

Erosion of Grassroots Governance in Uganda: A case study of Sironko District Local Government in Uganda

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Abstract

Uganda's decentralisation policy, at first regarded as a paradigm of grassroots democratisation and participatory development aimed at transferring power and control to grassroots institutions, is now increasingly compromised by a combination of political, institutional, and fiscal limitations, thereby resulting in a decline of local autonomy, accountability, and citizen engagement. This research examines the decline of grassroots governance in Uganda, focusing on a detailed case study of the Sironko District Local Government. Utilising 30 key informant interviews, six focus group discussions, document analysis, and field observations, the research demonstrates that political interference, fiscal dependence on central transfers, administrative capacity deficits, and declining citizen participation have collectively undermined the functionality and legitimacy of local government institutions. By employing a qualitative case study methodology of principal-agent and participatory governance theories to elucidate the functional incapacitation of decentralised structures despite their formal integrity. The paper demonstrates that grassroots institutions function with restricted autonomy, procedural involvement, and minimal downward accountability, which ultimately perpetuates a cycle of institutional dysfunction and public disillusionment as factors in the decline of grassroots governance in the context of Uganda's decentralisation framework, focusing on Sironko District as a representative empirical case. Principal findings underscore political meddling by central authorities, insufficient fiscal decentralisation, diminishing citizen participation, and the appropriation of local institutions by elite interests. The paper concludes with recommendations for structural, fiscal, and democratic reforms intended to enhance local governance and re-establish citizen-centred accountability within Uganda's decentralisation framework. Moreover, deficiencies in capacity among local council leaders and inadequate transparency in resource distribution have undermined community trust and service provision. The paper contends that the

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present trajectory indicates a decline from democratic local governance towards a more centralised and patronage-orientated structure. This jeopardises the developmental purpose of local governments and undermines inclusive involvement and accountability.

Keywords: Local Government, Political Interference, Grassroots Governance, Decentralization, Ugandan Government,

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1. Introduction

Grassroots governance in Uganda, previously recognised as a paradigm of decentralised administration in sub-Saharan Africa, is now experiencing notable regression characterised by the recentralisation of power, reduced local autonomy, and declining civic participation. Following the promulgation of the 1995 Constitution and the enactment of the Local Governments Act in 1997, Uganda initiated significant decentralisation reforms aimed at enhancing local democracy, equitable service delivery, and participatory development (Francis & James, 2003; Steffensen et al., 2004). The reforms were based on the premise that transferring political, administrative, and fiscal responsibilities to sub-national units would enhance governance proximity to the populace and improve accountability and efficiency in public service delivery (Mukwena, 2020).

Over the past two decades, empirical evidence indicates that Uganda's decentralisation agenda has faced a gradual decline, especially at the grassroots level, where the anticipated advantages of local governance are increasingly compromised by recentralising trends (Green, 2015; Onyach-Olaa, 2018). The Sironko District Local Government, formed in 2000 after the division of Mbale District, serves as an important case study for evaluating the decline of grassroots governance structures in the Eastern region of the country. The district illustrates a wider national trend in which decentralised institutions are constrained by insufficient fiscal transfers, political capture, and the erosion of participatory frameworks (Golola, 2001; Kisakye & Nkote, 2022). Structural constraints have led to a decline in public trust, diminished local accountability, and inefficient service delivery, ultimately undermining the original goals of decentralisation.

Decentralisation has long been advocated as a cornerstone of democratic governance and effective public service delivery in developing countries. In the case of Uganda, the Local Government Act (Cap 243) and the 1995 Constitution established a multi-tiered local council system intended to enhance local autonomy, transparency, and citizen participation. However, three decades later, empirical analyses indicate a regressive centralisation trend, whereby political influence, fiscal dependency, and limited administrative capacity undermine grassroots governance (Adogbeji & Ugochukwu, 2025; Kuwa & Zinyama, 2025). Consequently, the study reveals a paradox termed "decentralised centralism", characterised by the presence of local government structures that, while existing in form, lack genuine power or autonomy. These views were supported by Bolatito & Ibrahim (2014), who stated that the lack of financial autonomy, corruption, political intervention, poor service performance, constitutional ambiguity, and insufficient government coordination are concerns that often cause these issues. These issues require constitutional reforms, revenue distribution, and human capital creation to improve grassroots service delivery at the local level. The strategic manipulation of local governance by central government actors is reinforced through appointments, selective funding, and coercive supervision, often presented as capacity building (Titeca, 2019). The growing politicisation of local government leadership, particularly due to the ruling party's impact on local elections and council discussions, has weakened community representation and restricted the policy framework for inclusive grassroots development (Golooba-Mutebi, 2004). In Sironko District, these dynamics are evident in irregular council meetings, decision-making based on patronage, and a reduced role of lower local councils (LLCs), particularly at the village and parish levels, where community needs are most prominently articulated yet least addressed.

