

# Challenges of Decentralization in Liberia: An Analysis of Effectiveness in Improving Local Governance and Public Service Access

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## Abstract

Decentralization has taken shape as one of the vital strategies to address the reform needs of governance in Liberia, focusing on the levels of governance at the local level for access to public services. This article seeks to clarify both the problems attendant to decentralization in Liberia as well as its probable success in fulfilling its desired purposes. These discussions consider past literature and empirical evidence and highlight some major obstacles, such as impaired infrastructure, weak local government capacities, and some persisting socio-economic inequalities. The perceptions citizens have of the decentralization strategies are also analyzed. Conducted through interviews with 500 respondents, these analyses are quite informative of how these reforms are being seen. The findings derive some strain and stressors within the field of decentralization to signal the need for local capacity-building and resource exteriorization. The overall report recommends a multi-bound approach to support regional governance structures for improved service delivery in Liberia. It opens space for the government of Liberia to accede to responsive and accountable governance that meets citizens' needs. This study informs the larger discussions on post-conflict governance reform and serves as a basis for recommendations among stakeholders and policymakers experienced in the field of decentralization.

## Keywords

Decentralization, Local Governance, Public Service Delivery, Governance Reform, Socio-Economic Disparities

## 1. Introduction

Decentralization has emerged as a primary strategy for the reformation of gov-

ernance in Liberia, especially after decades of civil conflict and political instability. The main purpose of decentralization is to improve local governance and service delivery and empower communities by transferring decision-making authority from the central government to local government. This process will strengthen governance through increased responsiveness and accountability to citizens and increase community engagement and participation accordingly.

Despite this promise, decentralization has faced tremendous state obstacles in Liberia. Historical remnants of centralist governance coupled with socio-economic inequalities and poor infrastructures have hampered the effective actualization of decentralization programs. Most local governments do not have the capacity, means, and powers to respond to the diverse needs of their communities, creating frustration among citizens with high expectations for improved services and involvement in governance (Nyei, 2014).

This paper analyzes the promises of decentralization in Liberia, its inherent challenges, and implications for local governance and public service access. By analyzing the relevant literature, combined with a study of the public's perception, the paper aims to help one constructively understand how the practice of decentralization in Liberia has affected governance. Ultimately, such a review shall feed into the wider discourse on governance reform and where the journey of public administration takes Liberia.

## **2. Review of Related Literature**

### **2.1. Overview of Theories of Decentralization**

Decentralization is the process of transferring authority and responsibility of governance from the center to the local governments, envisaging local empowerment for participation in governance and the delivery of services. Several theories serve as frameworks for an understanding of decentralization. Each analysis touches upon different aspects and implications of decentralization as a model of governance.

1) Political Decentralization: The redistribution of power and authority from the central to the local government, thus giving local leaders the authority to pass the decisions on matters affecting their communities. It will build a form of democratic-hear a people-governance carried by citizen participation in political decision-making processes. Political decentralization is usually associated with local autonomy, the power of communities to impact decisions regarding governance and policies.

2) Administrative Decentralization: This is a viewpoint concerning administrative structures and procedures in redistributing authority, personnel, and financial resources. Administrative decentralization may be of different forms such as deconcentrating: the redistribution of authority within the channel of the central government; delegation: transferring specified responsibilities with some degree of autonomy to state or local organizations; and devolution: the transfer of powers to local governments. This theory holds that administrative decentralization will

foster improved service delivery due to shortening the decision-making process through local involvement (Ndambwa & Moonga, 2024).<sup>1</sup>

3) Fiscal Decentralization: This deals with the financial dimension of decentralization. Fiscal decentralization connotes the transfer of revenue-raising powers and expenditure responsibilities to local governments (Nyei, 2014). The goal is to enhance local financial autonomy and accountability, enabling local authorities to allocate resources in accordance with community needs. Fiscal decentralization is vital in creating an economic basis for the effective delivery of services by local governments.

4) Market Decentralization advocates for the involvement of private sector actors in the delivery of public services. Market decentralization emphasizes competition and efficiency, suggesting that competition itself leads to improved outcomes. This theory raises issues regarding the role of a government in the provision of services and the review of the balance between public and private functions.

