

Decentralization in Sierra Leone: A Critical Realist study of District and Chiefdom Councils in Bo District

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Abstract: This study examines the policy and institutional foundations of decentralisation in Sierra Leone, focusing on the relationship between district councils and chiefdom councils. It finds that despite successive decentralisation reforms, the role of Chiefdom Councils remains poorly defined, resulting in overlapping responsibilities, weak coordination, and ineffective implementation of the principle of subsidiarity. Using Critical Realism and qualitative policy analysis, the study reviews the historical evolution of decentralised governance and analyses the Local Government Acts of 2004 and 2022 together with the National Decentralisation Policies of 2010 and 2021. The findings reveal that while district councils are legally recognised as the primary local government authorities, chiefdom councils continue to perform important governance functions without adequate legal authority or institutional integration. The study concludes that sustainable decentralisation requires constitutional and legislative reforms to clarify institutional roles, strengthen collaboration between local governance institutions, and formally integrate chiefdom councils into Sierra Leone's decentralised governance framework while maintaining democratic accountability.

Keywords: Critical Realism, Institutional Foundation, Decentralisation, Chiefdom Council, District Council, Protectorate.

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Introduction

Decentralisation has become one of the most influential governance reforms adopted by both developed and developing countries over the past four decades. It is widely regarded as a mechanism for improving democratic governance, promoting citizen participation, strengthening accountability, and enhancing the delivery of public services through the transfer of political, administrative, and fiscal authority from central governments to lower levels of government. International organisations, including the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme, and other development partners, have consistently promoted decentralisation as an important strategy for achieving inclusive governance, poverty reduction, and sustainable local development. Despite its widespread adoption, however, the outcomes of decentralisation have varied considerably across countries because reforms are shaped by historical, political, legal, and institutional contexts.

In Africa, decentralisation has largely been pursued as part of broader programmes of democratic transition, public sector reform, and post-conflict state reconstruction. While many governments have devolved authority to elected local governments, the implementation of decentralisation has frequently encountered institutional, financial, and political constraints. In these countries, decentralised governance operates alongside traditional authorities whose legitimacy predates the modern state. Like in Sierra Leone, these traditional institutions continue to exercise significant influence over land administration, customary justice, local dispute resolution, community mobilisation, and local development. Consequently, decentralisation in Africa often involves managing

the interaction between formal democratic institutions and customary systems of governance.

Sierra Leone provides an important context for examining this relationship. The country's governance system reflects the legacy of British colonial administration, which combined direct rule in the Colony with indirect rule through traditional authorities in the Protectorate. This dual administrative heritage produced two parallel systems of local governance: elected local government institutions and chiefdom administrations headed by Paramount Chiefs. Following independence in 1961, the country experienced periods of both decentralisation and centralisation, culminating in the suspension of elected local councils in 1972. For more than three decades, governance became highly centralised, weakening local institutions and limiting citizen participation in public decision-making.

The civil war (1991–2002) exposed the weaknesses of this highly centralised governance structure, particularly in rural areas where state institutions had become ineffective. In response, the Government of Sierra Leone reintroduced decentralisation through the Local Government Act of 2004 as part of broader post-conflict governance reforms. The objectives of these reforms were to improve public service delivery, deepen democratic participation, strengthen accountability, and restore citizens' confidence in public institutions. Subsequent reforms, including the Local Government Act of 2022 and the National Decentralisation Policy of 2021, sought to strengthen local government administration and improve institutional effectiveness.

Despite these reforms, significant governance challenges remain. While district, municipal, and city councils have received

substantial legislative and policy attention, the role of chiefdom councils within the decentralised governance framework remains insufficiently defined. Although chiefdom institutions continue to perform important governance functions in rural communities, their statutory powers, institutional responsibilities, and relationship with district councils remain unclear and ambiguous. This ambiguity has contributed to overlapping mandates, weak intergovernmental coordination, fragmented accountability, and inconsistent implementation of decentralisation policies, particularly at the chiefdom level.

This study argues that these challenges cannot be fully explained by administrative inefficiency or inadequate financial resources alone. Rather, they reflect deeper institutional design, structures and historical legacies that continue to shape governance outcomes in Sierra Leone. Guided by the philosophy of Critical Realism, the study examines the underlying mechanisms that influence the interaction between district councils and chiefdom councils. It contends that understanding these institutional relationships is essential for explaining why decentralisation has produced uneven results despite successive legislative and policy reforms.

Objectives

The study examines the historical, institutional, and theoretical foundations of decentralization in Sierra Leone from a critical realist perspective and assesses their implications for socio-economic development.

Specific Objectives

- To examine the evolution of decentralization from the colonial period to the contemporary local government system in Sierra Leone.
- To analyse the institutional development of chiefdom administration and local councils.
- To evaluate the theoretical foundations underpinning decentralization, including Structural Functionalism, the Principle of Subsidiarity, and Sequential Theory.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Theories are generally understood as systematic explanations of phenomena that enable researchers to describe, explain, and predict events. Don-Solomon et al. (2018, p. 4) define theories as sets of logically interconnected concepts, propositions, and generalisations that facilitate understanding and advance knowledge. Frameworks, on the other hand, are support structures upon which ideas and analytical reasoning are anchored (Patelow, 2023, p. 511). Accordingly, a theoretical framework provides the conceptual foundation through which a research problem is examined and interpreted. Critical Realism as the overarching theoretical framework of this study provides an explanatory approach for understanding the complex institutional dynamics that shape decentralization in Sierra Leone. While decentralization is often analysed through legal, administrative, or political reforms, Critical Realism argues that observable governance outcomes are generated by deeper institutional structures and causal mechanisms. Consequently, the study complements Critical Realism with Structural Functionalism, the Principle of Subsidiarity, and Sequential Theory of Decentralization to explain

how institutional structures interact to influence local governance and public service delivery.

The case of Critical Realism in governance studies

Critical Realism, principally developed by Roy Bhaskar (1978), argues that reality exists independently of human perception and consists of multiple layers. It distinguishes between the empirical domain, the actual domain, and the real domain; which consists of the observable events, underlying structures and causal mechanisms that generate them (Fletcher, 2017. pp5-7). Critical Realism seeks to explain why particular outcomes occur by identifying the institutional, historical, political, and social mechanisms that produce them.

Critical realism is a philosophical way of thinking which guides investigation into reality (Koopmans et al 2022). It helps researchers in governance to understand service delivery challenges, as interactions among various levels of institutions and individual players and also the context and structures explain the seen and unseen qualities of the system (Haigh et al 2019). This may led to inquiry about the mechanisms underlining the causal influence of a situation. The application of critical realism in governance and development studies related disciplines will help to unravel causal mechanisms of poverty, poor governance and general under development in communities. By asking what, why, when, where and how questions a particular social phenomenon is laid bare to understanding. It is crucial for evaluative studies, policy analysis and project management (Lawani 2021 p3-4). In political and development sciences, this perspective suggests that improvements or failures in governance cannot be explained solely by examining legislation or administrative reforms alone. Instead, governance outcomes emerge from the interaction of deeper institutional structures, including political authority, customary governance, historical legacies, administrative capacity, and intergovernmental relations.

In Sierra Leone, decentralization has been implemented within an existing institutional landscape characterised by the coexistence of statutory local councils and customary chiefdom authorities. These institutions possess different sources of legitimacy, authority, and accountability, yet they jointly influence local governance. Consequently, the study seeks not merely to describe decentralization reforms but to explain the causal mechanisms through which relationships between district councils and chiefdom councils affect public service delivery.

