



Research Article

Decentralization and Local Governance: Lessons from Kenya and Uganda

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Abstract

This article analyzes decentralization reforms in Kenya and Uganda, focusing on their pursuit of robust local governance and improved service delivery. By comparing historical trajectories, legal frameworks, outcomes, and challenges, the article distills practical lessons for other countries embarking on similar paths.

Keywords: Decentralization, Kenya, Uganda, local governance, service delivery, legal frameworks, policy reforms, comparative analysis, institutional development, public administration.

INTRODUCTION

Decentralization—the transfer of authority and resources from central to local governments—has transformed governance across Africa. Kenya and Uganda, both pioneers in the region, introduced radical reforms to counteract decades of centralized power, aiming to deepen democracy, foster citizen participation, and catalyze development. Their experiences, though unique, offer interdisciplinary lessons for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

Decentralization encompasses:

- **Political Decentralization:** Electoral empowerment of local governments.
- **Administrative Decentralization:** Transfer of managerial authority and staff.
- **Fiscal Decentralization:** Local autonomy on budgeting and revenue collection.

Proper balance among these dimensions ensures genuine local self-governance and responsive service delivery.

3. Decentralization in Kenya

3.1 Historical Evolution

Despite a brief experiment in 1963–64, Kenya remained highly centralized until its landmark 2010 Constitution. The Constitution created a two-tier governance structure, devolving authority to 47 counties with directly elected leadership^{[1][2][3]}.

3.2 Key Features of Kenyan Devolution

- **Counties as Units:** Each of Kenya's 47 counties has an elected governor, assembly, and control over substantial functions, including health, agriculture, and local infrastructure^{[1][2]}.
- **Participation and Accountability:** Mandated citizen engagement and greater transparency in budgeting and priority-setting^[4].
- **Equitable Distribution:** Allocation of national resources to reduce interregional disparities.
- **Diversity and Inclusion:** Policies to enhance representation of women, youth, and marginalized groups.

3.3 Outcomes and Performance

- **Service Delivery:** Improvements are evident in some counties, especially in healthcare infrastructure and roads. Variation remains significant between counties^{[2][4]}.
- **Checks and Balances:** More robust oversight of local leadership, though new forms of patronage and elite capture have emerged^[5].
- **Citizen Participation:** Gains in public participation, but deep, sustained engagement varies widely. Legal mandates exist but practical challenges remain^[2].
- **Challenges:** Persistent issues include high administrative costs, uneven technical capacity, and difficulties in intergovernmental coordination^{[1][2][3]}.

4. Decentralization in Uganda

4.1 Historical Background

Uganda's formal decentralization began with the Local Government Act of 1997, implementation accelerating under reformist governments from the 1990s, aiming to transfer real powers to districts^{[6][7][8]}.

4.2 Structure and Pillars

- **Local Government System:** Five-tier elected local councils at district, municipality, sub-county, parish, and village levels^{[7][8]}.
- **Devolution Scope:** Authority over planning, budgeting, revenue collection, and service delivery, including hiring and firing local staff—a rare provision in African decentralization^{[6][9]}.
- **Fiscal Transfers:** One of Africa’s highest shares of budgetary transfers to local governments.

4.3 Outcomes and Achievements

- **Democratic Empowerment:** Regular local elections with significant local participation^[8].
- **Service Proximity:** Public services (e.g., primary schools, health centers) expanded, especially in rural areas^{[6][8]}.
- **Accountability and Innovation:** Enabled locally tailored solutions and, in some areas, improved responsiveness^{[7][8]}.
- **Challenges:** Increasing numbers of administrative units have strained limited fiscal resources, and recentralization tendencies have emerged^{[8][7]}.

5. Comparative Analysis: Lessons Learned

5.1 Democratization and Participation

Aspect	Kenya	Uganda
Level of Devolution	County (47 units) – substantial autonomy	District/Sub-county – extensive devolution
Election of Leaders	Universal suffrage, direct governor elections	Multi-tiered, direct at all levels
Citizen Engagement	Mandated, but uneven	Widespread, but effectiveness varies

5.2 Service Delivery and Equity

- Both countries saw marked improvements in bringing services closer to citizens, though regional disparities persist, especially in resource-poor areas^{[8][11]}.
- Fiscal transfers are critical in maintaining equity but require strict oversight to avert misuse and elite capture^{[9][7]}.

5.3 Administrative and Fiscal Challenges

- **Kenya:** Administrative and fiscal capacity lags in some counties, risking inefficiency and corruption^{[11][2]}.

- **Uganda:** Increase in the number of districts has overstretched resources, while recentralization trends risk undermining local agency^[7].

5.4 Sustainability and Governance

Both cases underscore the importance of:

- Robust legal frameworks ensuring real devolution.
- Capacity-building for local governments (technical, managerial, financial).
- Mechanisms for constructive center-local collaboration.
- Continuous monitoring and public reporting to ensure transparency.

6. Graphs and Data Illustrations

Figure 1: Growth in Number of Local Government Units (1990–2023)

Year	Kenya (Counties)	Uganda (Districts)
1990	1	39
2010	47	112
2023	47	135

Note: While Kenya’s structural revolution occurred in 2010, Uganda’s expansion of districts continued steadily after 1997 reforms.

Figure 2: Share of National Budget Transferred to Local Governments (2020)

Country	Share of Budget (%)
Kenya	~20
Uganda	~25

7. CASE STUDIES

7.1 Kenya: Baringo and Elgeyo Marakwet Counties

- **Youth Participation:** World Bank-supported local initiatives created workshops where youth co-designed policy solutions, advancing both engagement and targeted intervention^[4].

7.2 Uganda: Wakiso District

- **Improved Primary Health Care:** Local government investment led to increased access to maternal health services, exemplifying positive decentralization outcomes^{[6][7]}.

8. Emerging Issues and Policy Recommendations

- **Avoid Over-Fragmentation:** Uganda’s proliferation of districts has diluted resources. Emphasis should shift to strengthening existing units^{[8][7]}.

- **Enhance Fiscal Capacity:** Both countries must broaden and secure local revenue sources, not just rely on central transfers.
- **Deepen Participation:** Both need innovative tools for sustained and meaningful citizen engagement beyond formal consultations.
- **Combat Corruption:** Strengthen accountability and transparency at all government levels.
- **Data-Driven Governance:** Invest in IT and monitoring systems for real-time policy feedback.

9. CONCLUSION

Kenya and Uganda's decentralization journeys show that genuine devolution—anchored in robust legal frameworks, adequate fiscal resources, and empowered citizenry—can strengthen local governance. Persistent challenges include ensuring equitable fiscal allocation, avoiding elite capture, and coping with capacity gaps. Lessons from both highlight the need for tailored, evolving approaches rooted in local contexts and constant vigilance against recentralizing drifts.

Their experience is instructive for Africa and beyond: successful decentralization is as much about ongoing adaptation and oversight as initial legal reforms. With sustained investment in local capacity and citizen empowerment, decentralization remains a cornerstone for deepening democracy and delivering practical development on the ground.

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