

Decentralization by Devolution; Perceptions of Councilors on the Level of their Decision Making Authority in Local Government Experience from Tarime Town Council

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Abstract

Early 1990s governments across the South have embarked on democratic decentralization reforms aimed at introducing and strengthening local governance because of its assumed potential to improve the delivery of public services and alleviate poverty. To comply with that international practice, in early 2000 Tanzania government decide embarked on an ambitious Local Government Reform Program that addressed Political decentralization. Political decentralization signaled the government's commitment to enhance the decision making authority of local government councils on matters affecting local development including determining priorities for local development, land use, finance, service delivery and human resource management. This paper sought to find out whether the selected local government council led by councilors enjoys the development planning, and service delivery authority as established in the local government law. The findings have confirmed that the case study council enjoyed modest decision making authority in the areas of local development planning, selecting local development strategy, and enjoyed even greater authority over service delivery powers.

Keywords: Local government authorities, Councilors, Decentralization

1. Introduction

Since early 1990s governments across the South have embarked on decentralization reforms aimed at introducing and strengthening local governance because of its assumed potential to improve the delivery of public services and alleviate poverty (URT, 2008). At the heart of democratic decentralization is a quest to address the limitations of the traditional top-down planning and decision making that are often regarded ineffective in that they often fail to meet the local priorities and demands for services (URT, 1998). A key arguments in this case is that the centralized decision making by its nature is unlikely to lead to development polices and allocation of public resources that effectively address the local development priorities. This is because not only the central government remains far from the people it is supposed to serve, but also it may lack the knowledge on the local development needs and also the local conditions that affect the local development endeavors (Olowu, 2003).

As argued by Devas (2005), effective democratic decentralization requires inter alia transferring significant functions, resources and also substantial decision making authority to local governments to enable them to effectively address the local demands for services and address alleviate poverty. Democratic decentralization literature See for instance Olowu & Wunsch, 2004; Devas, 2003) emphasizes the need for central government authorities to transfer well defined functions alongside adequate financial resources and decision making powers to local governments not only because of their proximity to local communities but also because their local knowledge and experience enable them to make better policies and development investment decisions that are responsive to the local development needs and priorities.

In early 2000 the government of Tanzania embarked on an ambitious Local Government Reform Program that addressed four policy areas in the following order: 1. Political decentralization, 2. Fiscal decentralization, 3. Administrative decentralization, and 4. Changed central-local relations (URT, 1998). Political decentralization signaled the government's commitment to enhance the decision making authority of local government councils on matters affecting local development including determining priorities for local development, land use, finance, service delivery and human resource management, inter alia. While the potential advantages of decentralization are well known and often recited by governments in various policy statements many countries continue to have central local relations that do not lead to autonomous and meaningful local governments.

In the light of the above background this manuscript assessed the perception of the councilors on level of decision making authority of local government using a case of a selected local government authority. It sought to find out whether the selected local government council led by councilors enjoys the development planning, and service delivery authority as established in the local government law, namely Local Government Acts No.8 and 9 of 1982 and also as per the D-by-D sprit pursued by the government both in the Local Government Reform Program 1 and 2.

2. Theoretical Literature Review

2.1. *Decentralization and Principal-Agent Theory*

Decentralization can be defined as the transfer of specified powers, responsibilities and resources from central government to local and other agencies that discharge the decentralized functions on behalf of the decentralizing authority (World Bank, 2004). Decentralization closely reflects the principal-agent theory where the principal authority for instance the central government disperses or delegates some of its specified powers, functions and resources to the defined agencies including local governments (Hughes, 2003; URT, 1998). At the local level, the voters are the principal authority that entrust their political authority that is decision making powers to councilors who become agents to the voters. The agents are expected to carry out the delegated or agreed functions and deliver the agreed services on behalf of the principal, and do so in accordance to agreed or expected standards in exchange for agreed compensation or reward for good performance and sanctions for poor performance that cannot be justified (Hughes, 2003; Bovens, 2006).

