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The Role of Chiefdom Councils in Decentralisation: Evidence from Bo District, Sierra Leone

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Abstract: The 190 chiefdoms of Sierra Leone constitute the lowest level of governance where the majority of Sierra Leoneans reside, particularly outside Freetown and its surrounding rural areas. These chiefdoms are administered by Paramount Chiefs, supported by sub-chiefs and a range of chiefdom administrative officers. As integral components of district administration in Sierra Leone, chiefdoms represent the level of governance through which essential services are delivered to local populations. Paramount Chiefs serve as heads of chiefdom councils and oversee several key functions, including the collection of local taxes, mobilization of communal labour for socio-economic development initiatives, regulation of farming activities, and the arbitration and adjudication of local disputes.

Bo District is one of the sixteen districts in the country and is located in the Southern Province. This study assessed the role of chiefdom councils in the district using a qualitative phenomenological research approach. In-depth personal interviews were conducted with key informants across the sixteen chiefdoms of Bo District. The data were analyzed using the constant comparative method, whereby information was systematically disaggregated into thematic categories for interpretation and reporting.

Keywords: *Paramount Chief, Chiefdom, local tax, manual labour and local dispute*.

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Introduction

After twenty-one years of decentralization in Sierra Leone, it is important to examine the role of chiefdom council administration in order to better understand the service delivery system within the decentralization process. Following the end of the civil war in 2002, the government reintroduced the decentralization system of governance in 2004 after it had been abandoned in 1972 (National Decentralization Policy 2021, p.2). This reform was intended, in part, to address the numerous governance and development challenges that contributed to the civil conflict.

Earlier, in 1996, with the restoration of liberal multi-party democracy, the government had already outlined the rationale and general framework for decentralization in a White Paper titled *Good Governance and Public Sector Reform Strategy Paper*. At the time, the newly elected President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah emphasized the importance of restoring the relevance of traditional leadership institutions. Addressing Paramount Chiefs from the Southern and Eastern Provinces in Kenema, he stated:

"The desired new policy will now attempt to restore the past, and where necessary modernize the governance structure of the chieftaincy to make it more effective, relevant and democratic. This vital role, previously played by Paramount Chiefs, contributed immensely to our stability." (Thomson 2007, p.21).

By this time, local governance systems already existed within chiefdom council administrations headed by elected Paramount Chiefs and their sub-chiefs, who managed the affairs of local communities on behalf of the central government through district offices in all over the provinces (Ochiai 2017, p.2). Consequently, the re-establishment of elected district and city councils in 2004 represented a continuation and restructuring of local governance systems, with these councils mandated to provide services to local populations under the Local Government Act 2004.

Despite increasing rural-urban migration in Sierra Leone, the majority of the population continues to reside in chiefdoms outside the capital city of Freetown and its surrounding areas such as Waterloo. These chiefdoms remain governed by elected traditional leaders who operate within customary governance frameworks, although national constitutional laws ultimately supersede local ordinances. While the current decentralization process emphasizes the role of district councils, most rural citizens live in chiefdom towns, villages, and hamlets where their primary interaction with governance structures occurs through chiefdom administrations rather than district councils.

In practice, local populations often interact directly with Paramount Chiefs and chiefdom council administrations, which operate somewhat independently from district councils. Chiefdom councils are instead supervised through district offices headed by District Officers (D.Os), which function as administrative structures parallel to district councils. Under chiefdom customary practices and the Local Courts Act 1963 as amended in 2011, chiefdom councils enact local ordinances regulating various aspects of community life. These include the management of

natural resources, organization of communal labour, regulation of secret societies, and oversight of traditional ceremonies such as marriages. They also adjudicate local disputes according to customary laws and practices (Alie 1990, pp.152–157).

Historically, local government structures have played a significant role in Sierra Leone's public administration, contributing to socio-economic development and socio-political stability. Since the founding of Freetown in 1787, addressing the administrative and social needs of both indigenous Africans and non-native settlers formed an important component of local governance and public service delivery (Ochiai 2017, Pp2-5). In the Protectorate—later known as the provinces at independence in 1961—local government officials served as the primary intermediaries between indigenous communities and colonial authorities.