Structural Functionalist Theory

Structural Functionalism originated from the classical sociological works of Auguste Comte (1798-1857), Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), and Robert K. Merton (1910-2003). The theory conceptualizes society as a system composed of interdependent institutions, each performing specialised functions necessary for the survival and stability of the whole system. Spencer likened society to a biological organism whose various organs perform distinct but complementary functions to maintain equilibrium (Harper 2011. p3).

Similarly, governance institutions such as local councils, chiefdom councils, ministries, courts, and security agencies each perform specialised responsibilities that contribute to public administration. Structural Functionalism therefore emphasises that the effectiveness of governance depends not only upon individual institutional performance but also upon the coordination and interdependence among institutions (Waltz, 2014. p104-5).

Within this study, Structural Functionalism explains the expected functional roles of district councils and chiefdom councils within Sierra Leone's decentralized governance system. However, while the theory explains institutional functions, it does not sufficiently explain why those functions are successfully performed in some contexts but constrained in others. Critical Realism complements Structural Functionalism by examining the deeper institutional mechanisms that facilitate or inhibit effective role performance.

The Principle of Subsidiarity

The principle of subsidiarity provides the normative foundation for decentralization by asserting that public functions should be performed by the lowest competent authority capable of undertaking them effectively. Its philosophical origins can be traced to Roman administrative traditions and later Catholic Church social thought, particularly the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, where emphasis was placed upon balancing individual welfare with the common good.

Modern applications of subsidiarity have become central to federal systems and multilevel governance arrangements, including the European Union through the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 (Gosepath, 2005, p154). Drew and Grant (2017) describe subsidiarity as a governance principle that allocates decision-making authority to lower levels of government while requiring higher authorities to provide support only when necessary.

Within decentralization policy, subsidiarity provides the rationale for transferring political, administrative, and fiscal responsibilities from central government to local authorities. The principle assumes that local institutions possess greater knowledge of community needs and are therefore better positioned to deliver responsive public services (Rondinelli et al 1983, p.4; Faguet (2021, p. 3-5; and Carrasco et al 2023, pp. 4- 5).

From a Critical Realist perspective, however, subsidiarity alone does not guarantee successful decentralization. Although functions may legally be devolved to local institutions, their effective implementation depends upon deeper institutional structures such as administrative capacity, political incentives, customary authority, resource availability, and historical patterns of governance. Consequently, subsidiarity operates not merely as a legal principle but as a mechanism whose effectiveness depends upon broader institutional conditions.

Sequential Theory of Decentralization

Faletti's (2005, p326-330) Sequential Theory explains decentralization as a dynamic process rather than a single policy intervention. According to the theory, decentralization unfolds through successive layers of reforms involving political, administrative, and fiscal dimensions. The sequence in which these reforms occur significantly influences the distribution of power between central and sub-national governments.

Faletti identifies three principal dimensions of decentralization: decentralization as a process, the territorial interests of political actors, and policy feedback effects. Together these dimensions explain how reforms evolve over time and reshape relationships among different levels of government.

The theory further suggests that decentralization increases the authority of sub-national governments by expanding their responsibilities for governance, revenue mobilisation, and public service delivery. Consequently, attention shifts from national

political institutions as service deliverers toward local governments and their interactions with central government (Achen et al 2011.p857).

Conceptual Framework

Concepts are analytical tools that enable researchers to define, organise, and interpret social phenomena. Dingwerth and Pattberg (2006, pp. 185–186) argue that concepts constitute important ontological elements in social science research because they help researchers identify patterns, classify observations, and develop coherent explanations. A conceptual framework therefore specifies the principal concepts employed in a study and illustrates the relationships among them within the broader theoretical perspective.

Guided by the Critical Realist framework developed in the preceding section, this study conceptualises decentralization as a system of interacting governance institutions operating within historical, political, and administrative structures. The framework recognises that district and chiefdom councils do not function independently but interact through institutional arrangements that influence public service delivery. Accordingly, the principal concepts examined in this study are local government, local councils, traditional governance institutions, decentralization, governance, intergovernmental relations, and public service delivery.

The Concept of Local Government

Local government refers to the legally recognised level of government operating below the central government and exercising political, administrative, and fiscal authority within a defined geographical jurisdiction. It exists to facilitate democratic participation, represent local interests, and provide essential public services to local communities.

Zhou (2009. P18-19) argues that local government exists for two principal reasons. First, it performs administrative functions by providing goods and services closer to citizens. Second, it promotes democratic participation by enabling local communities to identify development priorities and participate in governance.

Similarly, Kargbo (2015,p35ff) defines local government as a political and administrative institution established by central government to exercise legislative, executive, and, in some circumstances, judicial authority over matters of local concern. Asamoah (2012, p91) likewise emphasises its representative character through elected or appointed officials responsible for local development.

The evolution of local government in Sierra Leone reflects changing political and administrative priorities. During the colonial period, chiefdom administrations functioned primarily as Native Authorities responsible for maintaining law and order within the Protectorate. Following independence, greater emphasis shifted towards developmental functions and public service delivery. The abolition of district councils in 1972 and their subsequent restoration under the Local Government Act 2004 demonstrate the continuing evolution of local governance institutions. Within this study, local government is understood as the broader institutional system within which both district councils and chiefdom councils operate (Srivastava & Larizza, 2011, p143).

The Concept of Local Councils

Local councils constitute the representative organs through which local governments perform their statutory functions. They formulate local policies, approve budgets, enact by-laws, oversee development programmes, and monitor public service delivery.

District councils comprise elected ward councillors led by chairpersons or mayors, while chiefdom councils are chaired by Paramount Chiefs and consist of customary representatives. Although these institutions differ in composition and sources of legitimacy, both perform governance functions within Sierra Leone's decentralised administrative system (Humes & Martin 1969, p.86 & Kargbo 2015, p 55ff). The study conceptualises local councils not merely as administrative organisations but as governance institutions whose effectiveness depends upon their relationships with other actors operating within the local governance space and system.

Traditional Governance Institutions

Traditional governance institutions occupy a central position within Sierra Leone's local governance system. Long before the establishment of statutory local councils, chiefdom administrations performed essential governance functions including customary justice, land administration, revenue mobilisation, dispute resolution, community mobilisation, and local security. Consequently, they possess enduring political legitimacy and social authority within rural communities. The reintroduction of decentralized local government in 2004 did not replace these institutions but created a system in which elected district councils coexist alongside chiefdom councils. This institutional dualism has produced both cooperation and competition over authority, accountability, and service delivery (Nickson & Cutting 2020 p801; Srivastava & Larizza 2011p149).

From a Critical Realist perspective, traditional governance institutions constitute enduring social structures that continue to influence governance outcomes. Rather than existing outside the decentralization system, they interact continuously with statutory local councils, thereby shaping the implementation of decentralization policies and the effectiveness of public service delivery.