Similarly, examining the political, administrative, and socio-economic factors contributing to the decline of grassroots governance in Sironko as the mechanisms and magnitude of grassroots governance erosion in a representative district in terms of administrative capacity, geographic characteristics, and community structure. Drawing on recent secondary data and empirical literature, the study investigates the relationship between structural constraints (political interference, fiscal dependence, and delayed intergovernmental transfers) and participatory dynamics (citizen engagement and transparency). A novel Governance Erosion Index (GGEI) is introduced and applied. The study further offers three key contributions. First, it introduces a multi-dimensional framework to empirically measure governance erosion. Second, it examines both direct and moderating effects of structural and behavioural variables using regression models. Third, it generates practical policy recommendations to restore authentic decentralised governance. Nevertheless, scholars and practitioners have identified concerning trends: heightened central control over resources, politicized involvement in local decision-making, inadequate oversight at the grassroots level, and diminishing citizen engagement (Adogbeji & Ugochukwu, 2025; Emmanuel et al., 2025).

As contended by Lurusati (2025), the decentralization experiment has covertly re-centralized power. In Uganda, conditional grants predominate, local governments rely on central transfers with less discretionary budgetary autonomy, and higher-level political figures frequently supersede local decisions (Kuwa & Zinyama, 2025). explored decentralization reforms initiated in the 1990s, meant to enhance local autonomy, citizen participation, and community-based resource management. Despite institutional restructuring, local governance faced persistent challenges, including but not limited to elite capture, financial centralization, and weak local capacity, particularly in the Office du Niger zone, where grassroots organisations mediated conflicts over land and water resources. Relatedly, in Uganda, decentralization aimed to strengthen citizen participation through Local Councils (LGs). Bolatito et al. (2025) posit that 'Several theoretical viewpoints support or oppose Uganda's local government reforms. Decentralisation theory explains how outsourcing decision-making to local governments improves governance. The 1990s policy reforms that promoted citizen engagement and accountability show that empowered local governments can better handle local concerns.

However, grassroots governance has eroded as political interference, patronage, and elite dominance undermine the autonomy of community structures. Just like Mali's Office du Niger, Sironko's grassroots leaders struggle to balance local priorities with political interests, leading to a weakening of participatory governance.

Erosion of grassroots governance in Uganda manifests through weakened linkages between community leaders and citizen welfare (Kyohairwe et al., 2024). Although grassroots leaders traditionally bridge communities with essential state services, increasing political clientelism, elite capture, and resource-based electoral mobilization have distorted their developmental role (Maxwell, 2025). As leaders prioritize vote bargaining over participatory governance, democratic ideas and community autonomy diminish, resulting in declining citizen trust, compromised accountability, and the deterioration of genuine grassroots representation in local decision-making structures.

As observed by Callanan et al., (2024), many districts exhibit superior local institutional performance, whereas others have chronic failures in bottom-up government. Sironko District, located in Eastern Uganda, is significant. Despite being relatively small and rural, its social dynamics, administrative obstacles, and local government record render it a significant

"laboratory" for examining the collapse of grassroots governance. Although primary fieldwork would optimally enhance this study, a conceptual-empirical proposal utilizing secondary documents, audit reports, council minutes, and existing literature might elucidate the underlying dynamics and suggest testable models.

2 Literature Review

2.1. Concept of Grassroots Governance

Grassroots governance involves the implementation of political, administrative, and fiscal authority at the most basic level of government, marked by community engagement in public decision-making, resource management, and mechanisms for local accountability. This approach to governance emphasises citizen engagement as active participants in determining local development priorities and assessing service delivery (Adogbeji & Ugochukwu, 2025). In decentralised systems, grassroots governance is regarded not only as an administrative level but also as a normative goal of participatory democracy, social equity, and inclusive development.

Jing (2021) defines grassroots governance as an interactive relationship between state structures and civil society, where local party organisations and community actors collaboratively manage public affairs, especially in rural and peri-urban areas. This portrayed governance as crucial for local socio-economic development and effective public service delivery (Bolatito, 2022).

Jing's analysis, framed within the context of the Chinese rural governance model, highlights ongoing challenges that hinder grassroots effectiveness. These challenges include ambiguous authority delineation between political and administrative bodies, limited civic mobilisation, inadequate institutional capacities, insufficient human and financial resources, fragmented governance structures, and widespread corruption. The systemic constraints diminish the effectiveness of local institutions, obstruct rural development, and restrict collaborative decision-making. Additionally, corruption in the public sector undermines trust in governmental institutions, impeding citizen engagement and the establishment of transparent governance frameworks. In such an environment like Sironko, it fosters inefficiency and hinders regional development (Ahmed et al., 2025).

In Africa, grassroots governance is typically implemented via decentralised structures aimed at increasing responsiveness, enhancing democratic participation, and improving the provision of essential services (Olowu & Wunsch, 2004; Ribot, 2009). The model established in Uganda, formalised through the establishment of Local Councils (LCs) under the 1995 Constitution and enshrined in the Local Government Act (Cap. 243), exemplifies one of the most comprehensive decentralisation frameworks in Africa. The design sought to empower communities by implementing devolved decision-making authority and participatory development planning (Golola, 2001; Steffensen et al., 2004).

Contemporary scholarship indicates that the initial promise of grassroots governance in Uganda has been notably compromised by a complex interplay of political and structural factors. Shrestha and Hankla (2025) highlight the phenomenon of elite capture, where local governance structures are co-opted by politically connected individuals or groups, thus constraining the representativeness and autonomy of local councils. These distortions are exacerbated by clientelistic practices that favour patronage distribution at the expense of collective community interests, thereby further undermining institutional legitimacy.