In 1893, Freetown attained municipal status. At that time, there were three local government institutions operated within the colony: the Freetown Municipality, the Rural Areas Council, and the Sherbro Judicial District, the latter being administered by a board with an ex-officio majority. For administrative purposes, these units were further subdivided into smaller jurisdictions (Hailey 1951, p.286).

Historically, the municipality of Freetown was organized into tithings; each tithing comprising ten families represented by a tithingman. Every ten tithingmen elected a hundredth-man or a hunderdor, and from among these leaders a headman—similar to a town chief in the Protectorate—was selected. Eventually, the position of mayor emerged from this administrative structure. In 1905, the *Tribal Administration Ordinance* was enacted to provide indigenous Africans living in Freetown the right to appoint tribal chiefs responsible for managing customary affairs within their communities. These responsibilities included establishing rules for community membership, resolving minor disputes related to debts and burial ceremonies, overseeing aspects of education, enforcing municipal sanitary regulations, and organizing communal labour (Hailey 1951, p.287; Alie 1990, p.53).

In the outskirts of Freetown—including Wilberforce, York, Waterloo, and Kissy—each locality was administered by a rural commissioner who reported to the District Commissioner of the Rural Areas Council. Similarly, in the southwestern part of the Protectorate, Bonthe Island and York Island formed part of the Sherbro Judicial District, largely due to the importance of the seaport at Bonthe. This district included Bonthe and York Islands as well as surrounding villages and islets, and it was responsible for managing local markets, sanitation, and other local administrative functions (Hailey 1951, p.293).

Since 2004, however, the current local government framework has evolved considerably. The contemporary decentralization system is centered on district councils headed by elected councillors, mayors and chairpersons. Paramount Chiefs serve only as ex-officio members of these councils and primarily act as conduits of information between district councils and the various chiefdom administrations. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the historical foundation of chiefdoms and examine their roles in the decentralization programme in Sierra Leone. Many studies have been done on decentralization in the country, but very few of such studies really focus on the expedient roles of chiefdom councils in the successful implementation of the decentralization programme. In light of the fore-going, the objectives of this study are three folds;

- To explore the historical establishment of chiefdoms and,
- Assess the myriad roles of chiefdoms in the decentralization process of Sierra Leone.
- Identify the challenges facing chiefdom councils in decentralization

Colonial Administrative Setup

The Republic of Sierra Leone has functioned as a unitary state since gaining independence in 1961. The country derived its name from the Portuguese explorer Pedro da Cintra, who visited the coastal region of present-day Freetown around 1462. Observing the thick forest vegetation and mountainous terrain along the coastline, he reportedly referred to the area as *Serra Lyoa*, meaning "Lion Mountains" in Portuguese. Subsequent European sailors and traders who visited the area for its natural harbour continued using this name, which was later anglicized to Sierra Leone (Alie, 1990, p.4). Geographically, Sierra Leone lies on the southwestern coast of West Africa. It is bordered by Guinea to the north and east and Liberia to the southeast. The country covers an area of approximately 73,326 square kilometres (27,925 square miles) and had an estimated population of 7.5 million according to the mid-term census report of 2021.

Following the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, the coastal region of Sierra Leone was selected as a settlement for freed Africans repatriated from the Americas and the United Kingdom, as well as those rescued from slave ships intercepted on the Atlantic Ocean. This settlement became known as Freetown, symbolizing freedom for formerly enslaved Africans. In 1808, the British government formally assumed administrative control of the settlement, making it a British Crown Colony. To safeguard the colony and extend administrative control inland, the surrounding hinterland territories were declared a Protectorate in 1896. In 1961, the colony and protectorate were unified to form the independent state of the republic of Sierra Leone (Ibid. pp.48–51).

Sierra Leone has a long tradition of decentralized governance. Early settlers in Freetown were organized according to socio-cultural realities, and local administrative systems were developed to address community concerns. The first group of settlers, known as the "Black Poor," arrived in 1787 but experienced severe hardships due to harsh environmental conditions and hostility from neighbouring groups. A second group, the Black Loyalists, arrived from Nova Scotia in 1792 and introduced a representative governance system based on the election of *tithingmen* representing ten families and *hundredors* representing one hundred families. This participatory governance system continued with the arrival of the Jamaican Maroons in 1800 and the *Recaptives*—Africans liberated from slave ships—who were later settled in the colony (Alie, 1990).