The Concept of Decentralization

Decentralization constitutes the principal concept of this study. It refers to the transfer of political, administrative, and fiscal authority from central government to subordinate levels of government in order to improve democratic participation, accountability, and public service delivery. It is a reform process in governance of once centralised governance system of service delivery. Carrasco, Rahemtulla and Rohdewohld (2023) define a decentralised state as one characterised by multiple levels of government, each exercising clearly defined functions and responsibilities. Historically, decentralization derives from the Latin concept meaning "away from the centre" (Mudalige, 2019). Scholars commonly distinguish four forms of decentralization: DE concentration, delegation, devolution, and privatization (Rondinelli et al., 1983; Faguet, 2021). This study focuses primarily on devolution because the Local Government Act 2004 established elected district councils with legally assigned responsibilities for local governance. Decentralization in Sierra Leone reflects both historical and political processes. The Chiefdom Councils Act of 1938 institutionalised customary administration during colonial rule, while the Local Government Act 2004 reintroduced elected local councils as part of post-conflict governance reforms aimed at

strengthening democracy, improving service delivery, and addressing grievances associated with excessive centralisation.

Governance and Intergovernmental Relations

Governance refers to the processes, institutions, rules, and relationships through which societies organise collective action and manage public affairs. Unlike government, which denotes formal state institutions, governance encompasses the interactions among public authorities, traditional institutions, civil society, and citizens (Wohlmuth, 1998.pp7-10). Within decentralised systems, governance depends largely upon intergovernmental relations. These relationships involve cooperation, coordination, negotiation, and accountability between central government, district councils, chiefdom councils, and other public institutions. For this study, intergovernmental relations constitute the principal mechanism through which decentralization is implemented. The quality of administrative coordination between district councils and chiefdom councils therefore becomes a key explanatory factor influencing local governance outcomes.

Public Service Delivery

Public service delivery refers to the provision of essential services that promote citizens' welfare and socio-economic development. These services include education, healthcare, water supply, sanitation, agricultural extension, infrastructure, environmental management, and local economic development. Within decentralization theory, improved public service delivery represents one of the principal objectives of devolving authority to local governments. However, Critical Realism suggests that service delivery outcomes depend upon the interaction of deeper institutional mechanisms, including administrative capacity, resource availability, political leadership, customary authority, and intergovernmental cooperation. Accordingly, public service delivery constitutes the principal empirical outcome through which this study evaluates the effectiveness of decentralization.

Governance and Decentralization

Governance constitutes the central analytical concept underpinning this study. Although the term is frequently qualified by pundits variously such as; *good, bad, corporate, global, multi-level*, and *network governance* (Ansell & Torfing, 2016,p2), these modifiers reflect different dimensions of governance rather than providing a universally accepted definition. At its core, governance refers to the institutional arrangements and processes through which political authority is exercised and societal affairs are managed. Among the earliest conceptualisations, Wohlmuth (1998, p7) defines governance as the manner in which political power is exercised through governmental institutions and administrative structures. This institutional perspective highlights the importance of formal state organs—including parliament, the judiciary, security institutions, anti-corruption agencies, and local governments—in determining the quality and effectiveness of governance. Governance, therefore, extends beyond political leadership to encompass the rules, institutions, and mechanisms that shape state-society relations and public service delivery.

Moving beyond an institutional understanding, Fukuyama (2013, p.3-4) conceptualises governance as the capacity of governments to formulate and implement policies and to provide public goods and services effectively, irrespective of regime type. This perspective shifts attention from democratic legitimacy to state capability, suggesting that governance should ultimately be evaluated by the extent to which governments protect citizens, maintain public order, and promote socio-economic development.

Such an interpretation is particularly relevant to developing countries, where institutional effectiveness often determines development outcomes more than constitutional arrangements alone.

Similarly, Katsamunsa (2016, p136) broadens the governance debate by identifying four complementary perspectives: hierarchical, market, network, and community governance. Hierarchical governance emphasises the vertical relationship between central and sub-national governments, where authority is delegated while maintaining accountability to the state. Market governance focuses on the allocation of public resources through economic mechanisms, whereas network governance recognises that policy implementation increasingly depends on collaboration among governments, civil society, private actors, and development partners. Community governance, in contrast, emphasises the role of local institutions and citizens in addressing collective problems. This perspective presents two contrasting viewpoints: one advocates reducing excessive state intervention to encourage local innovation and self-governance, while the other argues that inadequate state presence creates institutional weaknesses that undermine collective action and public accountability.

Collectively, these perspectives demonstrate that governance is a multidimensional process involving institutions, actors, and relationships operating across multiple levels of society. Rather than being confined to state administration, governance encompasses the interactions through which authority is exercised, decisions are implemented, and public services are delivered. Within this broader governance framework, local government represents the institutional mechanism through which governance is translated into service delivery at the grassroots level. Makinde, Hassan, and Taiwo (2016, p309) argue that local governments are established to fulfil political, administrative, economic, social, and cultural functions. They identify three complementary theoretical perspectives that explain the rationale for local government.

The democratic participatory theory views local government as an avenue for expanding citizens' participation in political decision-making and nurturing democratic accountability. By bringing government closer to communities, local authorities strengthen political inclusion and provide opportunities for leadership development. The efficiency-service delivery theory, in contrast, emphasises the comparative advantage of local governments in providing public services that respond to local needs more efficiently than central governments. Finally, development theory argues that local governments promote national integration and socio-economic development by reducing regional inequalities, strengthening local institutions, and encouraging community participation in development planning.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that local government performs a dual function: it serves both as a democratic institution that enhances citizen participation and as a developmental institution responsible for improving the welfare of local communities. Consequently, effective local governance depends not only on administrative structures but also on the degree of authority, autonomy, and resources available to local institutions.

Decentralization constitutes the principal policy instrument through which these governance objectives are pursued. It involves the transfer of political, administrative, and fiscal authority from central governments to lower levels of government, enabling local institutions to make decisions and provide services that reflect

local priorities. Dick-Sagoe (2020) defines decentralization as the transfer of authority from the central government to local governments, arguing that local institutions possess superior knowledge of community needs, enjoy greater proximity to citizens, and are better positioned to mobilise local resources. This reasoning reflects the foundational arguments advanced by Tiebout and Musgrave, (1959, p2) who propose that decentralised governments are better able to allocate resources efficiently because they possess more accurate information about local preferences.

A more comprehensive conceptualisation is provided by Rondinelli, Nellis, and Cheema (1983, p14), who define decentralization as the transfer of planning, management, fiscal responsibilities, and decision-making authority from central governments to subordinate governmental units, semi-autonomous agencies, public corporations, and, in some instances, non-governmental organisations. Their framework distinguishes decentralization according to the degree of authority transferred, ranging from administrative DE concentration to political devolution. Importantly, they argue that the effectiveness of decentralization depends not merely on transferring responsibilities but also on transferring the financial resources, legal authority, and institutional capacity required to perform those responsibilities effectively. Contemporary scholarship similarly recognises decentralization as both a political reform and a governance strategy. Schneider (2019, p5) argues that decentralization should be understood not simply as an administrative arrangement but as a political process that redistributes authority between different levels of government. Likewise, Asaduzzaman (2008, pp41-42) opines that decentralization strengthens good governance by promoting citizen participation, accountability, transparency, and responsive public administration. These attributes contribute to improved service delivery and more inclusive local development, particularly when local governments possess adequate autonomy and institutional capacity.