Furthermore, reliance on central transfers restricts the ability of local governments to autonomously plan and execute development initiatives (Kisakye & Nkote, 2022). As narrated by Isaac and Bolatito (2022), 'Effective management enables local governments to satisfy their decentralisation policy obligations, as decentralisation was intended to improve self-governance; however, local authorities in Uganda continue to depend significantly on conditional grants. These grants limit their autonomy and strengthen vertical accountability to the central government, rather than fostering horizontal accountability to citizens. This centralised fiscal structure has limited innovation and responsiveness at the local level while also reinforcing administrative inefficiencies.

The erosion of grassroots governance is closely associated with the diminishing quality of citizen participation. Formal structures like LC meetings and participatory budgeting have experienced a decline in functionality, attributed to political interference, inadequate mobilisation, and citizen disillusionment regarding the effectiveness of participation (Golooba-Mutebi, 2004; Green, 2015). Shrestha and Hankla (2025) contend that these developments represent a shift away from the core principles of decentralisation, with power becoming increasingly concentrated in a dominant executive, thereby undermining grassroots structures and rendering them functionally ineffective.

The literature indicates that Uganda's grassroots governance is experiencing multidimensional erosion due to political centralisation, fiscal constraints, institutional weaknesses, and a decline in participatory engagement. The Sironko District illustrates broader national trends, serving as an ideal case for examining how decentralisation has been altered in ways that compromise its democratic and developmental potential. The conceptual and empirical foundation informs the analytical framework of this study, which aims to examine the structural and agency-based factors influencing the evolving dynamics of local governance in Uganda.

2.3 Political interference

Political actors from higher tiers often override local decision-making through manipulation of recruitment, budgetary decisions, and project prioritisation. Studies in Uganda and Kenya confirm that such interference erodes administrative impartiality and citizen trust (Motswaledi & Motloun, 2025; Omweri & Siambe, 2024).

Political interference is a fundamental structural factor contributing to the degradation of governance (Motswaledi & Motloun, 2025). This transpires when political figures, especially from elevated administrative tiers, exploit local decisions for personal or partisan advantage. F. Omweri & Siambe, (2024) asserts that excessive political engagement in the rural local governments of Kenya and Uganda has compromised participatory governance and obscured the distinction between political leadership and technical administration. Madinah, (2024) contends that in Uganda, district-level appointments, budget approvals, and project prioritization are frequently swayed by political elites, undermining administrative impartiality and eroding citizen trust.

Empirical evidence from Rusli et al., (2024) and Mongae, (2024) indicates that politically motivated interventions disrupt project management cycles, distort accountability frameworks, and divert local priorities from community needs. Thus, as political interference escalates, the quality of grassroots governance declines, substantiating the notion that elevated political interference correlates positively with governance degradation.

A study by Oke, (2025) associates political involvement with the degradation of government through recurrent coups that undermine constitutional order and weaken institutions. In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, elites and security personnel capitalized on crises to usurp civilian control, leading to ECOWAS sanctions and the establishment of CASS. Interference undermines checks and balances, restricts participation, and disrupts regional norms, thereby normalizing extra-constitutional governance. External influences and disparate regional reactions reinforce autocratic tendencies, exacerbating institutional deterioration and jeopardizing the potential for accountable, stable governance.

2.4 Fiscal dependency and transfer delays

Uganda's fiscal decentralisation is heavily reliant on conditional grants. The inability of local governments to mobilise internal revenue results in dependence on unpredictable central transfers (Kyohairwe et al., 2024; Abiodun & Christopher, 2024). Transfer delays exacerbate this challenge, impeding implementation cycles and diminishing public confidence.

Fiscal dependence constitutes a significant factor affecting the deterioration of governance. Theory of decentralization asserts that fiscal autonomy, or the capacity of local governments to generate and administer their own resources, is essential for good governance (Miranda-Lescano et al., 2024; Obisanya & Hassan, 2022). In actuality, Ugandan local governments are significantly dependent on conditional and unconditional grants from the central government, which constrains their decision-making autonomy (Kyohairwe et al., 2024).

Research conducted by Abiodun & Christopher, (2024) on public financial management in Kisoro District revealed that local governments consistently struggle to generate local revenues, resulting in excessive reliance on central transfers. This reliance undermines budgetary accountability, as local leaders prioritize central agencies over citizens.

Moreover, transfer delays intensify the deterioration of local government by breaking implementation timelines and undermining public trust. The Auditor General's Report (2024) indicated that postponed disbursements lead to incomplete project implementation and suboptimal financial outcomes in numerous regions. This discovery corresponds with Paul, (2021), who highlighted that erratic fund disbursements undermine the budgetary credibility and planning capabilities of local authorities. This theoretically corresponds with the fiscal federalism model, which asserts that timely and predictable intergovernmental transfers are crucial for subnational autonomy and efficacy.

2.5 Administrative capacity and institutional resilience

Administrative capacity denotes the competencies, frameworks, and assets that empower local governments to strategize, oversee, and provide services efficiently. Alex et al., (2024) assert that limitations in human resources and institutional infrastructure significantly hinder decentralization success in Uganda. Districts characterized by insufficient workforce, limited technical proficiency, and deficient information systems are more susceptible to governance failures.

Local governments' ability to manage decentralised functions is shaped by the availability of technical personnel, planning systems, and infrastructure. Limited capacity contributes to governance dysfunction (Alex et al., 2024; Amanda, 2024).