5) Socio-Cultural Decentralization: This perspective places a large amount of importance on community and local social structures in governance. Proponents of decentralized governance argue to appreciate local culture, traditions, and community dynamics in developing a local government. Integration of socio-cultural factors to ensure cultural sensitivity in policies can achieve greater acceptance by the community.

## 2.2. Global Perspectives on Decentralization

Decentralization has taken many forms in varied places, and each variant with a varied degree of success. Countries from Latin America, Africa, and Asia have integrated decentralization into their measures that supposedly serve the goals of good governance, improvement of service provision, and economic development (United Cities and Local Governments, 2008).

1) Latin America: Many countries in Latin America, such as Brazil and Colombia, have undertaken the decentralization process in an attempt to address regional inequalities and improve local governance. The 1988 Brazilian Constitution articulated a decentralized structure that empowered municipalities to govern and allocate resources. This shift has, indeed, resulted in the participation of more local people and improved service provision, especially in education and health.

2) Africa: In Africa, decentralization has been seen as a remedy for improving local service delivery and ensuring democratic governance. Countries like Uganda and South Africa implemented decentralization reform under the auspices of a better local governance tool (Makara, 2018). Nonetheless, poor capacity, corruption, and political meddling adversely impacted these initiatives. In Uganda, for instance, decentralization has encouraged decision-making, but issues of resource allocation and accountability are still rife.

3) Asia: Decentralization is a tool in Asia that consists of an attempt to empower

<sup>1</sup><https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.eg>

local governments or regional authorities with the intelligence of improved service delivery. Through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, India has created a system of local self-governance, giving women representation on local councils. The effectiveness of these reforms, however, has varied—some regions have reported drastic improvements in governance, while others are bedeviled by bureaucratic inefficiency.

4) Europe: Most of the countries in Europe have engaged in human decentralization, though to varying degrees of success. In the UK, reforms for local governance were promoted to improve local accountability for service delivery. However, the realization of these reforms has been impeded by funding restrictions and central government oversight.

5) Comparative Insights: Experiences from around the globe provide valuable insights for Liberia. Although decentralization may be beneficial toward the improvement of local governance and service delivery, special attention should be paid to the contexts of local governance, capacity building, and proper accountability to work. The political will of the central authority often determines the success of decentralization, with local populations participating and local governments knowing their duties and responsibilities (Arends, 2020).<sup>2</sup>

### 2.3. Historical Context of Decentralization in Liberia

Liberia's decentralized durability is deeply embedded in the complex political backdrop marred by colonialism, civil wars, and governance rebuilding processes. Thus, it is remembered in history as the true story of decentralization.

1) Colonial Legacy: Established in the early 19th century as a settlement for freed African-American slaves, the governance regime established by Americo-Liberians was highly centralized, with power exercised by a small elite. That centralization marginalized the indigenous population and ensured the propagation of inequalities planted further in the quest for good governance.

2) Post-Independence Era: After gaining independence in 1847, Liberia maintained a highly centralized governance structure. Rural governance approaches were limited, and the central government exercised absolute authority in local affairs. With such a high level of centralization, governance further exacerbated regional imbalances, spelling trouble among the rest of the citizens and especially the marginalized.

3) Governance Collapse and Civil Wars: The civil wars in the late 20th century was viewed in another light as civil wars that pointed out the collapse of the governance structures that further disintegrated Liberia. The wars had, thus, unveiled how defunct the system of governance needed somewhat more responsive arenas closer to the people to be more effective. Upon concluding the wars, reconstruction brought into disrepute the unfathomable challenges of rebuilding the institutions and regaining public trust.

4) Decentralization Reforms: In the early 2000s, with the civil wars concluded,

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<sup>2</sup><https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12256>

Liberia began a series of reforms for decentralization that would cater better to local governance and service delivery. The Governance and Economic Management Assistance Program (GEMAP) and the National Policy on Decentralization were put together as the frameworks within which power and responsibilities were to be devolved down to the local governments (Nyei, 2014). Besides strengthening local participation in these arrangements, the reforms were increasingly regarded as an effective instrument for addressing the needs of communities directly affected by conflicts.

5) Challenges Facing Decentralization in Liberia: Quite far after the implementation of such reforms, decentralization in Liberia continues to be restricted. Challenges such as poor infrastructure, limited local government capacity, and continued socioeconomic divide all impede this process. Local governments are generally challenged to deliver traditional services, thus frustrating citizens who look forward to real improvements in governance.