From a critical realist perspective, however, decentralization should not be understood merely as a formal transfer of powers prescribed by legislation. Rather, it represents a complex governance process whose outcomes are shaped by the interaction of institutional structures, historical legacies, political interests, and local agency. The formal decentralization framework established by law may grant authority to local governments, yet its actual implementation depends on deeper causal mechanisms operating within the political system. In Sierra Leone, these mechanisms include the coexistence of elected local councils and traditional chieftdom authorities, the distribution of fiscal resources, administrative capacity, and central government oversight. Critical realism therefore provides a useful analytical lens for distinguishing between the formal structures of decentralization and the underlying institutional relationships that explain variations in governance and service delivery across chiefdoms. This perspective is particularly relevant to the present study because it seeks to explain not only whether decentralization has influenced socio-economic development but also how, where and why those outcomes have occurred within Sierra Leone's plural system of local governance.

Chiefdom Institutions within the Decentralization Framework

Although decentralization reforms are generally designed to strengthen elected local governments, their effectiveness in many African countries depends on the continued relevance of traditional governance institutions. In Sierra Leone, chiefdoms

constitute the oldest and most deeply rooted institutions of local governance. Long before the establishment of modern local councils, chiefdoms exercised executive, judicial, and legislative authority over local affairs, including land administration, customary justice, tax collection, conflict resolution, and community mobilization. Consequently, decentralization has not replaced traditional institutions but has created a system in which elected local councils and chiefdom authorities coexist and exercise overlapping responsibilities.

The continued importance of chiefdom institutions derives from their historical legitimacy, cultural authority, and proximity to local communities. Paramount Chiefs and their subordinate authorities command considerable social influence because their legitimacy is embedded in customary law and local traditions rather than electoral processes alone. As custodians of customary land and community values, they often serve as intermediaries between central government, local councils, and rural populations. Their participation is therefore indispensable in mobilizing community support for development initiatives, facilitating dispute resolution, and maintaining social cohesion, particularly in rural chiefdoms where state institutions may have limited administrative presence.

However, the coexistence of traditional and statutory governance institutions also creates institutional complexities. The Local Government Act 2022 devolves significant service delivery responsibilities to elected district councils, while the Chieftaincy Act preserves the legal authority of Paramount Chiefs over customary affairs. This dual governance arrangement can generate both collaboration and conflict, particularly where institutional mandates overlap or where political competition emerges between elected officials and traditional authorities. Consequently, variations in local development outcomes may reflect not only the design of decentralization policies but also the quality of relationships between these complementary governance institutions.

From a critical realist perspective, chiefdom institutions represent underlying structural mechanisms that shape the implementation and outcomes of decentralization. While decentralization legislation formally defines the distribution of powers among local government institutions, actual governance outcomes depend on deeper historical, cultural, and political structures that influence how authority is exercised in practice. Traditional authority, customary norms, informal power relations, and community trust are generative mechanisms that either facilitate or constrain the effectiveness of decentralized governance. Therefore, understanding the socio-economic impact of decentralization requires analysing not only the formal institutional framework but also the interaction between elected local councils and chiefdom authorities within Sierra Leone's plural governance system. Accordingly, this study conceptualises chiefdom institutions not as residual traditional structures but as integral components of local governance whose interaction with decentralized state institutions significantly influences service delivery, citizen participation, and socio-economic development in Bo District.

Methods

Research Philosophy

This study is grounded in the philosophy of Critical Realism, principally developed by Roy Bhaskar (1978, 1979). Critical Realism argues that social reality exists independently of

human perception but that our understanding of it is socially mediated and therefore fallible. Unlike positivism, which seeks observable regularities, or constructivism, which focuses solely on social interpretations, Critical Realism seeks to uncover the underlying structures and causal mechanisms that generate observable events (Vincent & O'Mahoney 2018). Critical realist researchers deal with problems from both qualitative and quantitative point of view. This is because of the belief that research problems exist in dualistic world of objectivism and subjectivism (Fletcher 2017, p6).

The philosophy is particularly suitable for this study because decentralisation in Sierra Leone involves complex institutional relationships that cannot be adequately understood by examining legal provisions or policy outcomes alone. While the Local Government Acts and decentralisation policies represent observable institutional arrangements, deeper historical, political, and institutional structures continue to shape their implementation (Fletcher 2017, p4-7). Critical Realism therefore enables the study to investigate why decentralisation reforms have produced persistent institutional ambiguities despite repeated legislative reforms.

Research Design

The study employs a qualitative case study design focusing exclusively on Sierra Leone. A case study design is appropriate because decentralisation is context-specific and influenced by unique historical, political, and institutional developments. Sierra Leone provides an appropriate case because it combines democratically elected local councils with constitutionally recognised traditional chiefdom institutions, creating a distinctive dual governance structure.

The case study allows an in-depth examination of:

- the historical evolution of decentralisation;
- the legal and policy framework governing local government;
- the institutional relationship between district councils and chiefdom councils;
- the implementation of subsidiarity; and
- the governance implications of institutional ambiguity.

Location of study area



Map of Sierra Leone showing boundaries of districts



Map of Bo district showing chiefdom boundaries

Sources of Data

The study relies primarily on primary and secondary qualitative data obtained from in-depth personal interviews, questionnaires, focus group discussion and documentary sources.

Data Analysis

Data are analysed using qualitative thematic analysis.

The analysis follows six stages:

1. Familiarisation with documentary evidence.
2. Identification of recurring themes.
3. Comparison of institutional arrangements across different legal and policy documents.
4. Interpretation of findings using Critical Realist concepts of structures, mechanisms, and causal influence.
5. Development of explanations linking historical institutional arrangements to contemporary decentralisation outcomes.

Thematic analysis enables the study to move beyond descriptive analysis and explain to why institutional challenges continue to persist.

Result

The gaps in chieftdoms and district council relationship:

The findings of this study reveal that the relationship between the District Council and the chiefdom councils in Bo District continues to be characterized by institutional fragmentation, overlapping mandates, and weak intergovernmental coordination. These governance gaps are most evident in the areas of revenue mobilization, revenue sharing, administrative reporting, and political representation. Collectively, these challenges undermine the objectives of decentralization, which seeks to promote effective local governance, democratic accountability, and improved service delivery.

One of the most prominent findings relates to disputes over local revenue collection and the absence of a transparent revenue-sharing mechanism. Although chiefdoms constitute the principal source of locally generated revenue, respondents consistently reported that the District Council collects taxes within chiefdom jurisdictions without providing an agreed proportion of the proceeds to chiefdom administrations. Paramount Chiefs argued that this arrangement has created financial uncertainty for

chiefdom councils, whose operations depend largely on locally generated revenue to finance administrative activities and remunerate chiefdom functionaries. Consequently, rather than fostering collaboration, the existing fiscal arrangement has generated competition and mistrust between the two institutions.

These findings support the fiscal decentralization literature, which argues that successful decentralization requires not only the transfer of expenditure responsibilities but also equitable fiscal arrangements that provide local institutions with adequate financial autonomy. When subnational institutions are assigned responsibilities without corresponding access to financial resources, decentralization tends to produce institutional rivalry instead of cooperative governance (Jibao & Prichard 2016; & Tambulasi 2009). The findings therefore suggest that the absence of clearly defined fiscal rules and transparent revenue-sharing mechanisms weakens the effectiveness of local government and undermines the spirit of decentralization.

The findings are also consistent with the decentralization framework established in Sierra Leone. While the decentralization reforms sought to devolve functions to local councils and encourage collaboration with traditional authorities, the study indicates that the operational relationship between these institutions remains inadequately defined. The overlapping responsibilities assigned to District Councils and chiefdom administrations have created uncertainty regarding authority over local revenue generation, thereby contributing to recurring conflicts. This observation reinforces earlier studies that identified institutional ambiguity and weak intergovernmental coordination as persistent constraints on the implementation of decentralization in Sierra Leone.