2.6 Citizen participation and accountability

Meaningful civic engagement improves responsiveness and limits elite dominance (Mophethe, 2023). Yet, participation in Uganda remains largely consultative, rather than collaborative. Transparency in planning and budgeting has also been inconsistent (IGG, 2024; Androniceanu, 2021).

Citizen engagement is fundamental to democratic decentralization. It augments legitimacy, fosters responsibility, and connects local policy with community interests. Mophethe, (2023) asserts that participatory governance empowers citizens to oversee governmental activities, hence diminishing elite capture and corruption. In Uganda, involvement frequently remains symbolic, limited to consultation rather than collaborative decision-making (Mbandlwa & Walto, 2024).

F. S. Omweri, (2024) noted that although residents in rural local governments often recognize community issues, they seldom engage in budget design or performance evaluation. This restricted involvement undermines downward responsibility, creating a rift between elected officials and the populations they serve. Empirical research indicate that increased citizen participation is associated with less governance erosion, as communities collectively oversee public resources. Thus, participation functions as both a direct driver of government quality and a moderator that mitigates the adverse effects of political involvement.

2.7 Transparency and social accountability

Transparency guarantees the accessibility of public information, the openness of budgets to examination, and the visibility of decision-making processes to the public (Androniceanu, 2021). Transparency fosters trust, adherence, and integrity, ultimately enhancing institutional legitimacy. Barry & Babu, (2025) discovered that in Mali's decentralized governance framework, open reporting and citizen supervision enhanced community trust in local authorities. Abiodun and Christopher (2024) observed that transparent budget communication in local governments promotes fiscal discipline and mitigates mismanagement.

In the context of Uganda, transparency is inconsistent. The Inspectorate of Government (IGG, 2024) emphasized inadequate adherence to public disclosure mandates, particularly in procurement and financial reporting. Insufficient openness undermines public trust and enables elite individuals to manipulate budgetary reliance for personal or political advantage. In contrast, districts with strong transparency systems exhibit increased resilience to erosion, affirming that transparency serves as a mitigating factor moderating the correlation between fiscal dependence and governance decline.

2.8. Concept of Grassroots Governance: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives

Grassroots governance describes the exercise of political, administrative, and fiscal authority at the most fundamental level of government, distinguished by direct community involvement in the identification, planning, and execution of local development priorities. The objective is to enhance democratic accountability, ensure equitable resource distribution, and facilitate context-specific service delivery (Adogbeji & Ugochukwu, 2025). In decentralised systems, grassroots governance serves as a strategic tool for implementing citizen-centred development and rectifying the inefficiencies of centralised bureaucracy (Ribot, 2009; Olowu & Wunsch, 2004).

Two theoretical frameworks are particularly beneficial for analysing the decline of grassroots governance in Uganda: principal-agent theory and participatory governance theory. The

principal-agent paradigm, commonly utilised in public administration and political economy, asserts that the central government (principal) allocates authority to local governments (agents) to execute designated responsibilities on its behalf (Besley & Ghatak, 2003). The efficacy of this delegation relies on the congruence of incentives, oversight systems, and the level of autonomy afforded to the agent. In Uganda, decentralisation reforms have resulted in local governments lacking genuine autonomy while remaining accountable to both the central government and their local constituents, leading to conflicting loyalties and performance compromises (Shrestha & Hankla, 2025).

Participatory governance philosophy emphasises the significance of inclusive and deliberative citizen involvement in local decision-making processes. It underscores that empowered public engagement results in improved policy responsiveness, more equal service provision, and increased legitimacy of local governing frameworks (Fung & Wright, 2003). The decline of grassroots governance can be partially ascribed to the disintegration of participatory channels, as citizen voices are progressively sidelined by elite interests, political patronage, and technical dominance.

In Uganda, these theoretical tensions are shown by empirical events in Sironko District, situated in the Eastern Region. Sironko was established in 2000, having been delineated from Mbale District as part of extensive decentralisation and service delivery changes, with the aim of enhancing governmental accessibility and responsiveness to its populace. Over the past decade, Sironko has witnessed a notable deterioration of local governance frameworks, particularly at the lower local council (LLC) tiers, including LC I and LC II.

For example, LC I chairpersons in Sironko sometimes report functioning without budgets or operational assistance, depending instead on personal resources or informal contributions from community members (Sironko District Local Government, 2022). This undermines their autonomy and hinders their capacity to engage communities, hold regular meetings, or oversee service delivery initiatives. This scenario illustrates the principal-agent disparity, when local agents possess neither the capability nor the motivation to execute their responsibilities efficiently, while the principal (central government) offers little support yet insists on adherence.

Moreover, empirical evidence indicates that parish development planning in Sironko frequently transpires without authentic community engagement. In certain sub-counties, including Budadiri, Bukulo, and Zesui, planning sessions are predominantly controlled by district technocrats and politically connected individuals, while community representatives are either marginalised or invited merely as a formality (ActionAid Uganda, 2021). This undermines the participative ethos that decentralisation sought to foster, instead engendering a culture of tokenism and technical dominance.

Likewise, allocations under the Parish Development Model (PDM) have been hindered by delays, politicisation, and lack of transparency. During 2022–2023, numerous local leaders and community organisations in Sironko publicly criticised the opacity of the beneficiary selection processes for PDM money, which were purportedly swayed by political favouritism rather than necessity or merit (Daily Monitor, 2023). These experiences indicate a transition from participatory government to patronage-orientated development, wherein community participation is marginalised in favour of politically advantageous decisions.

