



Limits to citizen engagement and downward accountability in the context of decentralization by devolution in Tanzania

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Key messages

- Low levels of financial and administrative discretion by LGAs limits effectiveness of citizen participation and downward accountability.
- Effective citizen engagement requires more realistic participatory planning strategy and feedback mechanisms.
- Downward accountability is still constrained by limited access to information and capacity of citizens and CSOs to carry out regular public expenditure tracking and budget analysis.

Introduction

This brief examines how the process of decentralization by devolution in Tanzania affects local democracy and the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery. The most common arguments for democratic decentralization in the literature are two, an efficiency argument and a normative argument. The efficiency argument is based on the fact that knowledge about needs and challenges in the local communities, and thereby the ability to act on that knowledge, is embedded better at the local administrative level. Local governments can interact better with local citizens than central governments due to their geographic

proximity. People's demands and needs are channelled to public officials more easily than in a centralized system. The normative argument for decentralization is one of democracy: true decentralization involves the devolution of real power: elected local councils can decide over the allocation of resources in their respective units. In that way people can decide how local resources should be spent and hence they can influence decisions about resource allocation that have a direct impact on their lives.

The brief is focused at assessing the various dimensions of local autonomy and their relationship with participation of citizens in the planning process and whether downward

accountability is enhanced or constrained in the process. The underlying study involved review of literature, reports and other secondary data, along with interviews with central ministries responsible for key services and administration of LGAs, regional secretariats and LGAs, carried out in 2017. It also uses some data from the citizen participation survey carried out in four waves, 2003, 2006, 2009 and 2013 and the previous studies on the experience of decentralization by devolution.

The key proposition underpinning this brief is that, while decentralization process in Tanzania have helped to enlarge the democratic space for citizen engagement in their development management at local levels, there remains some obstacles for realizing full accountability and effective engagement of citizens.

Findings

Low levels of financial and administrative discretion by LGAs limits effectiveness of citizen participation and downward accountability

The introduction of Local Government Reform Programmes (2000-2014) in Tanzania led to the renewed emphasis on citizens' participation in their governance. Considering the history and size of the country, and the unitary form of government, significant achievements have been achieved. The hierarchical structures of governance from the hamlets, village, ward and council provides good avenue for the people to participate in decisions affecting their lives and development, without the need for central government interventions. However, some policy and operational constraints limit the full benefits from effective citizen engagement. These include poor

participation in the village and hamlets meetings; low levels of financial discretion, such that many programmes and projects implemented by LGAs are not necessarily in line with the pressing needs for different communities; and limited supply of information that is critical to stimulate further demand for information. Citizens survey conducted in 2003 and 2006, finds that village assembly meetings were not convened in transparent manner, denying villagers opportunities to air their views. The same survey further finds that central government had denied local authorities not only the right to identify and implement projects of local priorities but also the right for local revenue mobilization

The over-dependence on the central government for financial resources, along with the legislative provisions that place administrative authority on LGAs to the central government tends to favour upward accountability. These findings are also shared by other studies done in REPOA on political settlement and revenue bargaining, in which over-dependency of central government transfers for local development has shifted bargaining from local government and citizens to mostly upward bargaining in which local authorities are mostly accountable to central government than to citizens. While article 8 of the constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania requires the government to be accountable to the people and mandates participation of the people in the affairs of the government, other legislations, including those governing LGAs do not provide for explicit roles of citizens in holding accountable the leaders of government at various levels. The supreme powers of the Village Assemblies are not translated into actions, and the Village Executive Officers (VEOs) seems more

accountable to appointing authorities. In addition, the law does not mandate participation of NGOs/CBOs in the village council or its committees. The law encourages disclosure of information, transparency and participation, but is not clear in setting out core principles, mechanism and processes to strengthen decentralization and empower communities to hold authorities accountable.

Effective citizen engagement requires more realistic participatory planning strategy and feedback mechanisms

The planning and budgeting process in LGAs is well regulated and guided by the Public Finance Act, 2001, the Local Government Finance Act 1982, the local Government Financial regulations of 1997 and 2010, the Budgeting Act 2015. These acts are also supported by the Planning and Budgeting Guidelines (P&BG) issued by the Ministry responsible for Finance and Planning. Every LGA prepares annual workplans from their Strategic Plans. The SPs are informed by broad national priorities, community needs identified by sub-district authorities through a participatory methodology known as Opportunities and Obstacles to Development (O&OD), and the mandates of LGAs. However, in practice, the annual plans are often influenced by the P&BG, warranting changes to the priorities of the LGAs in line with the priorities set by the central government. This practice is accentuated by the high dependency of LGAs on intergovernmental transfers. Thus, there is no systematic link between the inputs from the participatory planning process conducted at village level and the approved LGA plans. The uncertainty in the flow of funds and delays, and the declining ability to raise own

source revenue further hampers the flexibility of most LGAs to implement their priority programmes.

Downward accountability is still constrained by limited access to information, capacity of citizens or civil society organizations to carry out public expenditure tracking and budget analysis on a timely and regular manners

Despite a notable increase in the supply of information at LGAs, there is still paucity of information in a structured way and in forms that can allow citizens and CSOs to carry out expenditure tracking at unit levels. This could result from limited capacities of staff and resources, especially at lower levels of LGAs. The lack of mechanisms for the people to hold non-compliant leaders accountable may also contribute to the weak demand for information from the citizens in general.

There also seems to be some confusions on the lines of communications between LGAs, regional secretariats, and central ministries responsible for specific sectors. Frequent directives which do not reflect the plans of LGAs and which does not match with the resource flows are said to place severe stress on the functioning of LGAs, and this limit their ability to share the information that is timely and appropriate for the citizens to track results and to demand downward accountability.

Conclusion and recommendations

This brief has analysed factors hindering citizens engagement and downward accountability under the current practice of decentralization by devolution. We found that citizens are generally underprovided with access to information, and the posted

information is not always reader friendly. Also, limited access to information is caused by the fact that village assembly meetings are not convened on a regular basis and in transparent manner. This is partly because local leaders, mainly village executive officers feel more accountable to their appointing authorities than to the citizens. Lack of information has denied citizen's power to hold their leaders accountable. Over-dependency on central government funding for local developments has shifted accountability from citizens to the central government. Thus, most of the priorities set at the local level do not necessarily reflect local priorities but rather the priorities of the central government.

To address these challenges, access of information to citizens must be improved. This can be done by enhancing local capacity to produce and post information that can easily be understood and used by common

citizens to make informed contribution in public meetings or for holding their elected leaders accountable. It is also recommended that incentives should be created for local leaders to call village assembly meetings on regular basis as required by law by imposing sanctions to those who will not adhere, and to sensitize the citizens to understand the importance of their participation and demand for information. Involving local CSOs to sensitize citizens to demand for such meetings and relevant information is also an important aspect of promoting downward accountability.

While dependency on central government to finance local authorities is unlikely to be resolved on short term, it is recommended that more grants should be unconditional to reflect local level priorities, and the capacity of LGAs to collect own sources should be enhanced.



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