other sanctions that are hard to enforce. Challenges like poverty, hunger, climate change, crime, corruption, unemployment, land degradation, and a pandemic are some of common wicked problems experienced in local governments. The local bureaucracy in its current state has a limited ability to solve such societal problems.

- ***Resource-related conditions***

Administratively also, a multiplicity of local government units were literally overwhelmed by resource constraints for wage and non-wage payments. The resource envelope nationally remained inelastic while local government units increased excessively. This created a big mismatch between administrative and direct costs for the required services. To minimise the resource constraints, local governments were to utilise some common pool resources including road equipment and, in some instances, there were shared District Service Commissions (DSCs) – Council statutory bodies responsible for managing local government human resources. Sharing of such resources required clear frameworks that were either missing or limited in content and scope where they existed.

Fiscal decentralisation under which local leaders were authorised to determine their local revenue sources and manage local government budgets reinforced the political and administrative decentralisation at a later stage. Sadly, these powers and functions were partial and short-lived. With a larger source of funding remaining as the central government transfers and mainly as conditional grants, local governments' powers to decide on how to utilise such funds based on their priorities remained constrained. Subsequently, the inadequate amount of funds and the delays of the monthly and quarterly releases stifled the execution of local government work plans. The study of Mushemeza (2019) reveals the resource constraint in local government by establishing the overdependency of decentralisation on development partners to support basic and vital processes. This finding affirms Rondineli's (1986) financial resource condition where the effectiveness of decentralisation is determined by the degree to which adequate financial, human, and physical resources are made available to the organisations to which responsibilities are transferred. Financial availability is a key determinant of the performance of human and physical resources and other activities, programs, and functions relating to political and administrative decentralisation.

Local governments have inadequate revenue for financing decentralised services which consistently creates a problem of unfunded mandates and priorities. Cost-of-service



delivery remains high, while local governments find it difficult to generate adequate local revenues to supplement central government transfers and revenue from other sources. Weak revenue collection capacity and political interference are counter-effective to revenue mobilisation and collection. Local Governments' fiscal distress is deepened by a low revenue base and interference by the legal framework centralising revenue collection to the consolidated fund as per the current Public Finance Management Act 2015. This challenge has invoked technical and political debates at local and national level in recent years. For instance, on 08th September 2021, Parliament passed a resolution urging the government to reverse the directive requiring local governments to remit all local revenues to the Consolidated Fund as required by Sec 29 of the Public Finance Management Act 2015. The resolution demanded the amendment of the law to allow local governments to spend local revenue at the source where they were generated.

With the receding local revenues, local governments have found it difficult to sustain their normal operation and effectively plan for investments over the years. Quality and quantity of services become compromised in relation to inadequate outputs and poor service delivery. While the creation of new local government units has facilitated service access and eased ethnic tensions, the operation of these districts, in their current form, remains a costly undertaking. Some of the local governments remain operating way below optimal functionality due to inadequate financing.

- ***Behavioural and psychological effect***

Many of the challenges discussed above are closely associated with the attitudinal tendencies of international partners, central government officials, local government administrators, and the beneficiaries of the decentralised services. A number of behavioural and psychological factors limit effective collaboration among all actors for strong decentralisation outcomes. Such factors include the persistent overbearing central government officials, predominancy of the international funders and limited trust of local government leaders in the decentralisation processes. Further, there are negative biases of the grassroots people against government officials and the government services as a whole.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The previous sections highlighted the conceptual meaning of decentralisation, its perceived forms, as well as the theorised conditions for its success. The literature review presents a decentralisation process with an extensive five-tier local government political structure comprised of local government councils and administrative units that have increased overtime. The decentralisation followed a sequential approach in transferring central government power and functions to subnational governments, beginning with political, administrative, and financial decentralisation. The central government leadership signalled promises and willingness to devolve political and administrative powers and functions, although administrative challenges are increasingly causing a reversal of some



of these powers. This study makes the following observations from the analyses of these regressive decentralisation tendencies.

Local Governments in a Globalized Environment

Operating in a global village, local governments become part of complex and loosely coupled systems characterised by an assemblage or combination of parts whose relations make them interdependent. They act as aggregates of interdependent flows and activities linking shifting coalitions of participants embedded in wider material-resource and institutional environments. (Scott & Davis, 2015). Like any Loosely Coupled Systems (Glassman, 1973; March and Olsen, 1975, Weick, 1976; Orton, & Weick, 1990), local governments contain elements that are only weakly connected to others and capable of fairly autonomous actions. As such, they face the vulnerability of dependence on other national, regional and global systems, which challenges local autonomy in decisions and actions.

Arising out of the global system complexity argument, local governments must act collectivistic by interacting with other actors while each of them own hold preferences and objectives. This calls for the need to learn group dynamics of networking, coalitions, and partnerships even when new organisational relations may further compromise the local government autonomy. It is a new indispensable order in which local governments have to change purposes and domains to accommodate new interests, shedding off parts of themselves to avoid some interests, and where necessary become involved in activities far afield from their original resolves.

Local Government Re-Generation and Rebranding

Having assessed the tides of the past Uganda local government system, it is important to look into ways of reviving these institutions so that the objectives of decentralisation are attained. The local governments continue to lose political and administrative control over services within the decentralised jurisdiction. Resources and other constraints are worsened by shortfalls in accountability and effectiveness, corruption, and embezzlement, delays, and shoddy works in projects and programs executed in local governments. There is general dissatisfaction regarding the public use of government resources, value-for-money and realisation of public interests. Local Economic Development initiatives for alleviating poverty are taking too long to be realised since the approval of 2014 LED policy. Although the 2022 Parish Development Model (PDM) program has been introduced, its impact is just beginning to be actualised.