2.2. *The Concept and Purpose of Decision Making*

Decision has to do with making a choice or choices. It is a conscious human process which involves both individuals and groups selecting one or several courses of action from a set of alternatives (Devas, 2005). In the public sector governance, decision making implies a process by which those entrusted with the decision making make rational choice of policy or policies deemed to be potentially capable of addressing a problem or a set of problems at hand. The purpose of decision making is to select a best pathway or course of action that can lead to satisfactory problem solving (Hill, 2005). Thus decision making is meant to promote interests of the public.

2.3. *The Process of Decision Making and the Agency Problem*

Policy making literature provides good indication of the process of decision making. As stated by Dunn (2003), the process of decision making starts by problem identification and definition. Once the problems are known and agreed the next step is to decide which problems should be addressed first that is given top priority in the decision making agenda. The next step involves selecting alternative courses of action or solutions to the selected problems. The alternative solutions are compared and contrasted and finally the best course of action is selected and implemented (Hill, 2005).

While the fundamental purpose of decision making in the public sector local government included is to serve the public interest, those in charge of decision making may act in a way that does not benefit the public (URT, 2008). The principal agent theory referred to above clarifies this point better. One of the agency problems is that the agents entrusted to make decisions on behalf of the principal may act in a manner that completely diverges from the Interests of the principal (Hughes, 2003). In the context of local government this local government this implies the agents, both staff and councilors, may act selfishly by making decisions and act in a manner that does not serve the public interest. They may engage in corrupt practices and therefore undermine the capacity of local government to deliver quality

derives to the citizens (World Bank, 2004).

2.4. Assessing Decision Making Authority in Local Government

Community development literature represented by Arnstein (1969) provides useful insights on how decision authority of a local governments or communities may be assessed. Arnstein defines the levels of decision making authority from weaker to stronger forms where the stakeholders actually determine priorities for development investment and the courses of action, decide on service delivery priorities, determine financing of services, may decide to change the courses of action and take part in evaluating the implementation of the selected courses of action and investment plans. As presented in Table 1 Arnstein (1969) provided a ladder describing the levels of citizen engagement in the decision making process from the where forms where the people are merely recipients of information, educated on public programmes, consulted for their opinions to far better and stronger levels (levels 5 to 8) where the people actually influence and control the decision making process.

Figure 1: A ladder of participation in decision making

Level of participation	Category	Description
Level 8	Citizen control	Full delegation of all decision making and action
Level 7	Delegated power	Some power is delegated
Level 6	Partnership	People can begin to negotiate with traditional power holders, including agreeing roles, responsibilities and levels of control.
Level 5	Involvement	People's views have some influence, but traditional power holders still make the decision.
Level 4	Consultation	People are given a voice, but no power to ensure their views are headed.
Level 3	Informing	People are told what is going to happen, is happening or has happened.
Level 2	Education	Level one and two people are educated to participate through the provision of information which may be partial or in accurate information.
Level 1	Manipulation	

Source: Adopted from Arnstein (1969)

This study argues the suggestions provided by development decentralization literature referred to above regarding the key areas indicating the authority of local government in decision making and the Arnstein's (1969) model of community participation are relevant to the analysis of decision making authority in local government.

2.5. Roles of Councilors in Local Government Authorities

According to Albert (1989) the local government council is the body which receives political demands (policy agenda) that are generated in the locality by individuals and groups including councilors. Councilors are local politicians elected to represent interest of their wards in the council. There are two main categories of the responsibilities of councilors: Individual and collective.

2.5.1 Individual Responsibilities

According to Fowler (1995) the individual responsibilities of the councilor relate to representing his/her constituency or ward in the council. Thus the councilor is expected to: 1. Present and defend interests of his /her ward in the council, 2. Provide feedback to the ward on the decisions reached by the council, 3. Clarify council decisions and actions including the finances of the council, expenditures and implementation of development projects and service delivery, 4. Collect and present concerns and priorities of the voters to the council, and 5. Advance policies of his/her political/party in the council (Nchimbi, 2003). Councilors pay out most attention to their individual responsibilities and because these determine their re-election or loss of political office.

