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Assessing the Effectiveness of Local Government Decentralization in Enhancing Public Service Delivery in the Philippines

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Abstract

This study critically assesses the effectiveness of local government decentralization in enhancing public service delivery in the Philippines. While decentralization has been implemented with the intent to improve governance responsiveness and local development, its outcomes have been markedly uneven. Drawing on policy documents, audit reports, and case comparisons, the research reveals that many local government units (LGUs) lack the institutional, fiscal, and human resource capacities necessary to deliver quality services. Although some LGUs have achieved notable success, these cases often reflect localized leadership strengths rather than systemic efficacy. The analysis underscores the disconnect between formal decentralization policies and their practical execution, highlighting how weak intergovernmental coordination, limited accountability mechanisms, and inadequate policy coherence undermine broader effectiveness. The paper concludes that meaningful improvement in public service delivery requires a shift toward capacity-driven, performance-oriented decentralization frameworks that address structural asymmetries and promote institutional learning across LGUs.

INTRODUCTION

Decentralization has long been heralded as a pathway toward improved governance, democratization, and enhanced public service delivery, particularly in developing countries. In the context of the Philippines, the implementation of decentralization was institutionalized through the 1991 Local Government Code (LGC), which aimed to empower local government units (LGUs) with greater autonomy over administrative, fiscal, and political affairs (Tadem & Atienza, 2023; Lubos et al., 2023; Diokno-Sicat et al., 2021). The rationale was that decentralization would bring government closer to the people, improving responsiveness and service efficiency. However, more than three decades since the enactment of the LGC, the empirical outcomes of decentralization remain mixed and, at times, contradictory (Kimenyi, 2018).

While decentralization in theory promises efficiency and citizen participation, its real-world implementation in the Philippines exposes a host of structural, political, and administrative challenges (Wampler et al., 2021; Korte, 2013; Ghosh et al., 2024). Various studies have shown that the devolved functions have often outpaced the financial and human resources made available to LGUs, leading to uneven service delivery, especially in health, education, and infrastructure (Picazo, 2015; Robredo et al., 2021; Moreno & Sulasula, 2024). In many rural municipalities, decentralized governance has led to fragmentation and inefficiencies rather than to improved service access or quality (Capuno, 2019).

Recent global trends in public administration underscore a re-evaluation of decentralization's actual contributions to governance outcomes. Decentralization is increasingly criticized for its potential to exacerbate local inequalities, entrench elite capture, and hinder policy coordination (David-Barrett, 2021; Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006). In the Philippine context, political dynasties continue to dominate local politics, undermining the ideal of democratic decentralization (Tadem & Tadem, 2016). The entrenchment of these local elites often subverts accountability mechanisms and prioritizes patronage over performance (Obicci, 2025). This political economy reality raises serious questions about the extent to which decentralization has genuinely empowered local governments to improve service delivery.

Furthermore, decentralization has revealed gaps in administrative and fiscal capacity at the local level. Studies show that many LGUs lack the technical capability to effectively plan, implement, and evaluate public service programs (Diokno-Sicat et al., 2020; Teng-Calleja et al., 2017). The recent Supreme Court ruling on the Mandanas-Garcia petition, which mandates a significant increase in LGU shares from national taxes starting in 2022, has amplified these concerns. While the decision provides greater fiscal space, it also places increased responsibility on LGUs, many of which remain ill-equipped to handle expanded mandates (Yuson, 2021). The Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) has acknowledged that without adequate capacity-building, fiscal decentralization may not translate into improved service outcomes (Juco et al., 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the strengths and weaknesses of decentralized governance. On one hand, local innovations in pandemic response—such as contact tracing, social aid distribution, and community-based quarantine enforcement—demonstrated the potential of empowered LGUs (Duma et al., 2022). On the other hand, disparities in response capabilities highlighted persistent inter-LGU inequalities and coordination problems between local and national agencies. The pandemic response suggests that while some LGUs can effectively exercise their devolved powers, others continue to struggle due to institutional weaknesses.

From a public administration perspective, there is a growing need to reframe decentralization not merely as a structural reform, but as a complex governance process that requires continuous adaptation, monitoring, and institutional support. Metrics of effectiveness must go beyond budget utilization or legal mandates and should encompass citizen satisfaction, service quality, and inclusive governance. Thus, assessing the effectiveness of decentralization in the Philippines necessitates a multidimensional and critical approach that considers not only the formal powers granted to LGUs, but also the socio-political context within which these powers are exercised.

