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REPOA Brief

Strengthening Local Government Capacity and Autonomy for Food and Nutrition in Kagera Region

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Key Messages

- Local governments are pivotal actors in sustaining food and nutrition security.
- Capacity and resource constraints at LGAs limit policy implementation and service delivery.
- Centralized funding and approval processes constrain local responsiveness.
- Greater autonomy and capacity are critical for strengthening food system resilience and food security outcomes.

Introduction

Communities in the Lake Victoria region are increasingly experiencing the effects of climate change, including rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, floods, and emerging crop and livestock diseases that threaten agricultural production, livelihoods, and food and nutrition security (IPCC, 2022). Strengthening resilient local food systems has therefore become a policy priority. As the closest level of government to communities, Local Government Authorities (LGAs) translate national food security and nutrition policies into locally appropriate interventions. They coordinate agricultural extension, nutrition services, climate adaptation, natural resource management, and local development planning while ensuring community priorities are reflected in decision-making. However, limited evidence exists on whether LGAs possess the capacity and autonomy required to respond effectively to climate-related food security challenges and whether vulnerable communities have sufficient opportunities to influence local implementation.

The effectiveness of decentralised food system governance depends on two interrelated factors: capacity and autonomy. Capacity refers to the availability of adequate staffing, technical expertise, financial resources, planning systems, and monitoring mechanisms that enable local governments to deliver services in agriculture, livestock, fisheries, health, and nutrition (Mashauri, 2020). Autonomy refers to the degree to which local governments can exercise independent authority over planning, decision-making, resource allocation, and policy implementation within their legal mandates, free from excessive central government control. Effective decentralisation therefore requires both legal authority and fiscal flexibility to mobilize and allocate resources according to local priorities. Where financial resources remain highly earmarked or decision-making is centralized, LGAs' ability to address emerging food security and nutrition challenges is significantly constrained despite their formal responsibilities (Venugopal & Yilmaz, 2010; Lameck & Kinemo, 2021). Although decentralisation reforms have expanded local responsibilities, challenges persist regarding administrative capacity, fiscal discretion, and the ability of LGAs to respond to local development needs (Venugopal & Yilmaz, 2010; Tidemand & Msami, 2010).

This policy brief examines the capacity and autonomy of Missenyi and Bukoba Rural District Councils in implementing food and nutrition security policies. Both districts face increasing climate-related pressures that threaten agricultural productivity, household incomes, and nutritional outcomes, making effective local governance essential. The brief assesses whether the LGAs possess the institutional capacity, financial resources, technical expertise, and decision-making authority required to implement food system interventions. The findings provide evidence to inform policies that strengthen local government capacity and autonomy as essential foundations for building resilient and nutrition-sensitive food systems.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative case study design, combining desk review, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs) to examine the capacity and autonomy of Local Government Authorities (LGAs) in implementing food

system governance policies in Tanzania. The desk review analyses policy documents, legal frameworks, decentralisation policies, and relevant reports to understand the institutional foundations shaping LGA roles and responsibilities. This is complemented by two rounds of interviews and FGDs with Missenyi and Bukoba rural district officials conducted in March to April 2025 and March 2026.

Findings

Implementation capacity and coordination mechanisms

The findings show that Missenyi and Bukoba Rural District Councils are the primary institutions responsible for implementing food and nutrition security policies at the local level as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. LGAs functions in implementing food and nutrition policies



Food and nutrition security governance has increasingly become multisectoral. Departments responsible for agriculture, livestock, fisheries, health, nutrition, planning, trade, and community development work together to design and implement interventions, reflecting the interconnected nature of food systems. This coordination has enabled districts to combine agricultural production, nutrition education, market development, and climate adaptation into integrated local programmes. One respondent shared: *"Food security is cross-cutting, these funds allow us to collaborate with livestock, health, and education sectors"* (M-Officer).

A notable institutional strength is the expansion of agricultural extension services. Increased recruitment of extension officers has strengthened farmers' access to technical advice on improved crop production, livestock management, post-harvest handling, climate-smart agriculture, and nutrition-sensitive farming. Extension services have also facilitated the distribution of improved seeds and seedlings, supported rapid responses to crop diseases and pests, and contributed to improved agricultural productivity. As one district officer explained: *"We teach farmers how to plant, use quality seeds to increase yields, and proper storage."* (M-Officer)

The councils have similarly strengthened nutrition governance through community-based interventions such as home gardening, cooking demonstrations, school nutrition initiatives, child nutrition campaigns, and household nutrition education. Regular reporting systems, quarterly performance reviews, and village-level monitoring have institutionalized accountability for nutrition outcomes and strengthened coordination across sectors.

Human resources and operational constraints

Despite these institutional strengths, implementation capacity remains constrained by persistent shortages of human and operational resources. Although staffing has improved in recent years, both districts continue to operate below approved establishment levels. Missenyi District has filled 2,037 of the required 2,731 positions, leaving approximately 28 percent of

posts vacant, while Bukoba Rural has filled 2,545 of the required 3,686 positions, representing a staffing deficit of about 31 percent.