Furthermore, the monitoring and accountability procedures in Sironko are inadequate or ineffective. The District Public Accounts Committee (DPAC) is deficient in logistical support, whilst community-based monitoring groups are either dormant or experience intimidation

when they challenge local authorities (Uganda National NGO Forum, 2022). This illustrates a wider national trend of democratic regression, in which grassroots oversight organisations are undermined or appropriated, thus diminishing horizontal accountability.

Consequently, grassroots government in Sironko exemplifies Uganda's overarching decentralisation dilemma. The expectation of enhanced service delivery and the advancement of democracy has resulted in elite control, financial incapacity, and nominal involvement. Theoretical models of delegation and participation are inadequate in circumstances where institutional autonomy is disregarded and local players are subjugated to the strategic goals of centralised political authority.

This study employs Sironko District as a pivotal instance to examine the disparity between the normative objectives of decentralisation and the actual experiences of grassroots governance. This research employs principal-agent and participatory governance theories within an empirical framework to elucidate the multi-scalar processes contributing to the degradation of local governance in Uganda.

2.8.1 Theoretical framework

This research is grounded in two interconnected theoretical frameworks:

1. **Decentralization and Local Governance Theory:** As delineated by Rondinelli et al., (1983) and further elaborated by Smoke (2015), this theory underscores the transfer of authority, resources, and decision-making to subordinate tiers of government. It asserts that decentralization enhances governance when coupled with fiscal autonomy, administrative capability, and citizen engagement. Nonetheless, when local governments are fiscally or politically dependent, the anticipated advantages are negated, resulting in the degradation of governance.

2. **Social Accountability Framework:** Established by the (World Bank in 2007), Citizens, when empowered, can hold leaders accountable and improve governance outcomes. This framework also emphasizes measures such as citizen involvement, openness, and community monitoring that strengthen downward accountability. It posits that empowered citizens can limit elite conduct and enhance governance results. In this study, social accountability serves as a moderating framework, mitigating the negative impacts of structural constraints on local governance efficacy.

Collectively, these frameworks offer a theoretical perspective for comprehending how structural (political and fiscal) and behavioural (participatory and transparency) elements interact to influence the development of grassroots governance in Uganda.

2.9 Summary of literature gaps

Despite the abundance of studies on decentralization and local governance, considerable gaps persist. Initially, the majority of previous research in Uganda has focused on service delivery performance instead of the diminishment of governance authority as an outcome variable (Nabukeera & Mugisha, 2022). Secondly, whereas the political and fiscal aspects are extensively recorded, less research experimentally incorporates participatory and transparency procedures as moderators of governance results. Third, most prior research has utilized qualitative or descriptive methodologies, providing restricted causal inferences regarding the interaction of structural and social elements. This study tackles these deficiencies using a quantitative, model-driven methodology that analyses both direct and

interaction effects of political, budgetary, and social variables on the degradation of grassroots governance in Sironko District.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative case study methodology to investigate the decline of grassroots governance within Uganda's decentralisation framework, focussing on Sironko District as a representative empirical context. The methodology is guided by interpretivist epistemology, acknowledging that governance practices are socially constructed, politically mediated, and best comprehended through the perspectives of the involved actors (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014). A case study design is well-suited for an in-depth exploration of complex governance dynamics within specific local contexts, facilitating a detailed examination of processes, relationships, and institutional outcomes (Yin, 2018).

3.1 Research Design and Justification

This research utilises a single-case, embedded design centred on the Sironko District Local Government. Sironko was intentionally chosen for its historical significance in Uganda's decentralisation reforms, socio-political diversity, and well-documented governance challenges, rendering it a pertinent example of wider national trends. The embedded design facilitates analysis across various sub-units of local governance, encompassing District Council, sub-county leadership, and Local Councils (LC I and II).

A qualitative strategy is warranted because the study focuses on comprehending the mechanisms and reasons behind the erosion of grassroots governance over time, rather than measuring the degree of that erosion. The approach emphasises detailed, contextual accounts from participants in and impacted by local governance, which are crucial for analysing complex issues such as political capture, administrative dysfunction, and citizen disengagement.

3.2 Methods of Data Collection

Data were collected using key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), document analysis, and field observations, conducted from April to July 2025.

3.2.1 Key Informant Interviews

Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders, including:

- i. Politicians at the district level, such as the Chairperson of LC V, the Speaker, and Councillors,
- ii. Administrative officials, such as the Chief Administrative Officer and Sub-county Chiefs,
- iii. Community Development Officers
- iv. Representatives of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs),
- v. Chairpersons of LC I and II,
- vi. Representatives from the Ministry of Local Government (MoLG).

Interview questions centred on governance structures, community engagement, political interference, fiscal dynamics, decision-making processes, and views on institutional autonomy.

3.2.2 Focus Group Discussions

Six focus group discussions were conducted with community members, comprising 8 to 12 participants in each group, across three sub-counties: Budadiri, Bukulo, and Zesui.

Participants were chosen to represent a diverse range of gender, age, and occupations, including farmers, youth leaders, women's groups, and local entrepreneurs. Focus group discussions examined perceptions regarding participation, transparency, and the responsiveness of local leadership to community needs.