In the Protectorate, indigenous political institutions already existed long before European colonial rule. Colonial authorities entered into treaties of friendship and protection with local rulers in exchange for military support and development assistance, while the sovereignty of the indigenous political authorities was formally recognized (Alie, 1990, p.113). These traditional political entities were later designated as chiefdoms by colonial administrators. Chiefdom authorities continued to play an important role in mobilizing communal labour for infrastructure development such as road construction and other socio-economic activities throughout the colonial period.

At independence in 1961, there were 149 chiefdoms in Sierra Leone. However, in 2017 the number increased to 190 following administrative reforms initiated by Ernest Bai Koroma. This expansion resulted from the de-amalgamation of several chiefdoms that had been merged during the colonial period due to small population sizes. The reform also reintroduced two former colonial districts—Karene District and Falaba District—bringing the total number of districts in the country to sixteen. According to the government, this administrative restructuring was intended to deepen decentralization and improve governance in response to population growth.

During the colonial period, the Protectorate was initially divided into five administrative districts: Karene, Ronietta, Bandajuma, Panguma, and Koinadugu District, each administered by a District Commissioner. These districts were further subdivided into chiefdoms headed by traditional rulers, whom colonial authorities designated as Paramount Chiefs. The establishment of chiefdom administration was based on three main principles: the creation of chiefdom treasuries, the authority to levy taxes, and the power to enact customary laws for local governance.

To support the functioning of chiefdom administrations, several financial mechanisms were introduced. These included local house taxes, a 20 percent grant from the central government based on total house tax collected in each chiefdom, additional government grants for road maintenance and school construction, and revenue generated from fines imposed by local courts (Ochiai, 2017,p4).

Chiefdom administrations were responsible for a wide range of functions, including maintaining law and order, administering justice, controlling chiefdom lands, assessing and collecting house taxes, and providing essential social services such as primary education, sanitation, feeder road construction, maternity care, and environmental conservation (Ochiai, 2017, p5).

In 1945, the Protectorate Ordinance introduced additional local governance institutions, including District Councils and the Protectorate Assembly. District Councils were responsible for advising the central government on native affairs, providing policy guidance on customary law, conducting commissions of inquiry, and serving as appellate authorities in chieftaincy and local disputes (Alie, 1990, pp.151–162).

However, the local government structure in the colony differed significantly from that of the Protectorate. The colony comprised the Sierra Leone Peninsula, Sherbro Island, Tasso Island, Banana Islands, Turtle Islands, Plantain Island, and York Island, together with several surrounding coastal territories. These areas were administered through three main councils: Freetown City Council, the Rural Area Council, and the Sherbro Urban District Council (Alie, 1990).

The Abolition of district Councils in 1972 and Its Implications

Following independence in 1961, Sierra Leone initially maintained a system of local government institutions inherited from the colonial period. These institutions included district councils, municipal councils, and chiefdom councils, collectively facilitated governance and service delivery at the local level. However, significant changes occurred during the early 1970s when the government moved to restructure the local governance system.

In 1972, the government led by Siaka Stevens abolished elected local councils throughout the country. This decision effectively dismantled district and municipal councils that had previously served as key components of local governance. The abolition of these councils resulted in the concentration of administrative and political authority within the central government. Consequently, local governance functions that had previously been performed by elected local authorities were transferred to central government ministries and administrative officials operating through district offices (Nickson & Cutting, 2020, p800).

The restructuring significantly altered the relationship between central and local governance institutions. District Officers (D.Os), who represented the central government in the provinces, became the primary administrative authorities responsible for supervising local affairs. Chiefdom administrations led by Paramount Chiefs continued to operate, but they functioned largely under the supervision of central government representatives rather than through autonomous local government structures. As a result, the decentralised governance arrangements that had existed during the colonial and early post-independence periods were effectively replaced by a highly centralised administrative system (Ibid.).

The abolition of local councils had several implications for governance and development. First, it reduced opportunities for grassroots participation in decision-making processes, as local populations no longer had elected representatives responsible for addressing community needs. Second, it weakened institutional mechanisms for local accountability, since administrative authority was increasingly concentrated within central government structures. Third, service delivery in many rural communities became less responsive to local conditions because decisions regarding development priorities were often made at the national level rather than within local jurisdictions.