The study further found that administrative reporting between the District Council and chiefdom councils is weak and largely informal. Although both institutions employ technical personnel performing comparable functions, such as environmental health and sanitation, these officials operate under separate reporting structures. Chiefdom officers remain accountable to chiefdom authorities rather than to corresponding district officials, thereby limiting coordination in planning, implementation, and monitoring of development activities. Information sharing occurs primarily through Paramount Chiefs serving as ex officio members of the District Council instead of through institutionalized administrative reporting systems.

This finding illustrates a broader institutional coordination challenge frequently identified in decentralization studies. Effective decentralization depends upon clearly defined reporting relationships, vertical accountability, and integrated administrative systems. Where reporting structures remain fragmented, policy implementation becomes inconsistent, duplication of responsibilities increases, and public service delivery suffers. The absence of formal reporting mechanisms between the two institutions therefore reduces administrative efficiency and weakens local governance outcomes.

Another important finding concerns the changing nature of political representation following the introduction of the district block electoral system in the 2023 local council elections. Under the previous ward-based system, councillors represented specific geographic communities and served as a direct link between local populations, chiefdom authorities, and the District Council. Respondents observed that the current electoral arrangement has reduced this direct linkage because councillors now represent

broader political party interests at the district level rather than individual wards. This institutional change appears to have weakened grassroots participation and reduced opportunities for community concerns to be systematically communicated within council decision-making processes.

From the perspective of democratic decentralization, local representation constitutes an essential mechanism through which citizens participate in governance and hold elected officials accountable. The weakening of community-based representation therefore raises concerns about downward accountability and citizen participation, both of which are fundamental objectives of decentralization. Although the district block system may enhance political party organization, the findings suggest that it may simultaneously reduce the strength of the institutional relationship between communities, chiefdom administrations, and District Councils.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that decentralization in Bo District has not yet produced the level of institutional integration envisaged by the reform programme. Instead, fiscal disputes, fragmented administrative reporting systems, and evolving political arrangements continue to constrain effective collaboration between District Councils and chiefdom councils. These governance challenges reduce institutional trust, impede coordinated development planning, and ultimately limit the capacity of local governments to deliver sustainable socio-economic development. The study therefore suggests that strengthening intergovernmental relations through clearly defined fiscal arrangements, harmonized reporting structures, and enhanced institutional collaboration is essential for improving the effectiveness of decentralization and achieving its intended development outcomes.

Field observation: Chiefdom Council and community conflict resolution in wonde chiefdom

A field observation conducted on **25 February 2025** in Bathurst, the administrative headquarters of Wonde Chiefdom in Bo District, provided important empirical insights into the governance functions performed by chiefdom councils in Sierra Leone. The visit, originally intended to facilitate an interview with the Paramount Chief of Wonde Chiefdom, Chief Mohamed Shombie, coincided with the resolution of an industrial dispute involving mine workers and company representatives. This unplanned observation offered a valuable opportunity to witness the practical role of traditional authorities in local conflict management.

Upon arrival at the residence of the Paramount Chief, a large gathering of approximately fifty young men was observed within the compound. Shortly thereafter, a delegation comprising company representatives, some of whom appeared to be foreign nationals, arrived to engage in discussions concerning an ongoing labour dispute. The Paramount Chief requested that the scheduled interview be postponed until the mediation process had been concluded.

The mediation commenced in accordance with local customary practice, beginning with interfaith Muslim and Christian prayers, followed by introductions of the parties involved. The Paramount Chief invited the spokesperson for the mine workers to present their grievances before allowing the company representatives to respond. The workers' principal concerns centred on inadequate provision of personal protective equipment and persistent irregularities in salary payments. In response, the

company delegation acknowledged the concerns and committed to communicating them to the company's headquarters in Freetown for appropriate administrative action. Throughout the proceedings, the Paramount Chief facilitated dialogue between both parties, encouraged constructive engagement, and appealed for a peaceful resolution of the dispute.

After more than one hour of deliberation, the Paramount Chief advised the workers to resume work while awaiting a formal response from the company's management. Both the workers and the company representatives accepted this recommendation, thereby bringing the immediate dispute to a peaceful conclusion without recourse to law enforcement or formal judicial mechanisms. The company delegation subsequently departed with the workers to address the remaining operational matters.

Following the mediation, the interview with the Paramount Chief proceeded as scheduled. Reflecting on the incident, he described the dispute as representative of the routine governance responsibilities undertaken by chiefdom authorities in maintaining public order and responding to community grievances. He argued that chiefdom councils frequently provide the first point of contact for conflict resolution because of their close proximity to local communities and their institutional legitimacy. As he observed:

"We are the real local councils because we are the immediate authorities people contact whenever community grievances arise. The workers were protesting because they lacked protective equipment and their salaries were not being paid consistently."

This observation illustrates the continuing significance of traditional institutions within Sierra Leone's decentralised governance framework. Although statutory local councils possess formal administrative mandates under the Local Government Act, chiefdom authorities continue to perform essential governance functions that extend beyond those explicitly recognised in contemporary decentralisation policy. Their accessibility and customary legitimacy, within local communities enable them to intervene rapidly in disputes that require immediate mediation and consensus-building.

The field observation further corroborates evidence obtained through a Focus Group Discussion involving nine Chiefdom Administrative Clerks conducted at the Bo District Office. Participants consistently reported that while the operational capacities of chiefdom councils differ according to factors such as geographical location, population size, administrative resources, and natural endowments, their institutional responsibilities remain broadly comparable. Across the chiefdoms represented, councils were reported to perform functions including community dispute resolution, maintenance of public order, mobilisation of local participation, and facilitation of communication between citizens and government institutions, and coordination of local development initiatives.

Taken together, the observational and interview evidence demonstrates that chiefdom councils continue to occupy a central position in local governance despite the expansion of statutory local government institutions. The findings suggest that the practical operation of decentralisation in Sierra Leone is characterised by institutional complementarity rather than exclusive statutory authority. Consequently, understanding local governance requires attention not only to formal legal mandates but also to the informal institutional practices through which

traditional authorities continue to sustain peace, social cohesion, and administrative coordination at the community level.

Report on the interview of P.C. Prince Lappia Boima of Kakua Chiefdom on decentralisation

Date: 22/January/2025.

The interview with the late Paramount Chief Prince Lappia Boima of Kakua Chiefdom provides important insights into the institutional relationship between chiefdom administrations and local councils within Sierra Leone's decentralization framework. Kakua Chiefdom occupies a unique position because it hosts the headquarters of both the Bo District Council and the Bo City Council, making it particularly relevant for examining intergovernmental relations.

The Paramount Chief acknowledged that the chiefdom maintained cordial working relationships with both local councils. However, he emphasized that these relationships were largely informal and ceremonial rather than administrative or statutory. According to him, chiefdom administrations are not institutionally accountable to either the District Council or the City Council but instead report through the District Office. This finding suggests that despite the decentralization reforms, chiefdom councils continue to operate within an administrative structure that is largely separate from elected local government institutions. The absence of formal reporting and accountability mechanisms limits coordination between traditional authorities and local councils and contributes to institutional fragmentation.

