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Decentralization and its Impact on Governance and Political Accountability in Madagascar

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of decentralization on governance and political accountability in Madagascar, where reforms aim to bring government closer to citizens and enhance service delivery, participation, and accountability. Despite these intentions, concerns persist about the practical effectiveness of decentralization at the local level. Employing a qualitative approach, the study draws on in-depth interviews with 40 participants, comprising 20 citizens from various regions and 20 political actors, including mayors, parliamentary assistants, and local officials. These perspectives reveal that decentralization has improved physical access to government structures and opened limited avenues for citizen engagement. However, its implementation remains weak and uneven. Key challenges include limited financial and technical resources, low administrative capacity, and ineffective accountability mechanisms. In many instances, responsibilities have been devolved without adequate support, leading to frustration among both citizens and local authorities. The findings suggest that meaningful decentralization requires not only the transfer of authority but also robust institutional frameworks, sustained capacity-building, and inclusive governance practices. By highlighting the lived realities of both citizens and officials, this study provides practical insights for policymakers and development partners seeking to enhance the effectiveness of local governance and strengthen democratic accountability in Madagascar.

Introduction

Decentralization has become a key reform strategy adopted by many governments around the world, particularly in developing countries, as a means to promote democratization, improve governance, and enhance public service delivery (Herrera & Post, 2014). In the context of Madagascar, decentralization has been positioned as a crucial step in strengthening local governance and bringing government decision-making closer to the citizens. Since the early 1990s, successive Malagasy governments have introduced a series of decentralization policies aimed at empowering local authorities and fostering local democracy (Mansourian et al., 2016). These reforms were expected to improve administrative efficiency, ensure equitable development, and increase citizen participation in governance (Emynorane et al., 2025). However, the effectiveness of these reforms in practice remains uncertain and unevenly realized.

Previous studies on decentralization in sub-Saharan Africa have shown mixed results. In some cases, decentralization has led to greater local autonomy, enhanced transparency,

and improved responsiveness to citizens' needs (Odhiambo, 2024). For example, research in Ghana and Uganda has highlighted how empowered local governments can improve service delivery and political engagement at the grassroots level (Mutarindwa et al., 2020). In Madagascar, however, existing literature suggests that despite the legal framework supporting decentralization, the implementation process has been hindered by weak institutional capacity, financial dependency on the central government, and limited local autonomy (Sima et al., 2023). Most study in this area tends to focus on administrative and fiscal aspects, while the political dimensions, particularly accountability and citizen trust, have received comparatively less attention.

Among the solutions proposed in the literature to improve decentralized governance are fiscal autonomy, community-driven development models, and stronger institutional oversight (Mansourian et al., 2016). One of the most cited approaches is the participatory governance model, which emphasizes the role of local populations in shaping and monitoring public decisions (Evensen & Sovacool, 2024; Konte & Vincent, 2021). This model has been successfully implemented in some contexts, but its application in Madagascar remains limited due to structural and socio-political challenges (Eckert et al., 2024). Another frequently proposed method is capacity-building of local government institutions (Rodríguez-Rodríguez et al., 2024). While these approaches have shown promise, their effectiveness in Madagascar has not been sufficiently evaluated through qualitative, field-based research.

The research problem this study addresses is the disconnect between decentralized policies and their actual impact on political accountability and governance in Madagascar. Despite a growing body of research, there is a lack of empirical studies based on primary data that reflect the lived experiences of both citizens and local officials. Much of the current understanding relies on policy reviews or macro-level indicators, which overlook localized dynamics and grassroots perspectives (Andriamihaja et al., 2021). In particular, the role of decentralization in shaping political accountability, how and whether citizens are empowered to hold local leaders accountable, remains insufficiently studied (Evensen & Sovacool, 2024; Kora et al., 2025).

This study aims to fill that gap by investigating how decentralization in Madagascar affects governance and political accountability using a qualitative, field-based approach. Through in-depth interviews with both citizens and local political actors, the study explores the real-world experiences of decentralized governance. The study specifically examines (1) the evolution of decentralization policies in Madagascar, (2) their effects on local governance and citizen participation, (3) their influence on political accountability, and (4) the practical challenges faced by local governments in implementing these reforms.

The significance of this study lies in its empirical, bottom-up approach, which captures context-specific insights that are often overlooked in broader regional analyses. By focusing on voices from within the system, the research provides a more nuanced understanding of decentralization's strengths and limitations in Madagascar. It also offers

policy-relevant recommendations aimed at improving local governance and democratic accountability in low-income, postcolonial contexts. As such, this study contributes to the academic and policy discourse on decentralization by linking theoretical ideals with lived realities, and by considering the conditions necessary for effective, accountable local governance.