The shortages are concentrated in sectors that are central to food and nutrition security. Agriculture, livestock and fisheries sectors, combined, have a staff deficit of 46% in Missenyi & 58% in Bukoba rural districts, while the health and nutrition sector is understaffed by 29% and 41% in the two districts respectively. These shortages reduce the frequency of extension visits, weaken technical supervision, and limit the coverage of food security and nutrition programmes, particularly in remote communities.

Respondents did not identify staff competence as the principal constraint. Existing personnel were generally regarded as well qualified and capable of performing their responsibilities. Rather, implementation is constrained by insufficient operational resources. Inadequate availability of vehicles, fuel, field equipment, office facilities, and staff housing limits the ability of extension officers and technical staff to provide regular support to farming communities. Consequently, improvements in staffing have not been matched by corresponding investments in operational capacity, reducing the effectiveness of frontline service delivery.

Fiscal capacity and autonomy

The findings point to gradual improvements in local fiscal capacity. For instance, Table 1 shows total revenue for Missenyi District Council almost doubled from TZS 23.3 billion in 2020/21 to TZS 44.6 billion in 2024/25. During the same period, the share of own-source revenue increased from 16 to 27 percent of total revenue, reflecting improved local revenue mobilization and collection efforts. The increase in locally generated revenue has strengthened the councils' capacity to finance district priorities, including nutrition programmes, agricultural inputs, emergency food assistance, and climate adaptation activities. Respondents viewed internally generated revenue as one of the council's greatest strengths because it provides flexibility to address locally identified needs. As stated by one of the respondents: *"From November each year, we set aside TZS 1,000 per child from our own internal revenue to support the council's nutrition initiatives"* (M-Officer).

Table 1. Revenue sources % total revenue for Missenyi District Council

Income source	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Own source revenue	16%	20%	21%	23%	27%
Government grant salaries	63%	60%	63%	58%	53%
Government grant - (OC)	4%	4%	3%	2%	4%
Development project grants - Central Government and donors	17%	15%	13%	18%	16%
Total revenue (TZS million)	**23,337**	**24,567**	**30,039**	**35,455**	**44,639**

Source: Missenyi District Council - Authors' compilation

However, fiscal autonomy remains limited. Grant transfers from central government account for the largest proportion of district revenues, most of which is allocated to staff salaries. Respondents reported that conditional grants are accompanied by strict expenditure guidelines, limiting the council's ability to redirect resources when local priorities change. Budget reallocations require approval from central government, and delays in funding disbursements frequently slow implementation of planned activities. Consequently, although councils have improved their revenue mobilization, their ability to make timely financial decisions remains constrained by centralized financial management arrangements.

Decision-making autonomy

The study shows that Missenyi and Bukoba Rural District Councils operate within a system of partial decentralisation. District authorities have legal mandates to identify local priorities, prepare development plans, allocate internally generated revenue, coordinate implementation, and formulate district bylaws. Participatory planning processes begin at the village level, giving communities a voice in setting local development priorities and strengthening accountability within local governance systems. Respondents described district committees as legitimate decision-making bodies with authority to deliberate on local development issues and oversee implementation. This provides councils with considerable operational responsibility for implementing food and nutrition security interventions.

Nevertheless, important aspects of decision-making remain centralized. Staff recruitment and deployment are controlled by the central government, major development projects require higher-level approval, and some trade regulations and revenue instruments remain under ministerial authority. Respondents further reported delays in the approval of district bylaws, which limit councils' ability to respond promptly to emerging challenges. As one respondent observed: *"We have a fair amount of autonomy, but it's not 100%."* (M-Officer)

Local enforcement capacity is also constrained by limited local autonomy. While councils can formulate bylaws and monitor compliance, enforcement partly depends on the authority of the District Commissioner who falls under central government tier.

Similarly, the requirement for central government approval of changes to financial regulations limits the ability of local authorities to respond quickly to climate shocks, pest outbreaks, food shortages, and other unexpected local challenges.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that Missenyi and Bukoba Rural District Councils play a critical role in translating food and nutrition security policies into local action through coordination, participatory planning, and multisectoral interventions. However, their response to climate-related food system challenges is constrained by limited human and operational resources, restricted fiscal flexibility, and dependence on central government decisions. While variations may exist among LGAs in Tanzania, some of the observations from Missenyi and Bukoba could reflect in other LGAs in the region or even at national level. Strengthening fiscal and administrative autonomy, staffing, and operational support is essential to enable timely, context-specific interventions and build resilient food systems for vulnerable communities.

Recommendations

01 Increase fiscal autonomy of LGAs

The government and LGAs to address staffing and operational gaps by

- increasing predictable transfers
- strengthening local revenue sources
- enabling councils to allocate funds according to locally identified food security and climate adaptation priorities

02 Improve local government capacity and service delivery

providing field support to strengthen agricultural extension,

The government and LGAs to address staffing and operational gaps by

- filling critical vacancies
- providing essential resources such as transport, equipment
- nutrition, and climate resilience services

03 Expand local decision-making authority

Strengthen decentralisation by

- granting LGAs greater discretion over planning, budgeting, and local regulations, allowing them to respond faster to context-specific food and nutrition security challenges.

04 Promote integrated climate-resilient food systems

- Strengthen multisectoral approaches that combine climate-smart agriculture, nutrition interventions, market support, and sustainable natural resource management to improve community resilience.

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