6) In the Future: The historical background of decentralization in Liberia underscores the need to pursue a multi-pronged approach to reforming governance. Such decentralization must go beyond the mere transfer of powers; it must also ensure capacity-building efforts, infrastructure investments, and what may be termed as “community ownership”. Given Liberia’s struggle in transitioning from conflict to resolution in a post-war setting, the issues of decentralization must be factored into good governance and decision-making in the delivery of public services (Krawczyk & Muhula, 2018).<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Methodology

#### Description of the Research Design

This study applies a mixed-methods approach toward understanding the challenges and effectiveness of decentralization in Liberia in a comprehensive manner. The integration of both qualitative and quantitative analyses ensures a balanced and cogent understanding of the subject. The qualitative part consists of an extensive literature review to provide a theoretical and historical grounding for decentralization efforts in Liberia, which includes peer-reviewed articles, policy documents, and case studies highlighting global and local perspectives on decentralization.

The quantitative portion relies on information obtained through a very structured set of surveys and semi-structured interviews. Such designs allow for data collection that can finally capture broad quantitative data on a macro level or include in-depth approaches on a micro level with qualitative data. Thus, these methods alone can give the study an adequate insight into the nuances of decentralization, covering macro trends and micro-experiences.

Triangulation was employed in the study to ensure reliability and validity. The findings derived from multiple data sources, namely, surveys, interviews, and secondary literature, were compared for consistency and robustness. Furthermore, the study was anchored on the theoretical framework of decentralization theories

<sup>3</sup><https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.4230100302>

to inform survey instrument designs and analyses of results.

#### **Survey Instrument Describing the Multiple-Choice Questions**

The survey instrument was built to gauge respondents' perceptions of decentralization's effects regarding local governance and public service access. It consisted of 15 multiple-choice questions clustered together under three different areas:

**Infrastructure and Service Delivery:** Questions regarding the experiences of respondents regarding the availability and quality of basic infrastructures, such as roads, schools, healthcare services, and communication networks. Some questions are:

How do you rate public service provision in your area today as compared to five years ago?

What is your biggest challenge affecting service delivery in your community?

#### **Government Accountability and Responsiveness**

This section sought to explore perceptions regarding the performance, transparency, and responsiveness of the local government to the needs of its community. Questions posed included:

How often does your local government consult with community members regarding key decisions?

In general, do you believe that local government officials are held accountable for their actions?

#### **Equity and Regional Disparities**

Questions were framed around issues regarding socio-economic inequalities and their effect on decentralization outcomes. For example:

Has decentralization reduced inequalities between urban and rural areas in resource allocation?

Do marginalized groups in your community access public services effectively?

To enhance clarity and relevance resulting from feedback from pilot-test respondents, the survey instrument was finally edited, focusing on improving the research questions.

### **3.1. Process of Data Collection**

Data collection occurred over three weeks in various parts of Liberia to maximize variations and obtain adequate representative samples. These included urban areas, peri-urban places, and rural areas to account for a wide range of experiences and perspectives.

#### **The major data sources were:**

##### **Survey Respondents**

Survey respondents comprised 500 individuals purposely selected to comprise local government officials, civil society representatives, and the communities. Such a stratified sampling approach allowed the study to evaluate various stakeholders with varying situations engaged or affected by decentralization.

##### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

The selection of key informants, including policymakers, NGO representatives, and academics with expertise in decentralization also afforded a deeper look into

the institutional and systemic problems that confronted implementation.

#### **Survey Administration**

The survey was done online and face-to-face, depending, of course, on the preference of respondents and the communication infrastructure available in their particular places. Online surveys were sent through email and social media, whereas in-person surveys were conducted in communities where internet access was quite limited. The in-person administration of the survey was carried out by trained enumerators to ensure that respondents understood the posed queries and answered accurately.

To provide a greater incentive for participation, confidentiality of response was guaranteed, and it was emphasized that the study was purely academic. Ethical size considerations included the requirement for informed consent from each participant and guarantees regarding withdrawal rights at any given time while in the study.

#### **Regional Representation**

With a view, indeed, to represent the socio-economic and one of the diversities along the geographic lines of Liberia, the regional coverage of the study was done. The data collection sites included:

##### **Urban Areas**

Including Monrovia, the capital of the country, captures the views of an already quite developed area with relatively better access to services.

