

## **Counter Factual Reasoning for the Decentralized System of Public Administration Theory: *Building on Insights from Empirical Literature and the Performance of Tanzanian Local Government***

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**Abstract:** *Counter factual reasoning is a concept that involves constructive representation in which the researchers imagine the alternative to existing theoretical assumption, constructs and models. In this article, the concept is applied to develop an alternative thinking concerning the performance of decentralized system of public administration in Tanzania. Overall, a theory of public administration predicts four main objectives to be realized by the decentralized system. This includes improved local democracy, allocative efficiency, cost efficiency and tailor made services. On the contrary, in developing countries and Tanzania in particular, these objectives have not been fully attained. Although a theory and empirical literature suggest some factors explaining its short fall, overall it does not paint a full picture on the factors which are responsible for its failure. Instead, the mainstream literature focus on formal design of the system and the availability of resources and it neglects the informal institutions which guide the behavior of the actors involved in service delivery. In order to shed light on this puzzle, this article uses problematization method of counterfactual reasoning to develop an alternative model. The model is grounded on social logical institutionalism which suggests that goals and interests of actors are not given by nature, but result from the expectations created by the formal and informal institutions. This suggest that to understand why the performance of the decentralized system falls short, it is necessary to take into account: the formal institutions, the informal institutions and the availability of resources as a condition for service delivery. Therefore, unlike the default model which suggest two variables: the design of the system and the availability of resources, the alternative model suggests three variables: the formal design of the system, informal institutions and the availability of resources as explanatory factors to the performance of decentralized system of public administration in Tanzania.*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Counter factual reasoning is a theory building technique which involves constructive representation in which researchers imagine the alternative to existing theoretical assumption, constructs and models with the purpose of advancing knowledge by creating new connection and exploring its practical implications<sup>[10,27]</sup>. The application of counter factual reasoning can be done by using different techniques. Some of these techniques include discipline imagination which involves development of different alternatives to existing theory by using trial and error thinking. In precise, it involves consistent application of selection criteria such as *novelty and interesting* to develop the best alternative<sup>[41]</sup>. Second technique used is constructive explanation in which an explanation is an answer to constructive question. For example, it sets a question on why *P* rather than *Q* which means *P* is the phenomenon to be explained and *Q* is an alternative<sup>[38]</sup>. Third technique used is problematization method which involves; challenging the underlying assumption in the literature through critical review and suggesting the alternative to existing assumptions and models. It involves asking how and to what extent it would be possible to think differently instead of what is already known<sup>[1]</sup>. Since the goal of this article is to develop an alternative thinking concerning the performance of decentralized system of public administration in Tanzania, this last technique was used. In Tanzania, the decentralized system of Public Administration was first adopted by the colonial government through establishment of local governments system in 1919. The local government system was further empowered by 1926 Native authorities' ordinance which permitted chiefs to exercise substantial executive, judicial and administrative power. It also provided for the establishment of British district government officers who were appointed to advise the chiefs<sup>[28]</sup>.

In 1953, the British government introduced a limited form of local democracy. Ordinary citizens could be appointed in the district council by the district commissioner, by the recommendation of chiefs<sup>[28]</sup>. Although local government was given new responsibilities, such as the provision of health care, primary education, or the power to raise local taxes, the district commissioner maintained tight control over the native authorities. Moreover, native authorities were only present in rural areas<sup>[28, 39]</sup>. Apart from these, in urban areas a small number of Municipalities and town councils were established.

At the time of independence, Tanzania inherited the local government system left by British<sup>[30]</sup>. The political goal of government at that point was to promote independence, unity and equality through a nationalist movement. The nationalist ideology was implemented through the modernization of economy. The state took itself as an actor and agent for the modernization process with the aim to promote socio economic growth and the provision of basic needs<sup>[20]</sup> while the local government was used as a vehicle for improving the provision of basic services. To that effect, it was necessary to establish an overall local government system<sup>[28]</sup>. First, the government abolished the native authorities and established district councils throughout the country. Their composition varied from sixteen to sixty members depending on the size of the population and the area<sup>[40]</sup>. Second, the government replaced general administrative officers, who previously headed provinces and districts with political appointees who were the District and Regional Commissioners. And third, it introduced central government transfers to local government authorities<sup>[39]</sup>.