Over time, the centralization of governance contributed to growing concerns about limited citizen participation, ineffective service delivery, and the marginalization of local communities in the governance process. Scholars and policy analysts have argued that the absence of effective local government institutions reduced the capacity of communities to influence development planning and weakened mechanisms for local problem-solving.

By the 1990s, these governance challenges became part of broader national debates about state legitimacy, development, and political inclusion. The restoration of multi-party democracy in 1996 and the end of the civil conflict in 2002 created renewed momentum for institutional reforms aimed at strengthening local governance. Consequently, the government reintroduced decentralization reforms in 2004 through the Local Government Act 2004, which reinstated elected district and municipal councils as key institutions responsible for local service delivery and community development (National Decentralisation policy 2021).

Although the reintroduction of local councils represented an important step toward rebuilding decentralized governance, the legacy of the 1972 abolition continued to shape the institutional landscape of local administration. In particular, the coexistence of district councils and traditional chiefdom administrations created a complex governance arrangement that continues to influence the functioning of decentralization in contemporary Sierra Leone.

Literature Review

In discussing local governance in Sierra Leone, it is necessary to examine the historical foundations of chiefdom institutions. Any meaningful analysis of local governance in Sierra

Leone should consider the institution of chieftaincy, since chiefdoms function as the political jurisdictions under the authority of Paramount Chiefs.

According to Kwame Asamoah quoting from Arhin (1985), a chief is referred to as "a person elected or selected in accordance with customary usage and recognized by the government to wield authority and perform functions derived from tradition or assigned by the central government within specified areas" (Asamoah, 2012, p.90). This definition highlights the dual nature of chieftaincy institutions, which operate simultaneously within customary governance systems and the formal structures of the modern state.

The Constitution of Sierra Leone 1991, particularly Section 72, does not explicitly define the terms *chief* or *paramount chief*. Instead, it acknowledges the existence of the institution of chieftaincy as established under customary law and guarantees its protection by stating that the institution cannot be abolished by ordinary legislation. This constitutional provision effectively entrenches the chieftaincy institution as a fundamental component of Sierra Leone's governance structure.

More explicit definitions are provided in the Chieftaincy Act 2009, which distinguishes between different levels of traditional authority. Under Part 1 of the Act, a *chief* is described as "a headman of a group of people," while a *Paramount Chief* is referred to as "a chief who is not subordinate in his jurisdiction to any other chief." These statutory provisions reinforce the recognition of customary leadership structures within the broader framework of national governance.

However, it is important to clarify that the constitutional recognition of chieftaincy refers specifically to traditional leadership institutions and should not be confused with administrative titles such as chief executive officer, chief engineer, chief inspector, chief justice, or chief administrator. As emphasized by Asamoah (2012, p.91), these are merely professional or bureaucratic designations and do not carry the customary authority associated with traditional chieftaincy institutions.

Historical scholarship also demonstrates that the institution of chieftaincy in Sierra Leone predates colonial rule. Writing on the indigenous people of the Protectorate, Lord Hailey observed that leadership among the indigenous ethnic groups—including the Mende, Sherbro, Limba, Temne, Vai, Kono, and Gola—was largely hereditary in nature (Hailey, 1951, p.295). These societies possessed well-established political and social structures long before the arrival of Arab traders and European colonial administrators.

These indigenous communities shared several cultural and political characteristics, including strong kinship systems, similar chieftaincy structures, and common socio-cultural practices. These included the existence of secret societies and social associations, distinctive forms of dress, traditional music and dance, and shared dietary patterns. Such similarities reflected broader patterns of social organization among the indigenous populations of the Sierra Leone Protectorate (Ibid.).

The persistence of these traditional governance structures demonstrates the resilience of chieftaincy institutions in Sierra Leone. Even after the introduction of modern state institutions and decentralization reforms, chiefdom administrations continue to play an important role in mediating local governance, managing customary affairs, and facilitating interaction between rural communities and the formal state system.