A major concern raised during the interview related to fiscal decentralization, particularly the collection and sharing of local tax revenue. The Paramount Chief argued that while chiefdom authorities undertake the difficult task of mobilizing taxpayers and collecting local taxes, they are nevertheless required to transfer a prescribed proportion of the revenue to local councils. Kakua Chiefdom faces an additional financial obligation because it contributes precepts to both the Bo District Council and the Bo City Council through the District Office. He regarded this arrangement as inequitable because the councils provide limited support for revenue mobilization while benefiting from the proceeds collected by the chiefdom administration. This perception reflects broader concerns regarding the absence of transparent and equitable fiscal arrangements between traditional authorities and local councils.

The interview further revealed that the Paramount Chief viewed the principal role of chiefdom administrations within the decentralization process as safeguarding and maintaining development projects implemented by local councils within their jurisdictions. Beyond this responsibility, he perceived limited institutional collaboration between the two systems of local governance. He further argued that several functions traditionally performed by chiefdom administrations, particularly community mobilization, have gradually been transferred to local councils despite the latter possessing comparatively weaker community legitimacy. According to the Paramount Chief, traditional leaders possess stronger social authority and enjoy greater public trust because their legitimacy is derived from customary institutions that remain deeply embedded within local communities.

When asked to identify the "real" local government institution, the Paramount Chief unequivocally identified chiefdom councils rather than District Councils. He argued that chiefdom administrations deal directly with community affairs using

customary norms and traditional governance practices, which he considered more responsive to local realities than statutory local government institutions. He further observed that traditional leaders representing different ethnic communities residing within the chiefdom recognize the authority of the Paramount Chief rather than that of the District Council. The view illustrates the continuing significance of customary authority within Sierra Leone's pluralistic governance system and highlights the coexistence of statutory and traditional institutions exercising authority over the same populations.

The Paramount Chief also reflected on the historical evolution of decentralization following Sierra Leone's civil war. He argued that post-war governance reforms disproportionately attributed responsibility for the conflict to traditional authorities while overlooking governance failures at the national level. According to him, these reforms weakened the authority of chiefdom administrations and progressively marginalized traditional governance institutions within the national political system. Although this interpretation reflects the views of the interviewee rather than an established historical conclusion, it demonstrates the perception among traditional leaders that decentralization reforms have reduced their institutional relevance.

Looking ahead, the Paramount Chief expressed reservations about the future sustainability of decentralization. He argued that District Councils remain financially dependent on transfers from the central government and therefore lack genuine fiscal autonomy. In contrast, he described chiefdom administrations as relatively self-reliant because they depend largely on internally generated revenue. He cited the proposed collection of house rates by District Councils within chiefdom jurisdictions as an example of continuing uncertainty over fiscal decentralization. In his view, the absence of clear agreements regarding the proportion of revenue to be retained by chiefdom administrations has generated distrust among Paramount Chiefs. He further explained that traditional leaders regard such decisions as matters carrying both administrative and customary obligations, making it difficult for them to accept fiscal arrangements that may undermine their responsibility to their communities.

The interview concluded with an illustration of the financial resilience of Kakua Chiefdom. Despite receiving limited financial support from the central Government, the chiefdom had constructed its own administrative complex situated along Ngalu road, through locally mobilized resources. Apart from the salaries of the Paramount Chief and four court messengers provided by the Government, all remaining administrative personnel were financed from chiefdom-generated revenue. This demonstrates both the institutional capacity of chiefdom administrations to mobilize local resources and the substantial financial responsibilities they continue to bear despite their limited integration within the formal decentralization framework.

Overall, the interview demonstrates that while cordial relationships exist between chiefdom administrations and local councils, significant institutional gaps remain in administrative accountability, fiscal decentralization, role definition, and intergovernmental coordination. The findings reinforce the argument that decentralization in Sierra Leone has yet to establish an effective framework for integrating traditional authorities into local governance. Consequently, strengthening collaboration between statutory local governments and chiefdom administrations through clearly defined legal mandates, transparent fiscal arrangements, and formal coordination mechanisms remains

essential for achieving the objectives of democratic decentralization and sustainable local development.

Report on the interview with a former District Council Chairman on the implementation of decentralisation

Date: 26/November/2024

The interview with the former Chairman of the Bo District Council provides important perspectives on the institutional challenges affecting the implementation of decentralization in Sierra Leone. Drawing on his experience as the political head of the District Council, the interviewee discussed the legal framework governing local government, the relationship between the District Council, the District Office, and chiefdom administrations, as well as the future of decentralization.

The former Chairman argued that the Local Government legislation provides District Councils with supervisory responsibilities over chiefdom administrations. However, he acknowledged that this legal provision has not been effectively implemented in practice. According to him, the operational reality differs significantly from the statutory framework because the administration and supervision of chiefdom affairs remain largely under the authority of the District Office, headed by the Senior District Officer (SDO). This observation demonstrates the existence of parallel administrative structures that continue to shape local governance despite the decentralization reforms.

The interviewee identified the re-establishment of District Offices in 2011 as a major institutional challenge to effective decentralization. In his view, the restoration of the District Office created overlapping mandates and competing centres of authority between the District Council and the District Office, thereby weakening the relationship between District Councils and chiefdom administrations. He nevertheless expressed optimism that these institutional tensions could be resolved through legislative reform. Given that both the District Council and the District Office fall under the supervision of the Ministry responsible for local government, he suggested that Parliament could review the Local Government Act to clarify the respective roles and reporting relationships of the District Council, the District Office, and chiefdom administrations. Such reforms, he argued, would strengthen institutional coordination and enhance the effectiveness of decentralization.

The former Chairman openly acknowledged the existence of rivalry between the District Council and the District Office. He explained that this institutional competition has negatively affected the implementation of development programmes within the chiefdoms. Despite these challenges, he indicated that successful collaboration often depended on maintaining cordial interpersonal relationships rather than relying on formal institutional mechanisms. According to him, constructive engagement with chiefdom authorities was necessary because the various local governance institutions are mutually dependent in delivering development outcomes.

Reflecting on his leadership experience, the Chairman emphasized the political realities surrounding decentralization. He argued that elected District Council officials are directly accountable to the electorate, unlike appointed District Officers. Consequently, District Council leaders must exercise caution in managing institutional conflicts to avoid undermining public confidence and jeopardizing their electoral legitimacy. In his opinion, effective political leadership requires prioritizing

development objectives over institutional rivalry, as prolonged conflict ultimately affects the credibility and performance of local councils.

With regard to the relationship between the District Council and chiefdom administrations, the former Chairman explained that the District Council was not structured in the same manner as the District Office. He observed that Paramount Chiefs participate in council proceedings as *ex officio* members, thereby providing an important channel of communication between the council and chiefdom administrations. However, he clarified that Paramount Chiefs are not legally obliged to implement District Council decisions within their chiefdoms. Rather, their role is primarily consultative, serving to communicate council deliberations to fellow traditional leaders. This arrangement, according to the interviewee, limits the ability of District Councils to translate policy decisions into coordinated action at the chiefdom level.

The interview also highlighted concerns regarding the future of decentralization in Sierra Leone. The former Chairman expressed pessimism about the sustainability of the decentralization process unless significant institutional reforms are undertaken. He argued that although the country possesses an adequate legal and policy framework, implementation remains constrained by political and administrative forces that continue to favour centralized control. He cited the recent transfer of responsibilities for the procurement of drugs for district hospitals and the management of funds for feeder road maintenance from District Councils back to central government institutions as evidence of an emerging trend towards recentralization. In his assessment, these developments undermine the autonomy of local councils and contradict the fundamental principles of democratic decentralization.