2.5.2. Collective Responsibilities

All councilors irrespective of the different political ideologies are responsible for the overall development of the districts within which their councils operate and have responsibility (Max, 1991). Collectively they perform many duties including but not limited to: 1. Determining development policy and strategy, 2. Reviewing development policy and strategy and decide on the relevant changes, 3. Deliberating and deciding on council's development and recurrent budget and by-laws, 4. Supervising the conduct of the council's administration with regard to the implementation of development projects and service delivery, 5. Fostering community leadership and engagement, 6. They are the appointing and disciplinary authority for all cadres of staff in local government, In Tanzania however the appointment and disciplinary authority of senior high level post is firmly held by the central government (URT, 2008).

3. The Methodology

This study employed case study design to explore in detail the perception of councilors on decision making authority in Tarime Town Council. The sample of the study was 30 respondents involved 12 councilors representing the eight wards and the Member of Parliament representing Tarime Town constituency, 6 heads of department, 4 heads of section, 5 local government experts from selected institutions and 2 representatives of NGOs involved in community development activities. The study used two sampling techniques which are purposive and simple randomly sampling. Purposive sampling which is a non-probability

sampling procedure to select the 26 respondents into the study sample. The main criterion for inclusion of the respondents into sample was their resourcefulness

Interview method was principally used to gather perceptions of councilors on the level of their decision making authority. It was also used to capture opinions of the local government experts, representatives of NGOs and also selected heads section at Tarime Town Council on the decision making authority of councilors and local governments. Semi structured interview guided by an interview guide. Two FGDs involving 5 participants each were used to collect opinions of the heads of department and head of sections on the level of council decision making authority in selected areas: local development planning, determining development strategies, revenue mobilization authority, expenditure authority, budgeting and service delivery authority.

A number of documents were solicited and reviewed in the course of collecting data to address the main focus of this article addressed by this study. Included were: the policy paper on local government reform (1998), Local Government (Urban Authorities) Act No 8 of 1982, Local Government Finance Act No 9 of 1982, LGRP implementation reviews. Data collated were mainly qualitative an approach to data analysis was qualitative. Specifically, thematic analysis was used.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Councilors' Authority over Local Development Priorities

The question used to address the above variable was *to what extent councilors influence the choice of service delivery priorities in the council?* Based on the conceptual framework of the study, three indicators were used to investigate the above captioned independent variable: 1. Authority to set independent development plans, 2. Authority to select local development strategies and 3. The extent of service delivery authority.

4.2. Authority to Set Local Development Plans and Select Local Development Strategies

Interview with councilors revealed mixed reaction with nearly 67% of the respondents indicating they commanded substantial decision making authority in determining the local development agenda and direction and also substantial powers on deciding the local development strategies. Data in Table 3 summarizes councilors' responses on the extent of their decision making authority over local development priorities and determining the associated strategies.

Table 3: Responses on the extent councilors decision making authority over local development planning

Extent of authority	Responses	Percent
Substantial	6	66.7
Limited	3	33.3
Total	9	100.0

Source: Interview data (2014-15)

Some councilors (33%) were rather skeptical indicating they did not feel they had adequate authority over determining the local development investment direction. In the words of one skeptical councilor the following was recorded:

“I can tell you this government is not interested in letting the local governments have the powers they deserve. I do not know what really scares them to establish local governments with adequate decision making authority. How can they say we have authority when they almost always tell us what to do and refuse to allow us collect revenue from the lucrative sources?”

This rather unhappy respondent was referring to the ‘planning guidelines’ that the central government issues to guide local government budgeting process annually. He did also refer to many inelastic sources of revenue sources assigned to local governments particularly the rural ones.

When further probed, the councilors who felt they had authority over the local development agenda clarified that there was nothing that prevented from suggesting a local development path. A high ranking councilor said

“We absolutely in charge here and have authority over local development planning. We decide the local strategic direction where we select the development agenda in terms of priorities for local development investment and also selecting strategies to achieve the decided development investments plans. Those in opposition will never appreciate the powers of the council. They are chronically skeptical and always negative even where the improvements are obvious”

These councilors argued that even if the central government issues planning guidelines (discussed in the last section of the part) and delivers conditional grants their council still enjoyed substantial decision making authority over the local development plans. As discussed below, this opinion was largely shared by the local government staff.