Chiefdom Councils in Sierra Leone

The nation-state of Sierra Leone is administratively divided into 190 chiefdoms, 16 districts, and 22 local councils following administrative reforms implemented in 2017. Chiefdoms represent the lowest traditional governance units in the country and constitute important political and socio-cultural institutions, particularly in rural areas. Historically, these entities are associated with indigenous African political principalities that existed long before the arrival of Arab and European traders, explorers, and missionaries in the region (Skalník, 2004, p.79).

Early European travelers and scholars described these indigenous political systems using various terms such as "early states," "primitive states," or "chieftaincies." During the colonial period, especially after the territorial partition of Africa formalized at the Berlin Conference, British colonial administrators in Sierra Leone adopted the term *chiefdom* to describe these traditional political units. Each chiefdom was headed by prominent traditional leaders who were referred to by different titles depending on the ethnic and linguistic group. For example, among the Mende people leaders were often called *Mahei* or *Maada*, while among the Temne they were referred to as *Santigie*, *Alimami*, *Alikali*, or *Obai* (Hailey, 1951, p.296; Alie, 1990, p.114ff).

Although chiefdoms operate within the jurisdiction of the modern state, they maintain a significant degree of autonomy through traditional governance structures. Each chiefdom is governed by a chiefdom council composed of Paramount Chiefs, sub-chiefs, and other traditional authorities who collectively administer local affairs. The Paramount Chief serves as the highest traditional authority within the chiefdom and presides over the council's activities.

Administratively, chiefdoms are further subdivided into sections that contain several villages or towns. These smaller units are governed by section chiefs and town or village chiefs who oversee local governance and community affairs (Grieco, 2023, p.7). During the early colonial period, these local leaders were sometimes referred to as *headmen* by European administrators. However, as colonial governance structures expanded and became more formalized, the title *Paramount Chief* was introduced to distinguish the highest-ranking traditional authority from subordinate chiefs within the chiefdom hierarchy (Mihaylova, 2023).

Chiefdoms are the component administrative units of districts and are categorized into three classes: Class A**,** Class B**,** and Class C chiefdoms. This classification is based largely on population size, territorial extent, and administrative capacity. Class A chiefdoms are generally the largest and most populous, typically comprising eight or more sections. Class B chiefdoms are moderately sized and contain fewer sections, while Class C chiefdoms are usually smaller in both population and geographical coverage.

These classifications also influence the distribution of administrative services and infrastructure within chiefdoms. For instance, Class A chiefdoms typically host more local court sittings than the other categories. In many cases, three local courts operate in different locations within Class A chiefdoms, while Class B chiefdoms generally have two courts, and Class C chiefdoms usually have one. Similarly, the distribution of educational and health facilities often reflects these administrative categories. Although most of the chiefdoms now have access to secondary education following post-war reconstruction after 2002, Class A

chiefdoms are more likely to host full senior secondary schools, whereas Class B and Class C chiefdoms may have fewer educational facilities. In terms of healthcare provision, service allocation is often influenced by the remoteness of communities rather than solely by chiefdom.

Table 1: Category of chiefdoms

Class A			Class B			Class C		
Chiefdoms		Headquarter towns	Chiefdoms		Headquarter towns	Chiefdoms		Headquarter towns
1	Kakua	Bo [1]	1	Lugbu	Sumbuya	1	Bajia	Ngelehun
2	Valunia	Mongeri/Mandu[2]	2	Bagbo	Jimmi	2	Bagbe	Ngalu
3	Gao	Bumpeh				3	Bongor	Telu
4	Tikonko	Tikonko				4	Jaiama	Koribunbu
5	Baoma	Jerihun				5	Gbo	Baiima
						6	Niawa Lenga	Nemgbema/Sahn[3]
						7	Komboya	Njala
						8	Selenga	Damballa
						9	Wondeh	Fanima/Bathurst[4]

Source: authors' construct

METHODS:

This study employed a case study design with a phenomenological orientation**,** focusing on the lived experiences and perceptions of key actors within the 16 chiefdoms of Bo District**.** The phenomenological approach was appropriate as it allowed an in-depth understanding of how chiefdom councils operate within the decentralization framework in Sierra Leone from the perspective of those directly involved in governance.