Overall, the interview demonstrates that the principal obstacles to decentralization extend beyond legislative deficiencies to include institutional rivalry, overlapping administrative mandates, and weak coordination among local governance actors. The findings suggest that the coexistence of the District Council, the District Office, and chiefdom administrations without clearly defined operational relationships has created governance inefficiencies that impede effective service delivery and local development. The interview therefore reinforces the need for comprehensive institutional reforms aimed at clarifying roles and responsibilities, strengthening intergovernmental coordination, and safeguarding the autonomy of local councils if the objectives of decentralization are to be fully realized.

Interview with a Retired Senior Permanent Secretary and Former Chairman of the Public Service Commission (2002–2007)

Date: 18th/November/2025

The interview with the retired Senior Permanent Secretary and former Chairman of the Public Service Commission revealed that Sierra Leone's contemporary decentralisation reforms cannot be fully understood without examining the country's colonial administrative history. The respondent, who played a central role in the design of the post-war decentralisation reforms, explained that following the election of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, he was commissioned by the Government, with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), to develop a framework for reintroducing local government after its abolition in 1972. The outcome of this assignment was a policy paper entitled *Sierra Leone's Experience with Local Government*, which

reviewed the historical evolution of local governance and informed the decentralisation reforms that culminated in the enactment of the Local Government Act of 2004.

The respondent argued that the origins of Sierra Leone's decentralisation system lie within the British colonial policy of Indirect Rule. According to him, the establishment of Chiefdom Councils in 1938 institutionalised traditional authorities as integral components of the colonial administrative structure. Rather than replacing indigenous political institutions, colonial administrators incorporated them into the machinery of government to facilitate administrative control over the Protectorate. Consequently, the institutional relationship between traditional authority and local government has remained deeply embedded within Sierra Leone's governance system.

The respondent further explained that British expansion into the Protectorate was shaped by broader geopolitical considerations. Concerned about the westward advance of Samory Touré's forces and increasing French colonial influence, the British entered into treaties with powerful indigenous rulers during the late nineteenth century. Agreements concluded with leaders such as Chief Kai Lundu of Luawa and Madam Yoko of the Kpa Mende Confederacy secured British political authority while simultaneously restructuring existing systems of indigenous governance. The subsequent subdivision of these extensive territories into numerous smaller chiefdoms fundamentally altered the traditional political landscape and established the territorial foundations upon which the contemporary chiefdom structure continues to rest.

The respondent also associated the evolution of colonial local administration with the Hut Tax War of 1898. He argued that although the declaration of the Protectorate in 1896 formalised British authority over the hinterland, it was the introduction of the Hut Tax and its coercive implementation that provoked widespread resistance. The deployment of the Frontier Police Force, despite official instructions not to interfere in local political affairs, further intensified tensions between colonial authorities and local communities. According to the respondent, these events profoundly influenced subsequent colonial administrative policy by reinforcing the preference for governing through recognised traditional authorities rather than through direct colonial administration.

Another significant issue highlighted during the interview was the colonial restructuring of chiefdom administration during the transition towards self-government. The respondent contended that colonial authorities deliberately created numerous relatively small chiefdoms to prevent the emergence of powerful traditional political centres capable of organizing resistance. However, by the 1950s the colonial administration had recognised that many of these chiefdoms lacked the demographic and economic capacity to function as viable local government units. Although proposals were developed to amalgamate smaller chiefdoms into larger administrative entities, these reforms encountered strong resistance from traditional rulers who feared the loss of political authority despite offers of lifetime financial compensation. Consequently, many financially weak chiefdoms remained intact and were subsequently inherited by the post-independence state.

From the perspective of contemporary decentralisation, the respondent viewed this historical legacy as one of the principal structural constraints affecting local governance in Sierra Leone. He argued that many chiefdoms continue to experience limited

fiscal capacity, inadequate administrative resources and weak institutional effectiveness. As a result, meaningful devolution remains difficult because responsibilities cannot be sustainably transferred to institutions that lack sufficient financial autonomy to support their own operations.

These findings illustrate how colonial institutional arrangements continue to shape the operation of Sierra Leone's decentralised governance system. Rather than representing purely contemporary administrative challenges, many of the tensions surrounding chiefdom governance reflect historical institutional choices that have persisted over time. From a critical realist perspective, these colonial administrative structures constitute enduring generative mechanisms whose effects continue to influence institutional relationships between chiefdom councils, district councils and the central government. The persistence of financially weak chiefdoms, overlapping institutional mandates and limited local administrative capacity therefore represents not merely implementation failures but the reproduction of historically embedded institutional configurations. Consequently, contemporary decentralisation reforms must address these underlying structural conditions if they are to achieve genuine devolution, effective local governance and sustainable institutional development.

Participants' suggestions on relationship between local councils and chiefdom councils

The findings indicate a broad consensus among respondents that the current relationship between local councils and chiefdom councils requires significant institutional reform to enhance the effectiveness of decentralization in Sierra Leone. Although participants approached the issue from different institutional perspectives, their recommendations converged around five major themes: legislative reform, institutional clarification, fiscal empowerment of chiefdoms, enhanced collaboration, and restructuring of the local governance system.

The most frequently expressed recommendation was the need to review the existing legal framework governing decentralization. Participants from the Office of the Senior District Officer and the Office of the District Council Chairman argued that the Local Government Act, 2022 (replacing the 2004 Act) has not sufficiently clarified the reporting relationships, supervisory responsibilities, and accountability mechanisms among District Councils, chiefdom administrations, and the District Office. They therefore recommended that Parliament review the legislation to eliminate ambiguities and establish clearer institutional mandates. They further emphasized that such reforms would be easier to implement because the three institutions operate under the same ministry responsible for local government.

Another prominent suggestion concerned the fiscal empowerment of chiefdom administrations. The Office of the Central Chiefdom Administrative Clerk observed that many chiefdoms lack adequate financial resources to undertake local development initiatives. Respondents argued that government should provide direct financial support or establish sustainable funding mechanisms to enable chiefdom administrations to implement community development projects, including the construction and rehabilitation of schools, health facilities, and other local infrastructure. They noted that while financially stronger chiefdoms are capable of mobilizing resources independently, many chiefdoms that are small in size remain

unable to undertake meaningful development interventions because of limited revenue.

Several participants also advocated greater recognition of the role of traditional authorities within the decentralization framework. The Paramount Chief of Kakua Chiefdom maintained that decentralization should be built upon the existing chiefdom governance structure because traditional institutions remain the closest and most legitimate form of local authority. Similarly, the Honourable Paramount Chief representing Bo District argued that chiefdom administrations should be granted greater decision-making authority, observing that their current powers within the decentralization framework are insufficient to enable them to contribute effectively to local governance and development.

Respondents further highlighted the need to strengthen institutional collaboration and democratic representation. The Lead Councillor Paramount Chief proposed that councillors representing chiefdom areas should be elected directly by chiefdom communities and remains accountable to chiefdom administrations. This, it was argued, would strengthen the institutional linkage between elected representatives and traditional authorities while improving local accountability. Likewise, the longest-serving councillor of the Bo City Council recommended deeper collaboration between city councils and chiefdom stakeholders, accompanied by further devolution of functions such as the approval of building permits to local councils. These suggestions reflect the desire to promote greater cooperation between statutory and customary institutions while advancing the objectives of administrative decentralization.