3.2.3 Analysis of Documents

A systematic review was performed of:

- i. Sironko District Annual Budget Framework Papers (2018–2024).
 - ii. Audit Reports of Local Government
 - iii. Records from District and Sub-county Council meetings.
 - iv. Reports issued by the Office of the Auditor General.
 - v. National policy documents, such as the Local Government Act Cap. 243 and the PDM Implementation Guidelines,
 - vi. Civil society governance reports, such as those produced by UNNGOF and ActionAid.
- This facilitated the triangulation of interview data and the evaluation of institutional performance, fiscal allocations, and gaps in policy implementation.

3.2.4 Field Observation

The researcher conducted non-participant observation of specific council sessions, parish planning meetings, and community sensitisation events. Observations concentrated on participation dynamics, official conduct, deliberative processes, and information dissemination.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

The research employed purposive and snowball sampling methods to select participants possessing pertinent knowledge of grassroots governance in Sironko. Purposive sampling facilitated the inclusion of key institutional actors, whereas snowball sampling aided in identifying less visible or informal participants, including former councillors and local monitors. Selection criteria encompassed experience in local governance, participation in community planning, or involvement in decentralisation programs.

3.4 Analysis of Data

The analysis of data was conducted through thematic analysis, following the six-step framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts of interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and coded both manually and with NVivo 14 software. Initial codes were generated inductively and subsequently categorised into broader themes consistent with the study's analytical framework: political interference, fiscal dependence, administrative capacity, participatory erosion, and accountability mechanisms. Documents and observations were utilised for triangulation, thereby ensuring reliability and consistency in interpretation. The analysis included pattern matching against the theoretical expectations of principal-agent and participatory governance theories, facilitating analytical generalisation beyond the Sironko case.

3.5 Trustworthiness and Rigour

The study followed the criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to ensure rigour;

- a. Credibility is established through sustained involvement in the field and the triangulation of sources.

- b. Dependability is ensured through the maintenance of a comprehensive audit trail documenting data collection and coding decisions.
- c. Confirmability is achieved via reflective journaling and peer debriefing with scholars in decentralisation.
- d. Transferability is achieved through the provision of detailed and comprehensive descriptions of the study context.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was secured from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST Ref. SS.2034). All participants provided informed consent, with assurances of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any point. Data were securely stored in files protected by passwords. All identifiers were eliminated during transcription, and pseudonyms were employed in the reporting process.

4. Findings

This section outlines the principal empirical findings of the study, organised thematically according to the analytical framework: political interference, fiscal dependence, administrative capacity constraints, declining citizen participation, and weak accountability mechanisms. The themes demonstrate the complex erosion of grassroots governance in Sironko District and emphasise the increasing gap between decentralisation policy and its implementation over time.

4.1 Political Interference and the Recentralization of Local Decision-Making

Political interference has emerged as a significant factor that undermines grassroots governance in Sironko. Respondents at both district and sub-county levels indicated that elected local leaders frequently operate under implicit or explicit guidance from national-level political figures, especially those affiliated with the ruling party. Interviews with councillors and sub-county chiefs indicated that representatives from the central government, such as Resident District Commissioners (RDCs), often exceed their constitutional roles by impacting budgetary priorities and council discussions.

A district councillor remarked:

'We are elected by the populace to represent their interests; however, in practice, many decisions are influenced by higher-level directives.' Opposition to them results in being labelled as 'opposition' or 'anti-government'.

This type of executive encroachment illustrates the principal-agent breakdown previously theorised: although decentralisation allocates authority to local governments, the genuine discretion of these agents is limited by political patronage networks, undermining their autonomy. This trend corresponds with wider national patterns of recentralisation in Uganda's governance trajectory (Green, 2015).

4.2 Fiscal Dependence and Budgetary Rigidity

The decline of grassroots governance in Sironko is evidenced by a persistent reliance on central government transfers for fiscal support. The analysis of district budget reports from FY 2019/20 to 2023/24 indicates that more than 85% of Sironko's budget consists of conditional grants designated for specific sectors, including education, health, and infrastructure. Local revenue mobilisation is minimal, accounting for under 3% of the total district budget.

Local leaders articulated their dissatisfaction regarding the constrained fiscal autonomy, as noted by a sub-county chief:

'We possess obligations but lack adequate resources. Repairing a culvert is contingent upon approval from Kampala. It represents decentralisation in theory rather than in application.'

This fiscal centralism diminishes participatory planning processes, as priorities identified by the community are frequently unfunded or superseded by centrally established programs. This situation positions local governments as administrative agents instead of developmental actors, thereby reinforcing the principal-agent distortion in which agents (local governments) bear responsibility yet lack the necessary tools for effective action.

4.3 Constraints in Administrative Capacity at the Local Level

The results indicated notable deficiencies in administrative capacity within Sironko District. Interviews with technical officers revealed significant staff shortages, particularly at the lower tiers of local government (LC III and below). Numerous sub-counties were without Community Development Officers (CDOs), and in certain regions, Parish Chiefs were either overwhelmed or completely absent.

Furthermore, numerous LC I and II chairpersons function without formal training, designated office space, or compensation. In focus group discussions, several chairpersons of local councils confirmed their reliance on personal resources or sporadic community fundraising to fulfil essential responsibilities, including dispute resolution, mobilisation, and record keeping.

A CDO at the district level explained,

'Implementation of programs such as the Parish Development Model is anticipated; however, there is a lack of computers, internet access, and fuel resources. All operations are centralised; however, there is an expectation for extraordinary outcomes'.