Despite the introduction of a local government system, the gap between the government and the people widened and the vision of social equality and justice which were embedded in the nationalist movement was threatened<sup>[20]</sup>. Following that, from 1964 centralization was strengthened and the channels for citizens' participation were closed<sup>[20]</sup>. Authoritarian government gained foot and the economic activities were also centralized<sup>[20]</sup>. In 1972, when service delivery by local government, due to a lack of capacity in finance and human resources proved to be inefficient and not responsive to local needs, the delivery of services was also centralized. The central government and regional deconcentrated agencies became the main providers of services<sup>[32]</sup> and the institutions for service delivery like local boards and local government service commissions were abolished<sup>[31,32]</sup>. Following that, the decision making power was concentrated at the center and local government was perceived as an implementing agency of central government rather than a representative body<sup>[30,40]</sup>. The role of elected local councils was taken over by senior central government staff that was then transferred to local government; consultative forums at regional and district levels were abolished and regional commissioners were conferred a ministerial status<sup>[39]</sup>. Consequently, the district councils rapidly became bureaucratic organizations dominated by central government officials<sup>[28]</sup>.

From 1979, the country experienced an economic crisis. Agricultural production stagnated because of a weak demand for export crops; terms of trade worsened and foreign aid was reduced. The main cause of the crisis was associated with bad policies and the internal economic structure. Researchers argued that the crisis could be solved by reforming the institutions and democratizing the society: external advisers such as IMF and the World Bank advised for less state and more market. Consequently, in 1982 the government adopted reforms that reintroduced local government as the main vehicle for service delivery and development. To increase democratic participation in decision-making and implementation, local governments were entrusted with substantial formal authority. The elected councils were empowered to collect revenues, enact by-laws and determine local budgets and plans<sup>[16, 39]</sup>.

However, the inherited structure hindered local government playing the role attributed to it because resources like man power, expertise and equipment were retained at the regional level. Central government continued to control local government through the legal framework, policies and guidelines on local taxation and budget ceilings<sup>[30]</sup>. Consequently, the regional administration undertook the larger part of local development activities and controlled most of the local funding<sup>[39]</sup>.

Following the poor performance of the reformed system and the pressure from the World Bank and other donors, the government introduced *Decentralization by Devolution* and put it forward in the local government reform agenda of 1996 and the 1998 policy paper. The aim of these reforms was to give the local council power over all local affairs such as the power to levy taxes and provide services to local population. The reforms included the obligation of central government to supply adequate unconditional grants and allow the local council to pass budget plans that reflected their priorities. In

addition, the reforms promised to delink local staff from their respective ministries and to transfer responsibility as to establish the payroll and recruitment of the local staff to local government. The role of central government would be limited to general policy making, providing support and capacity building<sup>[30]</sup>. However, as said above, the idea of the reforms did not originate from the government; above all, it was the opinion of the donors that decentralization was necessary<sup>[40]</sup>.