It further considered the views of both chiefdom council authorities and district officials**,** including representatives from the District Office and District Council. Key informants were purposively selected to provide detailed insights into the roles and functions of chiefdom councils. The samples below consist of 9 Paramount Chiefs, 36 Town Chiefs, 17 District Council administrators, 5 District Office staff and 11 Chiefdom administrative clerks. Data was collected through content analysis of literature and in-depth personal interviews with the key informants. Interviews focused on understanding:

i. The administrative, judicial, and developmental functions of chiefdom councils.

ii. The interactions between chiefdom councils and district authorities in the decentralization process.

iii. Challenges and limitations faced by chiefdom councils in executing their roles.

The collected qualitative data were analyzed using the constant comparative method**,** whereby interview transcripts were systematically coded and disaggregated into thematic categories. This approach allowed the identification of patterns, similarities, and differences in the perceptions and experiences of respondents across the 16 chiefdoms, providing a comprehensive understanding of the operational dynamics of chiefdom councils.

Table 2: DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS:

Below is the thematic analysis of respondents on the various roles of chiefdom councils.

No	Roles	Remarks	No of responding chiefdoms	No of chiefdoms affirming to function	(%)
1	Revenue generation	In all 16 chiefdoms, authorities interviewed confirmed that revenue collection constitute the major function of their role in decentralization and include local tax collection and the collection of fees from miscellaneous sources such as bush begging fees and court fines. Chiefdoms relied on own source revenue generation such as local tax, osusu licenses, building land site registration fees etc. to	16	16	100%

[1] Second largest city in the country and doubles as the district headquarters and the provincial headquarter city of southern province.

[2] An amalgamated chiefdom current P C resides in Mandu

[3] Non amalgamated but P. C. resides in Sahn

[4] Non amalgamated but P.C. resides in Bathurst

		pay salaries of staff not catered for by the central government and run the chiefdom administration.			
2	Oversee community development projects	In all 16 chiefdoms, Community development projects done by the district council and other donor agencies are handed over to the chiefdom councils to take over operations for chiefdom benefit.	16	16	100%
3	Regulation of social behaviour and maintenance of public order in the chiefdom	In all chiefdoms, the authorities confirmed that the chiefdom council makes ordinances (bye law) to regulate social behaviour such as regulation to maintain public peace in their neighbourhoods about the use of obscene words, invectives, domestic violence, public health care, like use of bad traditional medicines, swearing without permission, waste disposal, combating air pollution; burning rubbish without permission, fighting and stealing. Regulations to protect human rights and illegal migration, for instance, wife beating and hosting strangers in the community without due presentation of him/her to the community chief/head constitute a crime.	16	16	100%
4	Community mobilization	Another primary role all chiefdom councils are proud of is the mobilization of their local people. Two instances in the past stood out clearly; first, the formation of the civil defense force against the rebel incursion and activities of renegade soldiers during the 1991-2002 civil war. Second, mobilization during the fight against Ebola virus disease of 2014. These roles the current Honourable paramount chief of Bo district, who is also P.C of Selenga chiefdom, Desmond Mahayei Kargobai proudly claimed that no other political entity enjoyed such power more than they chiefdoms. Moreover, chiefdoms mobilized local people for cultural, social and political activities.	16	16	100%
5	Regulations and Sanctions on the use of natural resources	Only 3 chiefdoms were affirmative of this function. They claimed that the role is slipping off the hands of chiefdoms authorities due to alleged central government interference and human rights based organizations, however, reported that sanctions on the use of water resources, fishing, harvesting palm oil, brushing forest without approval have helped in the past to reduce timber logging, conservation of animal population and protect biodiversity.	16	3	19%
6	Implementing and Monitoring policies	All 16 Chiefdoms confirmed undertaking the subsidiary roles in policies implementation. They confirmed implementing and monitoring central government policies in their localities. For instance, Wonde chiefdom reported a ban on charcoal burning in the chiefdom as a direct mandate from the central government while other chiefdoms pointed at teenage pregnancy reduction in their communities as testimony.	16	16	100%

Key Findings on Chiefdom Councils and Decentralization

The study found that chiefdom council administrations remain vital components of Sierra Leone's public administration system, endowed with legislative, judicial, and executive powers. Despite this, they are increasingly marginalized within the current decentralization process. This marginalization inhibits effective communication, knowledge transfer, and learning from the native customary administration, which historically served as the primary mechanism for problem-solving, citizen participation, and local service delivery.

a. High consensus functions: Revenue generation, community development oversight, social regulation, community mobilization, and policy implementation were affirmed by 100% of chiefdoms.

b. Limited functions: Only 19% of chiefdoms reported active regulation and sanctioning of natural resource use, indicating possible interference from central government or Non-Governmental Organizations.

c. Paramount Chiefs' central role: These results reinforce the notion that chiefdom councils, under the leadership of Paramount Chiefs, remain the principal operational units in rural governance and decentralization in Sierra Leone.