##### **Peri-Urban Areas**

The outskirts of Monrovia and some other big cities present the transition zones between more urban and rural ones.

##### **Rural Areas**

Populations in remote, underdeveloped areas with limited, if any, infrastructure challenges were taken into consideration.

### **3.2. Data Analysis**

The responses obtained from the quantitative surveys were analyzed via statistical software to identify trends and patterns. Descriptive statistics like frequencies and percentages were used to analyze the data. Inferential statistics were applied to check for relationships among different variables.

Qualitative data obtained from interviews and open-ended survey responses were analyzed thematically. Key themes were identified and compared to those from quantitative findings to contribute to an understanding of the challenges and success of decentralization efforts in Liberia.

#### **Limitations of the Methodology**

Though the mixed-method approach provides an excellent larger-picture analysis, each method has its limits. The smaller sample size of 50 survey respondents may restrict generalizability, while logistical challenges, such as poor road conditions and limited internet access in some areas, have constrained primary data collection. Relying on the rigor of the study design and its robustness in sampling, the findings will go a long way in informing on decentralization in Liberia.

## 4. Challenges of Decentralization

### 1) Infrastructural Deficiencies

Infrastructure is an immensely significant pillar for a successful decentralization process, but in Liberia, it remains a substantial challenge.

**Obstructions to Transportation and Communication:** The absence of a good road network and the unavailability of a very good communication infrastructure substantially impede good governance and service delivery. Many of these rural regions would not be approachable during much of the rainy season, which then means kids would not go to school. During that period, communities are cut off from primary services, especially health and education. Along with this comes the frustrations of unstable Internet and mobile network coverage that only serves to worsen communications between local governments and their people (Kenny et al., 2015).<sup>4</sup>

**Service Delivery:** Poor infrastructure does have a direct impact on the quality of delivery. For instance, equipment is often lacking, and most of the time, the health centers remain dry of supplies due to transportation difficulties. Schools also suffer from the unavailability of the necessary educational materials, contributing to poor educational performance. All of the above exacerbate inequality and derail the objectives of decentralization.

### 2) Limited Capacities of Local Government

The ability of local governments to come to the fore for the effective implementation of decentralization policies is curtailed by the following factors:

**Human Resource Issues:** The scarcity of qualified human resource capacity among many local governments to manage and implement administrative functions partly accounts for the ineffectiveness of service delivery. The availability and capacity of professionals such as planners, accountants, and engineers are poor and, therefore, cannot be said to always be answering the needs of local authorities to deliver on their mandate (Bardhan, 2002).

**Training and Development Needs of Local Government Officials:** Local government officials seldom obtain training opportunities, which further impacts their capacities for policy implementation and resource management. The establishment and provision of capacity support programs are necessary to enhance the skills that enable local officials to perform effectively in governance and service delivery.

### 3) Socio-Economic Disparities

Decentralization aims to address socio-economic inequalities, but significant disparities persist in Liberia:

**a) Regional Inequalities in Resource Allocation:** Rural areas often receive fewer resources compared to urban centers, perpetuating underdevelopment and marginalization. For example, schools and healthcare facilities in rural regions are often underfunded and understaffed, leading to poor outcomes.

**b) Effects on Public Service Access:** Socio-economic disparities limit access to essential services for marginalized communities. People in remote areas face higher barriers to accessing healthcare, education, and other basic services, un-

<sup>4</sup><https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-080213-040833>

dermining the equity goals of decentralization.

Challenges	Key Issues	Impacts
Inadequate Infrastructure	Poor roads, limited communication networks	Delays in service delivery, isolation
Limited Capacity of Local Govts	Lack of skilled personnel, insufficient training	Inefficient governance, poor resource use
Socio-Economic Disparities	Unequal resource distribution, marginalized groups	Limited access to public services

## Political Resistance and Bureaucratic Hurdles

Officially, decentralization is bogged down in Liberia by severe challenges from political opposition and bureaucratic inefficiency. Political resistance frustrates basic policy implementation, primarily by acting as a hindrance to decentralization goals.

### Challenges for Policy Implementation

#### 1) Power Centralization:

A significant barrier to decentralization remains the refusal of central government authorities to disburse power. Various policymakers and political leaders have been hesitant to cede authority and resources to local governments because of fears that this would reduce their influence and control. Resistance sometimes takes the form of delays in legislative enactments, disproportionate budget allocations, and limited delegation of senior decision-making powers.