Despite the high expectations of the reforms, recent evaluations show that service delivery does not meet the standards and expectations set at the beginning of the decentralization process. A number of factors seem to play a role. According to the official account, the administrative system is characterized by devolution: the main responsibility for service delivery and development lies with local government which is governed by elected councils; the role of central government and regional agencies of central government is merely to facilitate and support local government policies. But in reality, the role of central government leaves little discretion for local government; there is extensive central regulation of local policies and there is tight supervision; the recruitment and appointment of the local staff is predominantly in the hands of central government agencies; central government funding is insufficient to cover the costs of service delivery; local authorities lack the capacity to collect taxes; managerial and leadership skills at the local level are low, as is the level of civic education<sup>[29,39]</sup>. These Tanzanian experiences seem to be in line with the evaluations of decentralized systems in other developing countries. The question is what goes wrong? Are key propositions of decentralization theory untenable, are there moderating factors or conditions which play a role? How can we explain the poor performance of decentralized systems of public administration in Tanzania? This question justifies the use of counterfactual reasoning to develop an alternative thinking for the performance of the system. In doing this, I systematically applied problematization method of counterfactual reasoning to develop the alternative thinking. First, I identified the domain of literature for the assumption challenging investigation. In this case, the decentralized system of public administration in Tanzania was a focal point. Second, I identified and articulated the assumption underlying decentralized system of public administration. Third, I evaluated the articulated assumption of decentralized system of public administration. Fourth, I developed the alternative thinking of the decentralized system and considered it relation to audience and lastly I evaluated the alternative assumption ground.

## **2. APPLICATION OF PROBLEMATIZATION METHOD TO THE STUDY OF DECENTRALIZED SYSTEM OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

### **2.1. Identification of the Domain of Literature**

In identifying the domain of literature as a focal point, I started with *path defining*. This involves reading general literature in respective field and searching for the areas of focus<sup>[1]</sup>. In doing this, I chose the field of public administration as a field of interest. I explored different topics and finally I focused on one topic titled *decentralized system of public administration*. After that, I identified texts on the concept and theory of decentralization as my focal point while reading few *authoritative studies* and most recent *influential studies* with respect to theory of decentralization. These studies include; dimension and the degree of decentralization, decentralization and local democracy; allocative efficiency; cost efficiency; tailor made services and coordination of services. Then, I narrowed the literature into key assumption based the prediction of the outcomes of the theory of decentralization which includes vital local democracy, improved allocative efficiency, cost efficiency, tailor made services and coordination of services.

### **2.2. Identification and Articulation of Assumption**

In identifying and articulating the assumption, I used different methodological tactics such as paradigm, in-house and root metaphor assumptions. The field assumption with respect to theory of decentralization is that attribution of decision making authority to local councils creates proximity between citizens and their representative which has a positive impact on local democracy<sup>[7, 26, 24, 37, 13]</sup>. This means that local government is in a good position to collect information about the preferences of citizens and citizens can monitor the government policies and services from nearby. Because decision making authority lies with local government citizens are encouraged to articulate their needs and criticisms. On the other hand, the field of economics presents a paradigm assumption which suggests that decentralization can have a negative impact on cost efficiency if there are large economies of scale involved in the delivery of services<sup>[5, 18, 25]</sup>.

### 2.3. Potentialities for Contribution to Theory of Public Administration

Because the theory insists on theoretical potentials, in evaluating the assumption I concentrated on its opportunity for contribution. To be more precise, I considered novelty, fruitfulness and provocative capacity of a theory. Since a literature suggests that assumption should provide clear understanding of a theory, I concentrated in search for the clarity of assumption. In doing this, I reviewed empirical literature which disclosed a series of factors explaining the failure of decentralization. The empirical literature indicate that the design of decentralized system can obstruct service delivery if specific features of a policy or service such as the economies of scale of services or the externalities of policy decisions in certain sectors are not taken to account<sup>[3,34,13]</sup>. In other words, for certain services or policy sectors, a high degree of decentralization may undermine the quality of governance or service delivery. The second type of failure concerns the opposite, i.e. a low degree of decentralization. The literature has provided a proof that decentralization is characterized by centralistic elements which obstruct local democracy through promotion of upward accountability of local government officials and discouraging the active participation of citizens in local decision making which as result limit the efficient allocation of resources and tailor made service delivery<sup>[9,35,17]</sup>.