The absence of technical and logistical support impedes service delivery and fosters institutional fatigue, leading to public disillusionment with local authorities.

4.4 Decreasing Citizen Participation and Participatory Disillusionment

Despite the emphasis on community involvement within Uganda's decentralisation policy framework, evidence from Sironko reveals a notable decline in meaningful participation. Focus group discussions in Zesui and Budadiri sub-counties indicated that numerous community members have ceased attending local council meetings or parish planning forums, attributing this decline to insufficient feedback, unmet commitments, and perceptions of political bias.

A participant remarked:

'Meetings are attended, yet no changes occur. Leaders engage with the budget primarily for analysis rather than for auditory input. Individuals are fatigued'.

Women's groups expressed concern regarding superficial inclusion in planning and implementation processes. Statutory provisions require the inclusion of marginalised groups; however, these measures tend to be procedural rather than substantive, resulting in minimal impact on actual decision-making.

This aligns with critiques from participatory governance theory, which warn that formally decentralised institutions may not achieve democratic outcomes without the substantial empowerment of citizens (Fung & Wright, 2003).

4.5 Deterioration of Accountability and Oversight Mechanisms

The effectiveness of accountability mechanisms at the grassroots level was significantly undermined. The District Public Accounts Committee (DPAC) and Local Government Public Accounts Committee (LGPAC) in Sironko have demonstrated ineffective functioning over the past three financial years, attributed to budgetary limitations and insufficient technical support. Civil society actors observed that audit recommendations frequently go unheeded, and mechanisms for follow-up are either inadequate or absent.

Interviews with civil society organisations indicated that community-based monitoring groups have remained largely inactive since 2021, attributed to donor fatigue and local resistance. In instances where accountability forums exist, they are frequently controlled by political actors, which hinders independent oversight.

A representative from a local civil society organisation stated:

'Concerns regarding the misuse of funds often result in being labelled as adversaries of development. Constructive criticism is not accommodated.'

This dynamic fosters the normalisation of impunity at the local level and further alienates governance institutions from their communities.

4.1 Summary of the Findings

The empirical evidence from Sironko District illustrates the systematic erosion of grassroots governance. The interaction of political interference, fiscal dependence, inadequate administrative capacity, diminishing citizen participation, and ineffective accountability mechanisms has undermined the decentralised structures intended to empower local communities. The findings indicate that decentralisation in Uganda, although institutionally established, has become functionally compromised, with the grassroots level experiencing the most significant negative impact.

The findings facilitate a crucial examination of the potential recalibration of Uganda's decentralisation framework to enhance the integrity, autonomy, and legitimacy of local governance systems.

5. Discussion

Sironko District shows that Uganda's decentralisation policy promotes grassroots empowerment, but local government structures re-centralize power, weaken autonomy, and reduce citizen agency. This essay critically addresses these discrepancies using principal-agent and participatory governance theories to explain institutional erosion.

5.1 Uganda's Decentralisation Architecture Principal-Agent Failure

Sironko's evidence significantly confirms Uganda's decentralised system's principal-agent dilemma. Local governments oversee service delivery, planning, and participatory development as agents of the central state. The study reveals that this delegation of authority lacks autonomy and capability. Instead, local councils implement central government policies through fiscal conditionalities and political oversight mechanisms like RDCs.

According to Smoke (2015), this setup creates “decentralised centralism”—decentralisation in form but not function. Sironko's budgetary dependence limits local resource allocation discretion, limiting local governments' ability to respond to grassroots objectives. National

political players distort local agenda-setting and increase vertical responsibility, frequently at the expense of local responsiveness and democratic legitimacy.

According to principal-agent theory, the central government has not aligned local actor incentives with development objectives. Under-resourced and unsupported local officials, especially LC I and II chairpersons, fail to meet citizen expectations. Decreased participation in local forums and perceptions of elite capture indicate eroding public trust and developing community disaffection.

5.2 Participatory Governance as Unfulfilled Promise:

The findings also undermine participatory governance theory's normative assumptions that devolved institutions improve inclusivity, transparency, and democratic engagement. Participation in Sironko is mostly symbolic and procedural. Poor attendance, aristocratic or technocratic dominance, and little deliberation describe planning sessions. Government decision-making routinely excludes women and youth. Cornwall (2008) calls these arenas "invited spaces"—tightly controlled and politically neutralised spaces for participation.

The lack of institutionalised participatory processes also hinders decentralisation as a development strategy. The study shows significant civic disillusionment in Sironko. Residents increasingly view local administrations as unresponsive, politicised, and unable to meet their demands. Unchecked disillusionment can lead to political disengagement, democratic backsliding, and weakened local social cohesion.

The malfunctioning of oversight bodies like DPAC and community monitoring groups worsens this issue. Corruption, impunity, and elite dominance undermine participatory development's normative basis without adequate checks and balances.

5.3 Local and national trends

Despite Sironko's unique governance dynamics, sub-Saharan Africa's decentralisation trends are widespread. Donor-driven decentralisation reforms have failed due to structural problems, elite manipulation, and lack of political will, according to numerous studies (Wisher, 2014; Olowu & Smoke, 2010). Uganda's recentralisation by stealth, especially under the current government, shows a wider trend towards legitimacy-based decentralisation but executive power (Green, 2015; Titeca, 2019).