#### 2) Weaknesses of the Legal Framework:

The legal and policy frameworks for decentralization in Liberia remain weak. There exist frameworks, but gaps in policy implementation and enforcement create barriers to progress. For instance, local governments may not have the legislative powers to collect revenue or to carry out major administrative functions; thus, they do not have true autonomy.

#### 3) Resource Constraints:

Once approved, policies are still often subject to complications from a lack of resources. Since a central authority controls all funds, local governments are restricted in their ability to provide for their responsibilities, and such a situation creates an unbridgeable divide between policy intentions and implementation realities.

#### 4) Bureaucratic Delays:

Bureaucratic inefficiencies creep in here and there: slow decision-making practices, delays in funding distribution, and all-ins with bureaucratic inefficiencies hinder implementation. Local authorities and citizens alike share their frustrations with these bureaucratic inefficiencies, which can lead to waning trust in governance structures (Gweama, 2024).

### Stakeholder Engagement Issues

#### 1) Lack of Inclusion in Decision-Making:

Successful decentralization calls for deep involvement of all stakeholders: local communities, CSOs, and the private sector. Many stakeholders in Liberia are,

however, not included in key decision-making processes. This lack of inclusion leads to the formulation of policies that are not reflective of the needs and priorities of the local communities (Béné et al., 2008).

### 2) Low Public Awareness:

The public awareness of decentralization initiatives and the benefits they bring is still low. Many citizens seem to be unaware of their rights and the positions of local governments, thus carrying less weight to hold the officials accountable. The absence of informed, empowered, and engaged citizens poses major challenges to the impetus of the decentralization process.

### 3) Conflicts of Interests Among Stakeholders:

The rival interests among traditional leaders, local government officials, and central authorities combust against the smooth running of operations. Traditional leaders may feel that they have been pushed to the periphery by new governance structures, while local officials may find community resistance stemming from historical grievances or mistrust.

### 4) Resistance by Bureaucrats:

Generally, central politicians and bureaucrats are up against decentralization because this would jeopardize their roles and privileges. This can include passive obstruction, such as unwillingness to provide vital information and avoiding processes that would hamper local governments from doing their work effectively.

#### Political Resistance and Bureaucratic Controls

Political resistance and bureaucratic inefficiencies combine to undermine decentralization effectiveness in Liberia. Some effects include:

1) Inefficient Service Delivery: Delays in policy implementation and resource allocation prevent local governments from addressing community needs effectively. This inefficiency results in poor provision of basic services such as education and healthcare.

2) Erosion of Public Trust: When decentralization is perceived by stakeholders as ineffective or inequitable, public trust decreases. The citizenry will become apathetic, which will further weaken accountability mechanisms critical for successful decentralization.

3) Widening Inequalities: Political and bureaucratic resistance often perpetuates existing inequalities by favoring urban centers, or politically connected regions, over marginalized communities.

#### Table: Key Challenges and Impacts of Political Resistance and Bureaucratic Hurdles

Challenges	Descriptive	Impact
Centralized Power Dynamics	Reluctance of central authorities to transfer power and resources	Limited autonomy for local governments
Weak Legal Frameworks	Inadequate laws and enforcement mechanisms	Gaps in policy implementation

**Continued**

Resource Constraints	Insufficient funding and resource allocation	Poor execution of decentralization initiatives
Administrative Delays	Slow decision-making and resource disbursement	Reduced efficiency and trust in governance
Lack of Inclusion in Decision-Making	Exclusion of key stakeholders from policy formulation	Misaligned policies with community needs
Limited Public Awareness	Low awareness of decentralization benefits among citizens	Weak citizen participation and accountability
Conflict of Interests Among Stakeholders	Tensions between traditional leaders, local officials, and central authorities	Poor coordination and collaboration
Resistance from Bureaucrats	Obstruction by central government officials	Delayed or ineffective implementation of reforms

## 5. Effectiveness of Decentralization Efforts

Decentralization aims to place governance near the people by transferring decision-making powers, resources, and responsibilities from the central government to the local authorities (Boex & Yilmaz, 2010). In Liberia, decentralization has been pursued to improve access to public service, governance responsiveness, and accountability, but there are continuous debates on the effectiveness of such efforts. This section will assess decentralization's impact in Liberia through an analysis of improvements in public service, governance responsiveness and a comparative assessment with central governance (Nyei, 2014).<sup>5</sup>

### Public Service Accessibility Improvements

Decentralization seeks to make for effective access to basic public services, one of its key objectives of target groups, particularly in rural communities deprived of assistance. Success in decentralization is also closely evaluated through its capability regarding service provision, i.e., healthcare, education, sanitation, and infrastructure development.