Besides, the literature shows that the transfer of responsibilities and decision making authority to local government assumes that local government will have capacity of a local administration to sufficiently fulfill tasks of general government and to provide the services. On the contrary, local governments in developing countries are poorly staffed and the technical expertise and equipment to provide services are often not sufficient. This can be attributed by poor design of administrative system and scarcity of resources<sup>[9, 12, 17, 33, 34, 35]</sup>. However, the literature indicate that the operation of local governments ,decision on plans and policies, functioning of local democracy and citizens participation in local decision making can at least partly be explained by the informal institutions in place.<sup>[2, 6, 13, 33, 34, 35]</sup>

### 2.4. Developing the Alternative Assumption

The review of the literature discussed above has disclosed a large series of factors explaining the relative failure of the decentralized system of public administration. It is possible to subsume these under three main headings. The first involves the formal institutions, i.e. the formal administrative system. It concerns the distribution of responsibilities and decision making authority amongst different layers of government and the design of intergovernmental relations. Two types of failures can occur. The first is that the design of the decentralized system does not take into account the specific features of the policy or service in question, such as the economies of scale of services or the externalities of policy decisions in certain sectors. In these cases, the transfer of responsibilities and decision making authority to the lowest administrative level can result in a loss of cost efficiency (if minimum scales of production are not met) or in the sub optimal allocation of resources and harmful competition between local governments (if the system lacks arrangements for the regulation of externalities). In other words, for certain services or policy sectors a high degree of decentralization may undermine the quality of governance or service delivery. The second type of failure concerns the opposite, i.e. a low degree of decentralization. Decentralization comes in different degrees and shapes, but even in highly decentralized systems some form of central regulation or oversight is present, and with good reasons. But the literature suggests that administrative systems which are presented by national governments as highly decentralized in fact often contain central rules and regulations for local decision making and service delivery, national guidelines and priorities for local planning, detailed central guidelines for spending budgets and grants, or arrangements for the supervision of local decisions by central government. There is ample evidence that this kind of centralistic elements can undermine local democracy by promoting upward accountability of local government officials and discouraging the active participation of citizens in local decision making; and that it can limit the responsiveness of local government, the efficient allocation of resources and tailor made service delivery.

The second heading is the availability of resources. Again, it is possible to distinguish between two categories of resources. The first concerns the resources of local government. A transfer of responsibilities and decision making authority to local government presupposes the capacity of a local administration to adequately fulfill tasks of general government and to provide the services for which it is responsible. There is ample evidence that local governments in developing countries are poorly staffed and that the technical expertise and equipment to provide services are often not sufficient. In part, this is due to the general scarcity of resources these countries have to deal with. But it can also

be the result of the design of the administrative system, if central governments attribute responsibilities and tasks to local government, but do not allocate the corresponding personnel and budgets. It is clear that the volume and type of resources required vary with the policy sector or service. The second categories of resources concern the human and social capital of the local communities. The literature shows that illiteracy, low levels of education of the population, the absence of civil society organizations or their limited capacity for social mobilization hinder the emergence of active citizenship, and limit the possibilities for citizens to articulate their preferences and hold local governments accountable.

The third heading involves the informal institutions, i.e. the norms, values and social rules which give meaning to reality and guide the behavior and interactions of individuals, groups and organizations. In general discussions on issues of centralization and decentralization the role of informal institutions receives little attention. Empirical research however shows that how local governments operate, how local councils decide on plans and policies, how local democracy functions, whether and how citizens participate (or are allowed to participate) in local decision making, how civil society organizations interact with local government can at least partly be explained by the informal institutions in place. If there is no culture of accountability present, local councils avoid meetings with citizens or show themselves immune for their criticism. If local officials put a high value on administrative rules, they will tend to ignore citizens claims for tailor made services. Absenteeism, corruption and elite capture by officials and elected executives can only occur if they are up to a certain point considered as admissible practices. Women will not voice their needs and complaints in council and village meetings if social rules tell them to hold their tongue in the presence of men.