With the above shortcomings, the local government's image is slowly fading. From the connotation of "independent", "self-determined", "Autonomous" subnational units, Uganda local governments currently are nearly reduced to the literally meaning of *local* signifying "the locality, position in governance hierarchy, basic, rural, not well developed or civilised".



First, a rebranding strategy to publicise local government's achievements and emphasise the potential benefits of decentralisation is necessary. This will attract local economic development initiatives and regain local people's confidence and trust in the central government's power, control and programs. Secondly, proper performance analyses should be done, and appropriate social, economic, political and environmental measures should be instituted accordingly to contain the causes of local governance's downward trend and create sustainable communities.

Digitised Local Government and Local Governance

Leveraging digital technologies at local level to strengthen public administration and to keep the intergovernmental relations at all levels is one way of reengineering the local bureaucracy. ICT integration can expand and improve services provision, streamline and optimise internal processes, and allow residents to engage with institutions and public issues in multiple ways both nationally and locally. With the complex multiple government ministries, departments, agencies at the national level that closely work and network with multiple subnational units (as those indicated in the Uganda's five tier system), the most effective and efficient way is to operate through digital coordination, monitoring and evaluation.

While some form of e-governance practices may currently experience challenges in effecting budgets and workplans, local government official use of ICT to disclose and disseminate public information can be more intensified. ICT plays an important role in facilitating communication and consultation, enabling a wide range of stakeholders to interact with and participate in local governance by contributing to decision-making directly or indirectly. Local government can share details relating to their plans and objectives, daily operations, and service offerings through customised digital platform that are widely accessible by all citizens. This will automatically translate into transparency and will increase the level of accountability and responsiveness of public administrators. Inevitably by so doing, administrative corruption becomes minimised. Digital revolution transforms the role of local bureaucrats in a way that their administrative burden is lessened through remote interaction with the public and also through efficient internal communication and collaboration, which increases overall efficiency in a way that is friendly to the environment. The major role of central government leadership in this collaboration should be to serve as enabler for this digital revolution which among other things include regular and sufficient utilities supply (electricity, water), strong and affordable internet access and communication tools – phones, tablets, computers and other emerging technologies for communication. Moving from physical accountability mechanisms and platforms – like *barazaas* and physical paper reports - to digital media platforms on televisions, radios and e-documents will ease access and storage of information, but also increase interactive conversations between administrators and citizens.



Capacity-building content and strategies for staff and politicians should largely target the mindset-change of traditional bureaucrats to appreciate and practice administration outside the Max Weber's framework of hierarchy, control specialisation and rule-orientation.

Confronting Wicked Problems at Grassroots

The wicked problems – like security, climate change, corruption and pandemics – cut across hierarchy and authority structures within and between organisations and across policy domains, political and administrative jurisdictions, and political “group” interests (Weber and Khademian, 2008). This nature of problems has far-reaching impacts and being often unexpected, they are difficult to measure. Lasting solutions need to be sought through strategic alliances rather than approaches of organisational specialisms and technical fixes often done by public agencies in a linear manner.

Usually, part of the solution to wicked problems involves changing the behaviour of groups of citizens or all citizens. Other key ingredients in solving or managing complex policy problems include successfully working across internal and external organisational boundaries and engaging citizens and stakeholders in policy making and implementation. Wicked problems require innovative, comprehensive solutions that can be modified in the light of experience and on-the-ground feedback. All of the above can pose challenges to traditional approaches of administration exhibited at national and local levels in policy making and programme implementation (Zhao, Wehmeyer, Basham & Hansen 2019; Head, 2022).

Solving wicked problems requires a deep understanding of the stakeholders involved, and an innovative approach provided by design thinking. This suggests strategic innovations of local administrators who are conversant with the localities' realities and dynamics. The necessary solutions need to be generated by collaboration across organisations and specialisations as the approach of Uganda Parish Development Model (PDM) rather than through technical fixes developed and delivered to public agencies in a linear manner. A highly networked local governance bureaucracy fully linked to private and public actors at local, national and international level is the most feasible way to galvanise wicked problems' sustainable solutions.

Shifting from Numerical Local Governments to Empowered Communities

Community engagement and equitable participation to create change are the most recommendable empowerment strategies. An equitable, inclusive community engagement approach to public decisions ensures that the people most affected and most marginalised, (eg, low-income people, physically challenged, women and youth, elderly, minority groups, and refugees) have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. Inclusive civic engagement results in government processes, practices, and decisions that are more responsive to community priorities, those avoiding many unforeseen consequences, and those that create relationships that hold local governments accountable. Effective



community engagement can also lead to decisions that result in a more equitable distribution of health, education, housing or other social services.

Most importantly, improvements in government practices, such as local agencies' engagement strategies, can lead to lasting changes in organisational culture, policies, and processes long after any public decision-making process. With a greater commitment to intentionally increasing equity in their community engagement efforts, local governments are better positioned to address social inequities. Therefore, The most appealing solution is to drift from creating more local governments to consolidating existing structures, community leadership, citizen empowerment, and local autonomy for decision-making. Several strategies that can be used to build more effective community engagement and public participation include sufficient budget allocations and relative financial autonomy. In addition to budgeting decisions, local legislative bodies power on local legislation has a huge influence on who has access the quality, affordability, and accessibility of public services. There is a need for increased involvement in public participation in local legislative and policy decisions.

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