#### 1) Health Care Services

There have been improvements in the delivery of health services due to decentralization, even though there are still great disparities. Local governments are responsible for operating health facilities, procuring medical supplies, and distributing such supplies. In some areas, this meant:

- Better response time in the case of medical emergencies as localized decision-making is adopted.

- Enhanced involvement of the community in health planning.

- Better tracking of health needs within the province.

Some challenges, on the other hand, include:

- Limited means to expand operations due to inadequate financing from the central government.

- Lack of trained health personnel, especially at the rural level.

- Poor infrastructure for the delivery of medical supplies or to effect emergency

<sup>5</sup><https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2012.01982.x>

response.

## 2) Educational Services

The results from the decentralization of education would seem to be between improvement and otherwise; some improvements include:

More localized decision-making structures within schools effectively allow for modification of the curriculum in response to regional needs.

Increased involvement of parents and village leaders in administration.

In several regions, school enrollment has risen in comparison with earlier periods because of improved accessibility.

Simply put, decentralization has failed to tackle issues such as:

- Inequities in the quality of teachers, classrooms, and infrastructure between urban and rural schools.
- Insufficient funding from the central government leaves some rates of teachers' salaries unpaid.
- Weak monitoring and evaluation systems result in inefficiencies of policy in the field of implementation.

## 3) Infrastructure and Public Utilities

It was expected that decentralization, alongside the project executed under local authorities, would be able to push for better infrastructure development. Such an improvement includes:

- Community-driven initiatives in some areas for the construction and maintenance of roads.
- Better waste management is implemented through local government oversight.
- Some improvements in rural electrification owing to localized participation.

However, infrastructure remains a major challenge due to:

- Limited financial autonomy for local governments, restricting their ability to invest in large-scale projects.
- Corruption and mismanagement at the local level, leading to stalled or poorly executed projects.
- Poor coordination between local and central authorities, creating delays in project approvals.

**Table: Effectiveness of Public Service Access Improvements**

Sectors	Improvements	Challenges
Healthcare	Faster emergency response, community involvement	Limited funding, shortages of medical personnel
Education	Localized management, increased enrollment	Rural-urban disparities, funding issues
Infrastructure	Community-driven projects, improved waste management	Financial constraints, corruption

## Local Governance Accountability and Responsiveness

Another important indicator of decentralization's effectiveness is the capacity of local governments to respond to citizen needs and be accountable in decision-

making processes (Crook & Manor, 1998).

#### 1) Citizen Participation

One of the very nice developments of decentralization is the growing role of citizens in local governance. Decentralization has empowered community members to participate in decision-making (Faguet, 2012) through:

- Town hall meetings and public consultations.
- Local development committees that influence budgeting priorities.
- Direct engagement with local government officials.

Nevertheless, challenges to increased participation include:

- Low awareness of local governance processes.
- Cultural barriers restricting women's and marginalized groups' participation.
- Political interference suppressing independent civic engagement.

#### 2) Government Accountability

Accountability measures have improved in some decentralized regions, especially in places where local leaders engaging with citizens exist. Such Measures Include Introducing performance monitoring systems for local officials' Greater transparency in local budget allocation and expenditure and increased responsiveness to public complaints and service demands (Christensen et al., 2021).<sup>6</sup>

Despite these advances, accountability challenges endure:

- Corruption at the local level, mostly arises from weak oversight mechanisms.
- Political elites oppose participation for personal interests.
- Weak enforcement of laws on transparency and good governance.

#### 3) Efficiency in Service Delivery

Decentralization facilitates quality service delivery in various sectors, notably where local governments have successfully mobilized resources. Such examples are:

- Fast issuance of business permits and local licenses.
- Effective tax collection at the municipal level.
- Better maintenance of community roads and marketplaces.

However, efficiency varied due to:

- Constraints from limited administrative capacity.
- Overlapping roles between local and central authorities, leading to inconsistency.
- Delay in the disbursement of funds from the central government.