A more far-reaching recommendation emerged from the Provincial Administration, which proposed merging the District Council, City Council, Chiefdom Council, and District Office into a single integrated local government structure. The rationale for this proposal was that the coexistence of multiple institutions exercising related functions has generated persistent rivalry, duplication of responsibilities, and administrative inefficiencies. According to this view, institutional integration would reduce conflicts, clarify reporting relationships, and improve coordination in local governance.

Overall, the participants' recommendations reveal a shared perception that the principal constraints to effective decentralization are institutional rather than conceptual. The respondents did not reject decentralization as a governance policy; instead, they emphasized the need to strengthen its implementation through legal reform, clearer institutional mandates, and improved fiscal arrangements, enhanced recognition of traditional authorities, and stronger collaboration among local governance institutions. Collectively, these recommendations suggest that a more integrated and coordinated system of local governance would enhance accountability, reduce institutional conflict, and improve the capacity of local governments to promote sustainable socio-economic development in Bo District.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the relationship between District Councils, City Councils, Chiefdom Councils, and the District Office remains one of the most significant institutional challenges confronting decentralization in Sierra Leone. Although the Local Government Act envisages a decentralized system of governance characterized by cooperation among local institutions, the evidence from Bo District suggests that institutional ambiguity,

overlapping mandates, and weak coordination continue to undermine the realization of these objectives.

A recurring theme across all respondents was the lack of clarity regarding the respective roles and reporting relationships of the District Council, the District Office, and chiefdom administrations. While the law provides for decentralized local governance, its practical implementation has resulted in parallel administrative structures. The District Council is legally recognized as the highest political and development authority within the district, yet the District Office continues to exercise considerable administrative oversight over chiefdom affairs. This dual system has created uncertainty over institutional authority, accountability, and decision-making, thereby weakening coordination among local governance actors.

The study further revealed that fiscal decentralization remains one of the weakest components of the decentralization programme. Paramount Chiefs and chiefdom administrators consistently expressed dissatisfaction with existing revenue-sharing arrangements, arguing that chiefdoms generate a substantial proportion of local revenue while receiving limited financial returns. The proposed collection of house rates by District Councils without clearly defined revenue-sharing arrangements further illustrates the mistrust that has developed between traditional authorities and local councils. These findings suggest that fiscal decentralization has not been fully implemented, as responsibilities have not been matched with adequate financial autonomy or transparent mechanisms for sharing locally generated resources.

Another important finding concerns the continued relevance of traditional authorities in local governance. Paramount Chiefs emphasized that chiefdom administrations remain the institutions closest to the people and possess considerable legitimacy derived from customary law and community acceptance. Their ability to mobilize communities for development initiatives was repeatedly highlighted as an institutional strength that statutory local councils have yet to replicate fully. Rather than viewing traditional authorities as competing institutions, the findings suggest that decentralization would benefit from a governance model that recognizes the complementary roles of customary and statutory institutions.

The interviews also indicate that political and administrative competition has weakened intergovernmental collaboration. The former District Council Chairman acknowledged the existence of rivalry between the District Council and the District Office, while respondents from the Provincial Administration proposed institutional integration as a means of reducing duplication and conflict. These findings demonstrate that decentralization is constrained not only by legal ambiguities but also by institutional competition, which diverts attention away from service delivery and socio-economic development.

Respondents further expressed concern over what they perceived as a gradual trend towards recentralization. Examples cited included the reassignment of responsibilities for hospital drug procurement and feeder road financing from local councils to central government institutions. Such developments were viewed as inconsistent with the principles of democratic decentralization, which emphasize the transfer of authority, resources, and decision-making powers to local governments. If these perceptions reflect broader administrative practice, they suggest that the

decentralization process risks losing momentum unless the autonomy of local institutions is protected.

The recommendations advanced by participants reveal a remarkable degree of consensus despite their different institutional affiliations. Most respondents called for legislative reform to clarify institutional mandates and reporting relationships. Others emphasized the need for increased financial support to chiefdom administrations, stronger collaboration between local councils and traditional authorities, enhanced community representation, and, in some cases, structural reforms to integrate existing local governance institutions. Collectively, these recommendations indicate that stakeholders do not oppose decentralization itself; rather, they seek a more coherent institutional framework capable of promoting cooperation, accountability, and effective service delivery.

Overall, the findings suggest that decentralization in Bo District has established important democratic institutions but has not yet achieved effective institutional integration. The persistence of overlapping mandates, fiscal disputes, administrative fragmentation, and weak intergovernmental coordination continues to limit the effectiveness of local governance. Addressing these structural challenges is essential if decentralization is to contribute meaningfully to sustainable socio-economic development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen decentralization and improve the relationship between District Councils, City Councils, Chiefdom Councils, and the District Office.

1. **Review the Local Government Act and related legislation.** Parliament should comprehensively review the Local Government Act and other relevant laws to eliminate ambiguities concerning the powers, functions, reporting relationships, and supervisory responsibilities of District Councils, chiefdom administrations, and the District Office. Clear legal mandates would reduce institutional conflict and improve accountability.
2. **Develop a formal framework for intergovernmental coordination.** The Ministry responsible for Local Government should establish structured coordination mechanisms involving District Councils, City Councils, Chiefdom Councils, and District Offices. Regular joint planning meetings, information-sharing protocols, and coordinated monitoring systems would strengthen institutional cooperation and reduce duplication of functions.
3. **Strengthen fiscal decentralization.** Government should introduce transparent and legally enforceable revenue-sharing arrangements for locally generated taxes, including local taxes and house rates. Revenue-sharing formulas should be developed through consultation with chiefdom authorities and local councils to promote fairness, institutional trust, and financial sustainability.
4. **Increase financial support for chiefdom administrations.** Government should provide targeted grants or establish a Chiefdom Development Fund to enable chiefdom administrations to implement community development projects, particularly in financially weaker chiefdoms. Such support should

complement, rather than replace, locally generated revenue.

5. **Recognize the complementary role of traditional authorities.** Paramount Chiefs should be formally integrated into local development planning, implementation, and monitoring processes. Their knowledge of local communities and capacity to mobilize citizens should be recognized as important assets for achieving inclusive and participatory local governance.
6. **Promote capacity building across local governance institutions.** Continuous training should be provided for elected councillors, chiefdom administrators, District Office personnel, and traditional leaders on decentralization policy, intergovernmental relations, financial management, conflict resolution, and participatory development planning.
7. **Safeguard the autonomy of local councils.** The Government should avoid unnecessary recentralization of devolved functions unless supported by clear evidence of improved efficiency or public interest. Where functions must be reassigned, the rationale should be transparent and developed through consultation with local government stakeholders.
8. **Strengthen citizen participation and accountability.** Local councils and chiefdom administrations should establish regular public consultation forums, participatory budgeting processes, and community feedback mechanisms to improve transparency, responsiveness, and public confidence in decentralized governance.
9. **Undertake further research.** Future studies should examine the effectiveness of institutional coordination between traditional and statutory governance structures across other districts of Sierra Leone. Comparative research would provide evidence for national policy reforms and contribute to strengthening the country's decentralization programme.

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