Methods

Research design

This study uses a qualitative research design, chosen for its strength in capturing rich, in-depth insights into complex social and political phenomena. Qualitative methods are particularly well-suited for exploring the lived experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of individuals within their specific socio-political contexts (Emynorane et al., 2024). Given the focus of this study on the practical implications of decentralization in Madagascar, particularly on governance and political accountability, a qualitative design allowed for a deeper understanding of how decentralization policies are perceived and experienced at the local level. The study was structured as an exploratory case study (Yin, 2013; Citriadin, 2020), enabling the researchers to investigate decentralization as a process embedded in local governance practices.

Research sample

The study used a purposive sampling technique to select participants who could provide relevant and diverse perspectives on decentralization. The sample consisted of 40 participants in total, divided equally between 20 citizens and 20 political figures. Among the political figures were mayors, parliamentary assistants, and other local government officials from various regions of Madagascar. Citizens were selected from both urban and rural communities to ensure a range of experiences and opinions. This sample was designed to include both implementers of decentralization policies and those directly affected by them, thus providing a balanced view of the issue.

Data collection techniques

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, a method that combines the consistency of a guided interview format with the flexibility to explore topics in more depth based on participants' responses (Yin, 2013). Two separate interview guides were developed, one for citizens and another for political figures, to address their specific experiences and roles in the decentralization process. The interviews covered themes such as the structure and implementation of decentralization, access to local services, citizen engagement, mechanisms of accountability, and challenges encountered. Interviews were conducted in Malagasy official or dialect language, depending on participant preference, and were audio-recorded with consent. Field notes were also taken to capture contextual information and non-verbal cues.

Data validation

In this study, triangulation was used as the sole method of data validation to enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings. Specifically, source triangulation was applied by collecting data from key informants. This allowed for the comparison of perspectives between those responsible for implementing decentralization and those affected by it, highlighting both common experiences and differing viewpoints.

Results and Discussion

Key informants were asked through interviews to share their experiences and perceptions of the decentralization process, particularly its effectiveness in governance, citizen engagement, and political accountability. The findings are summarized in the table 1 below and organized according to the four research objectives. Each theme reflects patterns that emerged from the qualitative data and are supported by direct feedback from the participants.

Table 1. Summary of Study Results

Research Objective	Key Findings
1. Analyze the structure and evolution of decentralization policies in Madagascar	- Decentralization policies are present but inconsistently applied. - Centralized control remains dominant. - Legal frameworks lack enforcement.
2. Assess the effects of decentralization on local governance efficiency and citizen participation	- Local institutions are closer to citizens. - Participation is limited due to lack of awareness and education. - Communication gaps are evident.
3. Evaluate how decentralization influences political accountability	- Improved proximity between officials and citizens. - Weak mechanisms for accountability. - Citizens feel powerless to demand transparency.
4. Identify challenges faced by local governments in implementing decentralized governance	- Lack of financial autonomy. - Shortage of skilled staff. - Delays in funding and political interference hinder local performance.

Source:

In relation to the first objective, most political informants acknowledged that decentralization in Madagascar is built on a clear legal foundation, including policies that recognize the autonomy of local governments. However, several mayors and local officials pointed out that these policies are not uniformly enforced across the country. Some regions

enjoy relative freedom and receive more attention from central authorities, while others face delays in support and lack clear guidance. Citizens were largely unaware of decentralization laws, indicating a disconnect between legal policy and public awareness. For the second objective, both citizens and politicians agreed that decentralization has brought local government structures physically closer to communities, making it easier for residents to access public offices. However, when it comes to participation in governance processes such as budget planning, community consultations, or council meetings, citizens felt excluded or uninformed. A number of citizens expressed interest in participating but noted that they were rarely invited or did not know when or how to engage. Politicians, especially the mayors, admitted that public outreach remains weak, often due to lack of resources or training. Regarding the third objective, the study found partial improvement in political accountability. Citizens observed that local leaders were more visible and responsive than national representatives, often attending public events or responding to community issues. However, formal accountability mechanisms, such as public hearings, audits, or citizen feedback systems, are either absent or ineffective. Many citizens felt they had no real power to influence decisions or challenge poor governance, and several local governement officials admitted there is limited oversight from higher levels of government. Lastly, in addressing the fourth objective, both groups of informants strongly emphasized the challenges facing local governments. Mayors reported chronic delays in receiving funds from the central government, which disrupts local projects and planning. Additionally, they cited a shortage of qualified personnel, particularly in rural areas, where administrative staff often lack training. Political interference from national authorities was also highlighted as a barrier, as local governments sometimes lack the freedom to prioritize community needs over national political agendas.