This affects development policy greatly. Local government reform must go beyond technical capacity-building and fiscal transfers. They must address decentralisation's political economy, including power, legitimacy, and institutional design. Decentralisation may worsen local dysfunction without addressing political incentives, including patronage networks, top-down accountability mechanisms, and poor citizen safeguards, as in the Sironko instance.

5.4 Reimagining Grassroots Governance: Towards Accountability and Autonomy

The findings require Uganda to rethink grassroots governance. First, decentralisation must be re-politicized as a governance change needing robust democratic institutions, not only administrative deconcentration. This includes protecting local councils from political influence and increasing their fiscal discretion.

Second, revive participatory systems to truly enable citizens to set public priorities. Scaling up participatory budgeting, citizen report cards, and social audits requires institutionalisation and legal frameworks.

Thirdly, enhance accountability systems. This includes strengthening monitoring organisations, protecting civil society actors, and punishing corrupt or irresponsible officials. Importantly, the central government must commit to subsidiarity and transparency at all levels.

Finally, capacity-building must include leadership development, civic education, and local incentives for ethical public service, as well as technical skills and infrastructure.

Consequently, discussing Sironko District as a grassroots administration in Uganda is not just a result of capacity shortfalls or institutional weaknesses but a political and structural failure of the decentralisation regime. Conclusion and policy recommendations from the study follow, highlighting reform and future research.

6.0 Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

This study critically evaluated grassroots governance loss in Uganda using Sironko District Local Government as a case study. Uganda's decentralisation framework—established under the 1995 Constitution and Local Government Act (Cap. 243)—was meant to bring governance closer to the people, promote participatory democracy, and improve service delivery, but Sironko's empirical evidence suggests that structural, political, and institutional factors are undermining these goals.

The findings show that decentralised systems do not guarantee grassroots governance. Instead, the study shows local governments losing autonomy, resources, and legitimacy (functional hollowing-out). Political involvement from central government encroachment and patronage politics limits local decision-making. Local governments have less flexibility to address community needs due to fiscal dependency and rigid conditional grants. Administrative capacity limitations, especially at lower local government levels, hamper service delivery and planning. Once a cornerstone of Uganda's decentralisation drive, citizen engagement has become a formality, and accountability measures are weak or ineffective.

The analysis confirms the principal-agent model's weaknesses in unequal power relations and mismatched incentives. Civic participation without institutional safeguards and political commitment renders participatory governance incomplete. Sironko shows how administrative inefficiencies and political and institutional failings in decentralisation are eroding grassroots government.

These dynamics risk entrenching local authoritarianism, worsening public dissatisfaction with democratic processes, and undermining decentralisation's developmental potential if ignored. Uganda must prioritise local government reform in its governance strategy.

6.2 Policy Recommendation

For Uganda's grassroots governance to recover, the research recommends the following policies:

1. Strengthening Fiscal Autonomy and Budgetary Flexibility

- Amend the Local Government Act to give local governments more unconditional grants for local objectives.
- Reduce central transfer dependence by reintroducing and expanding local income mobilisation systems with capacity-building and oversight.
- Ensure timely and predictable central government funding to avoid grassroots service disruptions.

2. Maintain Local Political Independence

- To avoid RDC intervention in local council duties and planning, define their supervisory role.
- Protect elected local officials against political reprisals and co-optation using constitutional and legal safeguards.
- To maintain equitable service delivery, promote multi-party inclusivity and prevent local development efforts (e.g., Parish Development Model) from becoming politicised.

2. Build administrative and technical capacity

- Focus on hiring and retaining qualified sub-county, parish, and village staff, especially Community Development Officers and Parish Chiefs.
- Establish LC I and II chairperson capacity-building programmes in planning, record-keeping, accountability, and community mobilisation.
- Invest in ICT, transport, and office space to help grassroots institutions function.

3. Enliven Citizen Participation

- Establish parish and sub-county citizen assemblies, participatory budgeting sessions, and public hearings.
- Civic education empowers communities by teaching them their rights and government duties.
- Create inclusive engagement initiatives that involve youth, women, and marginalised communities in planning and oversight.

4. Revitalise Accountability Systems

- Improve DPAC and LGPAC operations by financing meetings, training, and audit follow-up.
- Create and support independent community monitoring groups with political retaliation protections.
- Force elected leaders and technical officials to report performance, budgets, and interventions at yearly social accountability forums.

5. Make decentralisation a democratic imperative

- Change the policy rhetoric from decentralisation as a service delivery mechanism to democratic governance based on local self-determination and institutional responsiveness.
- Include local government reform in governance and anti-corruption efforts, including public sector management and rule of law changes.

6.3 Areas for further research

The degradation of grassroots government across Uganda's districts and regions warrants further research due to the limitations of a single-case study design. Comparative examinations of rural and urban local governments or newly constituted districts and older administrative divisions may illuminate decentralisation dynamics. Future research might evaluate how donor-funded local governance programs affect participatory practices and institutional resilience.

Uganda's grassroots governance decline is a result of a lack of autonomy, systematic corruption, resource control, and non-existence of accountability in the political economy. Stopping this tendency requires more than technological reforms—it requires a political reorganisation that puts citizens first; hence, Sironko District provides a warning and a

window for intervention if the benefits and redemption of decentralisation should be beneficial to the grassroots people.

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