FGD with sampled heads of department at Tarime Town Council (TTC) indicated generally the acknowledgement by the staff of substantial development planning powers of the council. This opinion was also reflected by interviewed heads of unit at TTC. The council staff

unanimously referred to what one of them called “*a lot of powers*” to decide on the local development path on behalf of the local citizens. The staff referred to local government laws and also the policy paper on local government reform (1998) as the source local development planning exercised by their council and other local government authorities across the country.

Unlike some skeptical councilors, these respondents did not consider the central government planning guidelines as seriously impeding the council planning authority. Instead they referred to a huge (100%) planning authority over projects funded by own finances.

Telephone interview with local government experts confirmed the above suggestion that indeed local governments have been given substantial local development planning powers particularly with regard to determining the priority developments projects financed by the locally generated revenue. The interviewed experts unanimously indicated that local governments can come up with any decisions with regard to local development provided they are lawful decisions likely to serve the public interest and that they are within the confines of local government their powers.

However, the experts observed that the development planning powers of local governments are often limited by lack of adequate resources to implement the selected service delivery projects. Indeed, literature for instance Smoke (2003) indicate that many local governments fail to implement their development plans because of the lack of adequate funding. One of the well established principles of decentralization and local governance is that the decentralized functions should be accompanied by an adequate level of financial and human resources (Johnson, 2000).

4.3. Service Delivery Authority

The review of local government laws (Section 111 of Local government Act N0 7 and Section 54 of Local government Acts No 8 of 1982 revealed that local government authorities in Tanzania Tarime Town Council being part have been given authority to deliver many services to their respective local communities. Those are mandatory services meaning the local governments must deliver those services to improve the well being of the people and alleviate poverty (URT, 1982).

Moreover, the review of “part V” (the sections entitled *schedules*) in both local government Acts N0 7 and 8 revealed that the local governments have been allowed to deliver more the one hundred “permissive” functions. These are functions local government **may** deliver if they deem necessary and have resources to do so (URT, 1982, 1998). Interview with councilors and FGD with staff of Tarime Town Council confirmed the above finding. As senior council staff TTC said “*Oooh, we have more than enough responsibility for service delivery. We will some of the functions could be transferred to someone else so that we remain with few functions to grapple with*”.

Like the local government experts, both councilors and staff referred to the scarcity of funding indicating that while their council was responsible for the delivery of many services it did not have adequate resources to do so. Indeed, literature for instance Devas (2003) and Smoke (2003) shows that often governments push so many functions down to local

governments without the corresponding level of funding. Literature (Olowu, 2003; URT, 2008) further argues that often governments give a lot of planning powers to local governments but without the necessary financial and human resources to implement the plans. While this observation is common in decentralization literature, some people and institutions, for instance Tanzi (2002) and the World Bank (2004) have disputed the lack of funds argument saying local governments always use the excuse of lack of funds for their failure and inability to deliver the local services.

Indeed over years, evidence provided by the Controller and Auditor General (CAG) often indicates that many local governments misuse the funds meant to improve the delivery of the local services. One of the interviewed representatives of NGOs argued that

“It is true that the LGAs may have limited funds. But the question is what do they do with the available funds? Most of them are simply not committed to improving the delivery of services. Even a small amount of money should go a long way to improve the local services. We simply lack the people in these governments with public interest at heart. So they will always complain and complain and complain... that they do not have adequate funding. Ask them what they have done with the so called little money they have and they will show you nothing...”

While the above quote has a lot of support in literature, clearly the argument of inadequate funding to local governments is experienced in many countries (Devas, 2005). This study argues that local governments cannot be expected to implement their often huge service delivery mandate with limited funding. Australia, Canada and the USA are among the countries credited with providing local governments adequate authority and funding (Davey, 1996; Tanzi, 2002).

5. Conclusion

The conclusion of this manuscript is that the findings do not fully support the stance of critics that local governments in Tanzania lack planning authority. Instead the findings have confirmed that the case study council enjoyed modest decision making authority in the areas of local development planning, selecting local development strategy, and enjoyed even greater authority over service delivery powers.

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