Evolution of Decentralization Policies in Madagascar

The study found that although decentralization in Madagascar is constitutionally and legislatively established, its practical application remains fragmented and inconsistent. Local officials and citizens repeatedly emphasized that the policies intended to empower local governments often lack enforcement, especially outside major urban centers. This inconsistency has created uneven development outcomes and varying levels of governance quality across the country. The findings directly respond to the research question regarding how decentralized policies have evolved and whether they are effectively operationalized. It confirms that, while there has been policy progress on paper since the 1990s, including the creation of decentralized territorial collectivities (CTDs), implementation has lagged due to institutional inertia, centralized political culture, and inadequate oversight mechanisms.

Comparative studies underscore similar patterns in other Sub-Saharan African contexts. For example, Smoke (2015) argues that many decentralization reforms in developing countries are symbolic, serving donor interests or national political agendas rather than genuine power redistribution. This is consistent with the case of Madagascar,

where decentralization appears more declarative than actionable. The voices of local informants in this study echo this critique; several officials stated that although legal mandates exist for local autonomy, decisions regarding finance, staffing, and project execution are still subject to central approval. This weakens the legitimacy of local governance and frustrates both leaders and citizens. As observed in the findings, many local officials operate in a gray area held accountable for service delivery without the corresponding authority or resources to meet community needs.

This study contributes to existing literature by centering on grassroots perceptions of decentralization rather than limiting analysis to legal frameworks or national indicators. This bottom-up approach reveals that the primary challenge in Madagascar is not the absence of policies but the lack of operational mechanisms to support those policies. As Ikeanyibe (2017) points out, successful decentralization requires strong subnational institutions, political commitment, and a culture of accountability elements currently lacking in Madagascar. Moreover, this study aligns with findings from Crook and Manor (1998), who assert that decentralization efforts often fail when the center retains fiscal and administrative control. By capturing the lived realities of local officials and citizens, the study adds empirical depth to the discourse and highlights the urgent need for genuine structural reforms, better resource allocation, and improved coordination between central and local governments.

Effects of Decentralization on Local Governance and Citizen Participation

Decentralization in Madagascar has had a modest positive impact on the accessibility and visibility of local governance structures, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas. Citizens reported that local government officials, such as mayors and municipal staff, are now physically closer and more approachable compared to central government representatives. This geographical proximity has improved citizens' awareness of local governance institutions and increased the frequency of informal interactions between officials and the public (Eckert et al., 2024). However, these improvements are largely surface-level; they have not translated into significantly better service delivery or stronger institutional responsiveness (Rodríguez-Rodríguez et al., 2024). Several political figures interviewed acknowledged that while they are more present in their communities, their ability to act on citizen demands is limited by budgetary constraints and central government control.

From a participatory governance perspective, the study reveals that decentralization has not yet succeeded in fostering deep or meaningful citizen engagement. While formal mechanisms such as local council meetings and community consultations do exist, they are often irregular, poorly attended, or not well-publicized (Klein et al., 2023). Citizens frequently expressed frustration over being left out of local decision-making processes, citing a lack of transparency and limited opportunities for input. Many also noted that they lack the knowledge or confidence to engage effectively, pointing to a broader issue of civic

education and political literacy. This aligns with existing literature that suggests decentralization alone does not automatically lead to participation unless it is accompanied by deliberate efforts to empower citizens and create inclusive, participatory spaces (Andriamihaja et al., 2021).

Study conducted in Mali and Uganda (Tebkew & Atinkut, 2022) has shown that even when local institutions are established, meaningful participation often remains limited due to entrenched power hierarchies, weak accountability, and minimal civic infrastructure. In Madagascar, based on the results of this study, although decentralization has created channels for interaction between the state and society at the local level, those channels remain underdeveloped and underutilized. Therefore, for decentralization to truly enhance governance and participation, there must be stronger institutional support, more robust civic education, and policies that intentionally encourage active citizen involvement in local decision-making processes (Evensen & Sovacool, 2024).

Influence of Decentralization on Political Accountability

The findings of this study reveal that decentralization in Madagascar has led to some improvement in political accountability, particularly through increased accessibility and visibility of local leaders. Citizens and local officials alike confirmed that decentralized governance has brought authorities closer to the people, allowing for more frequent direct interactions. In many cases, mayors and council members are known personally to community members, which creates informal pressure to respond to local concerns. This proximity has helped foster a sense of responsiveness among some local officials, who feel more directly answerable to their communities than to distant central authorities (Sima et al., 2023). However, this informal accountability remains limited and lacks the structure necessary to ensure long-term institutional responsibility.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings align with the concept of downward accountability, which refers to the obligation of elected officials to answer to their constituents rather than to higher tiers of government. In theory, decentralization enhances downward accountability by shifting power closer to citizens and allowing them to monitor and influence local decision-makers (Long et al., 2021). Yet, in the case of Madagascar, this study shows that the formal mechanisms for accountability such as public audits, citizen complaints systems, and participatory budgeting are either weakly implemented or completely absent. Local officials often lack both the tools and the incentives to institutionalize transparent practices. Moreover, political interference from national parties can compromise the independence of local officials, especially in regions where party loyalty is prioritized over community interests (Long et al., 2021).