Since the discussion on centralization and decentralization does not sufficiently pay attention to values and norms which guide the behavior of politicians, administrators and citizens, in developing alternative assumption, I reviewed the literature on sociological institutions to establish how these values and norms guide the behavior of actors. This theory assumes that the systems of rules, norms, values and conventions structure the courses of actions of actors<sup>[19]</sup>. Institutions show the boundaries of behavior by defining roles, obligations and prohibitions which show what is appropriate, permitted or forbidden. They also give meaning to human action. Although actors are assumed to pursue their interests, the existing institutions shape the way they define their interests and preferences<sup>[21]</sup>. This suggests that the goals and interests of actors are not given by nature, but result from the expectations created by the formal and informal institutional context that these actors operate in. In order to understand why the decentralized system of public administration fall short, we must consider, not only the formal design of the system i.e. the formal rules, policies and regulations and the resources but also the informal institutions such as values and norms which guide the behavior of officials and give meaning to reality.

Therefore, the review of literature suggest an alternative model for the performance of decentralized system of public administration which addresses three independent variables: the formal institutions which explain the policy sector or service in question; the availability of relevant resources for the actors involved to perform their respective roles; and the informal institutions, i.e. the social norms, values and rules which give meaning to reality and guide the behavior and interaction of actors, in the realm of politics, administration and society. The three variables are expected to result into *vital local democracy* in which citizens participate in the election of their representative and in the decision making on plans and program, *allocative efficiency* in which officials allocate resources according to the preferences of people, *cost efficiency* in which the citizens monitor the officials nearby and reduce decision making cost, *coordinated services* in which the waste is reduced and *tailor made service delivery* in which the resources are allocated according to different needs of local population.

## **2.5. The New Assumption in Relation to Audience**

In this article, the alternative assumption targets the general public, local and national politicians engaged in policy making and supervision of the actual implementers of the policies and programs. Since the literature warns us to avoid upsetting certain groups with the alternative assumption, I considered the use of anonymity techniques in which the assumption can be applied to different groups of politicians, civil society, the community and the administrators engaged in the delivery of public services in Tanzania.

## 2.6. Evaluation of the Alternative Assumption

The literature suggests some criteria which can be used to evaluate the alternative assumption ground. In this review, I paid attention to three criteria namely *novelty*, *excitement* and *interesting*. The literature suggests that the alternative assumption can be interesting if it accepts certain parts or part of a theory and rejects others. Nevertheless, if the alternative assumption rejects all parts of a default theory, it can be perceived as unbelievable. In this article, I develop the alternative assumption which accepts part of a default theory of decentralization which assumes that attribution of formal roles, responsibility and resources to local government can improve service delivery. My argument is that, this theory is insufficient because it neglects the fact that officials and politicians involved in the delivery of services are guided by informal institutions in place which determine their behavior and interaction. With respect to novelty and excitement, the literature suggests that the assumption is novelty and exciting if it tells us new and surprising contribution to theory. In this article, the proposed alternative assumption/ theory is novelty because it incorporates the three explanatory variables namely formal institution, informal institution and the availability of resources unlike the default theory which assumes that only decentralizing power and resources to local government is enough and disregards the fact that the officials involved in the delivery of the services have their own value and norms which guide their actions and interaction.

## 3. CONCLUSION

The final conclusion is that counterfactual reasoning for the decentralized system of public administration sheds light on the default model/theory of decentralization because it provides the alternative thinking grounded on sociological institutionalism. The assumption that decentralization of decision making authority and resources alone to local government would result to improved service delivery (improved local democracy, allocative efficiency, cost efficiency, tailor made services and coordination in services) does not hold because the actions of local government politicians and administrators are guided by values and social rules which shape their behavior and interaction. This suggests that to understand why decentralized system of public administration in Tanzania fall short, we must take into account the number of factors which constitute an alternative model: formal design of the system which touch upon the government policies, rules and regulations, distribution of formal roles and responsibilities; the availability of resources which includes human and financial resources which can seriously constrain the delivery of the services if they are insufficient or not made available and the informal institutions such as social rules and values which guide and shape the behavior of the actors involved in service delivery.

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