### **Comparison with Central Governance**

To determine the effectiveness of decentralization, one should assess the performances of local governance against those of centralism.

#### 1) Decision-Making Propensity

- Centralized: There are many bureaucratic hurdles in the decision-making process; as a result, decision-making becomes slow.
- Decentralized: Decision-making at the local level is more hastened, thereby opening the way for faster responses to emergencies and localized questions.

#### 2) Community Liaison and Trust

<sup>6</sup><https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.1736>

- Centralized: Public participation tends to be low since citizens feel detached from street-level government institutions.
- Decentralized: Involvement has increased, although this very much depends on people being knowledgeable in governance culture.

3) Resource Distribution

- Centralized: Regional inequalities are perpetuated through the concentration of funds in urban sectors.
- Decentralized: Some improvements in equitable resource distribution but financial constraints still linger.

4) Corruption and Accountability

- Centralized Governance: Corruption is prevalent, with limited oversight mechanisms for high-level officials.
- Decentralized Governance: Greater potential for accountability but also increased opportunities for local-level corruption.

**Table: Comparative Assessment of Centralized vs. Decentralized Governance**

Factor	Centralized Governance	Decentralized Governance
<b>Decision-Making</b>	Slow, bureaucratic	Faster, Localized Decisions
<b>Public Trust</b>	Low, distant institutions	Higher community involvement
<b>Resource Allocation</b>	Unequal, favors urban areas	More equitable but limited funds
<b>Accountability</b>	Weak oversight for top officials	Greater potential but local corruption risks

## 6. Research Findings

The research was done with the intent of evaluating the effectiveness of decentralization in Liberia. It targeted local government officials, civil society representatives, and community members, aimed at getting their contextual perspective about service delivery, responsiveness of local governance, and challenges to decentralization policy implementation. This section executes the intensive exploration of the data collected.

### Presentation of Survey Results

The survey comprised several questions, both choice-based and open-ended, that dealt with some aspect of decentralization. The results are summed in the following:

#### 1) Perceptions of Public Service Delivery

The overall objective of decentralization is to improve the quality of public service delivery and access. The survey returned mixed reviews in this area:

- 35% say public service delivery has improved under decentralization, indicating better access to healthcare, education, and local infrastructure.
- 45% feel services are still mediocre and thus did not see the onset of improvements due to decentralization in their communities.
- 20% say service delivery has gotten worse due to bureaucratic ineptitude, lack

of funding, and infrastructure deficit.

## 2) The Responsiveness of Local Government

The responsiveness of local government to community needs is a critical consideration for decentralization to be successful. The survey findings on this subject include:

- 40% of respondents noticed that local governments became more responsive, as officials were accessible and participated in constant community meetings.
- 38% of respondents believed that the responsiveness of local government had not changed, and thus, it follows that the reform of decentralization did little to change the dynamics of governance.
- 22% expressed their displeasure, with the view that decision-making was still centralized and that local officials had little if any, real authority.

## 3) Accountability and Transparency in Governance

One of the major indicators of decentralization is the degree of accountability exercised by local governments towards the citizens whom they serve. The survey results on accountability include:

- 30% indicated that decentralization achieved transparency because local officials were monitoring and being held accountable more often (Cadot et al., 2009).
- 50% felt that corruption and mismanagement continued to fester, with little change in accountability to the National Government.
- 20% reported an increase in local-level corruption, claiming that decentralization merely redirects the power to local elites without any broadening to integrity in governance.

## 4) Challenges of Decentralization

The respondents identified the various barriers to ensuring the successful implementation of decentralization as follows:

- Limited financial resources (68% of respondents)—Local governments suffer from inadequate funding, making it difficult for them to implement development projects (Caprini, 2023).
- Lack of skilled personnel (54%)—Most local authorities have few if any trained staff for carrying out the essential administrative functions.
- Political interference (47%)—Politics at the national level repeatedly intrude into local government decisions, thus increasingly restricting the freedoms of local leaders.
- Infrastructure problems (62%)—Poor roads, a resilient communication system, and a lack of good electrification play a major role in poor service delivery.