A recurring theme from the interviews was that citizens feel they lack the means to hold their leaders truly accountable. Many expressed frustration with unfulfilled promises, lack of transparency in local budgeting, and the absence of channels to report mismanagement or corruption. This lack of structured engagement leads to disillusionment,

especially among younger populations who feel their voices are ignored (Ward et al., 2018). At the same time, several mayors acknowledged that even when willing to respond to community needs, they are constrained by limited financial autonomy and bureaucratic hurdles imposed by central ministries. This dynamic illustrates what scholars like Rakotoson & Tanner (2006)Click or tap here to enter text. describe as "accountability without authority", where local officials are expected to be responsive but lack the real power and resources to effect change.

Compared with study conducted in other decentralized African contexts, the case of Madagascar shows similar struggles in institutionalizing political accountability. Studies in Ghana and Tanzania have shown that while decentralization can improve representation, real accountability requires robust civil society engagement, independent oversight mechanisms, and local capacity-building (Goel et al., 2017). Madagascar's decentralization remains fragile in this regard, as local officials are caught between community expectations and central government control. This study's added value lies in illustrating how decentralization can improve local visibility and informal responsiveness, but without proper institutional frameworks, the potential for accountable governance remains largely unfulfilled.

Practical Challenges Faced by Local Governments in Implementing Decentralization

Local governments in Madagascar face numerous practical challenges that hinder the effective implementation of decentralization policies. One of the most frequently mentioned issues by both mayors and municipal staff was the chronic lack of financial resources. Local authorities largely depend on budget transfers from the central government, which are often delayed or insufficient. This dependency severely limits their ability to plan and execute development projects or respond effectively to local needs (Emynorane & Arrive, 2024). In many cases, even when budgets are approved at the central level, actual disbursement of funds is inconsistent, creating a cycle of uncertainty and underperformance in local administrations.

Another major challenge identified was the shortage of skilled personnel and institutional capacity at the local level. Many municipal offices, particularly in rural and remote areas, lack trained staff to manage public administration tasks such as financial management, project planning, and service delivery. Local officials reported difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified professionals, as most prefer to work in urban centers or at the national level. This skills gap undermines the efficiency of local governance and contributes to poor service delivery. Without adequate human resources, even well-intentioned local leaders struggle to implement policies and maintain basic administrative functions (Mutarindwa et al., 2020).

Local governments also face persistent interference from the central government, which continues to exert control over key administrative decisions. Several local officials reported that despite legal provisions granting autonomy to communes and regions,

national ministries often override or delay local initiatives. This political centralization discourages initiative at the local level and creates confusion over the roles and responsibilities of different government tiers (Evensen & Sovacool, 2024). As a result, decentralization in Madagascar often resembles deconcentration, merely relocating central authorit, rather than genuine devolution of power.

The study also highlighted the lack of coordination and communication between different levels of government and among local actors. There is often a disconnect between what is expected from local governments and the support they receive (Long et al., 2021). Mayors expressed frustration with being held accountable for services they have no control over. These systemic problems are consistent with broader research in African decentralization, which shows that without coherent planning, sustained support, and political will, decentralization can lead to confusion rather than empowerment (Smith et al., 2012). Therefore, addressing these practical challenges is essential if Madagascar is to realize the full potential of its decentralization framework.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study reveal that decentralization in Madagascar has improved the proximity of governance structures and encouraged limited informal responsiveness. However, the system remains largely underdeveloped due to persistent institutional weaknesses, financial dependency, and interference from the central government. These results highlight the necessity of pairing decentralization efforts with genuine fiscal autonomy, stronger institutional frameworks, and inclusive civic engagement mechanisms. Grounded in the lived experiences of both citizens and local officials, this study offers a nuanced perspective on decentralization in a low-income, postcolonial context and presents practical insights for governance reform. This study's reliance on qualitative data from selected regions and the absence of a longitudinal approach may limit the generalizability of the findings and restrict insights into how decentralization evolves over time. Future research should explore comparative case studies across regions with varying levels of decentralized effectiveness and incorporate mixed methods, including participatory action research and digital ethnography. These approaches can shed light on how technological tools and e-governance platforms might strengthen transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement in decentralized governance systems.

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