Roles and Responsibilities of Chiefdom Councils

Chiefdom councils retain primary responsibility for local tax collection and subsidiary levies**,** which are critical for sustaining their operations and funding local governance. These include:

- Bush begging fees
- Native Administration (N.A.) court fines
- Surface rent
- Traditional marriage and divorce registration fees
- Palm wine tapping fees
- Sand and stone mining fees

However, these functions vary among chiefdoms due to differences in size, geographic location, and natural resource endowment**.**

Revenue Collection and Administration

Chiefdom councils manage their own revenue collection systems, which are distinct from district or city council taxation mechanisms. Examples include:

- Evacuation taxes collected by district councils on forest products (timber, palm oil) and agricultural/marine products (yams, cassava, fish) at police checkpoints
- Market dues collected at weekly trade fairs within chiefdoms
- Trade and business taxes, property rates**,** particularly in Class A urban or semi-urban chiefdoms such as Ngao, Baoma, Kakua, and Tikonko

This independent revenue generation allows chiefdom councils to fund administrative salaries and local development projects without direct reliance on central or district authorities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings suggest that modern decentralization efforts have overlooked the strategic role of chiefdom councils**,** undermining their potential to contribute to participatory governance and effective local service delivery. Integrating chiefdom councils into the decentralization framework could strengthen grassroots engagement, improve resource allocation, and harness local knowledge for sustainable Socio-economic development.

Strengthening the Role of Chiefdom Councils in Decentralization

- Integrate chiefdom councils formally into the decentralization framework: Chiefdom councils should be recognized as key actors in local governance alongside district and city councils, ensuring their legislative, judicial, and executive powers are leveraged for local development.
- Clarify reporting and accountability structures: Establish clear lines of communication and accountability between chiefdom councils and district councils, while maintaining the customary autonomy that chiefdoms historically possess.

Enhancing Revenue and Financial Autonomy

- Support revenue generation systems: The central government and district councils should provide technical and financial support to chiefdom councils to improve their revenue collection systems without undermining local authority.
- Harmonize tax roles: Clearly delineate the roles of chiefdom councils versus district/city councils in tax collection to prevent conflicts and duplication, and also ensures local development projects are adequately funded.

Leveraging Chiefdoms for Service Delivery

- Use chiefdom councils as conduits for public service: District councils and government agencies should actively involve chiefdom councils in planning and implementing development projects, social programs, and public health initiatives.
- Mobilize communities effectively: Chiefdom councils' ability to mobilize communities during crises (e.g., Ebola outbreak) should be institutionalized as part of local disaster management and development strategies.

Preserving Cultural and Social Functions

- Recognize chiefs as custodians of local customs: Policies should safeguard the cultural and social regulatory functions of chiefdom councils, such as maintaining local peace, resolving disputes, and regulating natural resource use, while aligning with national laws.
- Support natural resource management: Government and NGOs should collaborate with chiefdom councils to manage forests, water, and other resources, providing training and legal backing for local environmental governance.

Capacity Building and Institutional Strengthening

- Training for chiefs and council staff: Implement capacity-building programs to enhance administrative, financial, and policy implementation skills within chiefdom councils.
- Strengthen data and reporting systems: Equip chiefdoms with tools to collect, monitor, and report local development indicators, enhancing evidence-based planning at the district and national levels.

Policy and Legal Reforms

- Review decentralization laws: Amend decentralization policies to formally include chiefdom councils as partners in governance, ensuring clarity in functions, authority, and oversight.
- Codify subsidiary powers: Recognize the specific roles of chiefdom councils in legislation (e.g., tax collection, by-law enforcement, and community mobilization) to protect their autonomy while ensuring accountability.

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