### Table: Summary of Survey Results

Survey Questions	Key Findings
Has public service delivery improved under decentralization?	35% Yes, 45% No Change, 20% Worse
Has local government responsiveness improved?	40% Yes, 38% No Change, 22% Worse

**Continued**

Has decentralization improved accountability and transparency?	30% Yes, 50% No Change, 20% Worse
Key challenges identified	Financial constraints (68%), Skilled personnel shortage (54%), Political interference (47%), Infrastructure deficits (62%)

**Analysis of Public Perceptions Regarding Decentralization Efforts**

The survey findings suggest that while there have been some improvements in decentralization, especially at the local governance level, some serious issues still remain.

**1) Public Service Improvement: Observable**

Limited of the respondents, 35% observed improvement in service delivery, suggesting that decentralization tends to have an impact in some areas, while a larger percentage (45%) see no change, and 20% reported deterioration indicating that the gains from decentralization are not widespread. The shortages of funding and infrastructure deficits hindered service delivery from meeting expectations.

**2) Governance Responsiveness: Increased Participation, Minimal Effect**

With 40% indicating that local governments have recently become more responsive to citizens, decentralization seems to have enabled citizen participation in the affairs of the government. However, the evidence that 38% see no change at all, and 22% report a decline, indicates that many local governments still lack the authority or resources to give effect to any such potential change.

**3) Accountability and Transparency: Continuing Governance Problems**

Decentralization, in theory, ought to have enhanced transparency, however, 50% of our respondents felt corruption had remained at status quo, with a further 20% noting some deterioration. Hence, although power may have been devolved to local levels, it can still be said that governance reform was not robust enough to stem corruption and mismanagement.

**4) Major Challenges: Structural Barriers in Decentralization**

The largest obstacles pointed out were four-fold: limited financial resources, lack of skilled manpower, political interference, and infrastructure deficits. Structural barriers hindering the decentralization process must be sealed to improve governance and public service delivery at the local level.

**7. Conclusion**

Decentralization in Liberia has been adopted as a main strategy to improve governance, public service delivery, and inclusive development. However, although progress has been made, substantial challenges remain that continue to hamper this process. Some of the findings of this research include inadequate infrastructure, limited local government capacity, socio-economic disparities, and political resistance as obstacles that slow down decentralization's full potential. Therefore, addressing these challenges is synonymous with the assurance that decentraliza-

tion delivers quality and lasting measures of governance.

Infrastructure constitutes one of the most acute problems concerning the local government's ability to function. Such undeveloped infrastructure includes poor road networks within the counties and poor communication systems and public facilities that greatly limit the ability of local authorities to reach remote communities and render vital services. Citizens are left without access to health care, education, and government services, which defeats the cardinal purpose of decentralization. Without added investment in infrastructure, local governments will continue to encounter logistical constraints that will inhibit their effectiveness.

Another dominant obstacle is the lack of capacity of local governments. Many local authorities do not have the professional staff or financial resources to implement policies or effectively manage essential services. Dependency on grants from the central government further reduces local autonomy, fettering local governments in decision-making. Unless training programs and financial support empower local agencies, weak local governance will prevail, and decentralization will always fall short of the desired goal.

Socio-economic inequalities are major hurdles. As decentralization intends to provide an opposite-to-balanced development plan, rural areas continue to receive fewer development resources than urban centers. Many marginalized communities face difficulties with basic services, leading to extreme frustration and disillusionment with the entire decentralization process. Addressing these disparities requires targeted policies to properly and expeditiously allocate resources and deliver services to those populations in greatest need.

Moreover, political resistance and bureaucratic inefficiencies slow down the decentralization efforts. Interference by the central government often undermines local decision-making, while bureaucratic inefficiencies cause delays in policy implementation. Corruption and lack of accountability further complicate things, making it impossible for local governments to operate transparently and efficiently. Such challenges can only be surmounted with the strengthening of the governance framework and enforcement of accountability measures.

Despite these challenges, decentralization has increased the participation of citizens in governance processes across certain districts. Citizens have become involved in the decision-making processes, and local governments in some areas have shown enhanced service delivery. However, there have been inequities in decentralization, with many communities still far from visible gains.

Decentralization should be implemented in an effective, multifaceted way that includes infrastructural development, capacity-building initiatives, financial empowerment of local governments, and reforms of governance. If implemented correctly, decentralization can act as a turning point for effective government, equity in development, and increased public service delivery in Liberia. Unless key challenges specified in this study are addressed, decentralization is likely to fall short of its objectives and leave several communities short-changed on the benefits of local governance.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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