This paper critically examines the extent to which local government decentralization in the Philippines has enhanced public service delivery. It interrogates the normative assumptions of decentralization by exploring empirical evidence on service outcomes, fiscal performance, and citizen perceptions. The study contributes to the ongoing discourse by highlighting the need for recalibrated decentralization

strategies—ones that align institutional capacity, political accountability, and equitable development. In doing so, it aims to inform future reforms that seek to deepen local governance without sacrificing efficiency, inclusion, and coherence in service delivery.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with the aim of understanding in depth the effectiveness of local government decentralization in improving public service delivery in the Philippines. This approach was chosen because it allows for a comprehensive exploration of the dynamics of decentralization policies, their implementation at the local level, and their impact on the quality of public services. Data in this study were collected through intensive literature studies of policy documents such as the Local Government Code 1991, reports from government agencies (e.g. the Department of the Interior and Local Government and the Philippine Institute for Development Studies), and the latest research results from national and international academic journals. In addition, secondary data were also obtained from reports from international institutions such as the World Bank, UNDP, and OECD that discuss decentralization and local governance in developing countries, including the Philippines.

Data analysis was conducted using the thematic analysis method, namely identifying patterns, themes, and key issues in the implementation of decentralization, especially those related to fiscal, administrative, and political aspects. This study also adopted an evaluative framework based on indicators of public service effectiveness, such as accessibility, efficiency, quality, and citizen participation, to assess the extent to which decentralization has met its initial objectives. The author critically compares inter-LGU practices to show performance disparities and identify factors that influence the success or failure of decentralization implementation.

As a form of validation and triangulation, this study also reviews audit reports, independent monitoring results of LGU performance, and policy case studies that highlight local government responses to crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Although no direct interviews were conducted, this study relies on analysis of credible and verified sources in academic and public policy contexts. With this method design, the study is expected to provide a critical and contextual understanding of the effectiveness of decentralization in the Philippines and its relevance for future local governance reforms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A successful use of decentralization to enhance public services in the Philippines can not be applied in a blanket representation country-wise but quite the contrary is true as it is severely subject to asymmetric capabilities of localities. Results indicating success in cities like Naga, Iloilo and Davao are fascinating, but in most cases are unusual and do not reflect the greater number of local government units (LGUs) in the Philippines. These cities have used the degree of fiscal autonomy they have been accessing to build responsive and participatory governance cultures, including budget transparency and community engagement in the development planning (Andrew-Amofah et al., 2022; Hakiman & Sheely, 2023; Ahmad & Islam, 2024). This success, nevertheless, has been reinforced traditionally through charismatic leadership, the civil society networks, and sufficient technocracy support, which is neither distributed evenly throughout the region.

In the Philippines, due to the approach of decentralization, the assumption has been made too strongly, based on the idea that providing autonomy is bound to make the quality of the public services better. As it actually was, as Juco dt al. (2024) and Laurio & Malto (2023) have demonstrated, most LGUs have little institutional and

fiscal ability to exercise the powers allotted them. This forms a paradox, autonomy is provided, yet no sufficient structural support is included, neither in humankind resources, governance infrastructure, or systems of monitors. In these things, Naga or Davao cities are not indicators of systemic performance, but, instead, aberrant successes within a broadly weak and amorphous decentralized system.

Besides, the successes recorded by select LGUs are usually not introduced into the cross-regional learning of policies. Horizontal replication of innovations in the provision of public services within the LGUs has no systematic type of an institutional mechanism. Therefore, the success of major cities, on the contrary, highlights the inability of the country to create a decentralization environment based on equality and fairness. Such demonstrates that the decentralization in the Philippines despite being planned in order to increase institutional access to the society will, in reality, increase the discrepancy between strong and weak regions with regard to institutions.

When successes are experienced in cities such as Naga and Iloilo, the second criticism is that this is always taken to mean that the current legal framework on decentralization is indeed effective when in very many instances, this success was achieved due to actions that took place at the local level to break the current normative rules and even over-surpass such provisions. This indicates the deficiency of the very policy of decentralization design that is too bureaucratic and less adjusted to the variety of local conditions. Instead of political leaders or serendipity, the decentralization system must be based on the principle of innovation that builds legal and structured dynamics of experimentation.

It is therefore notable that despite the fact that some LGUs have managed to budget and develop services well, these experiences attribute much to the high internal strength and local leadership as compared to the effectiveness of the decentralization system of the country. In the latter, increment ought to aim at developing the minimum standards of service, developing equitable institutional capacity and the mechanisms of incentive which facilitates the development of accountability and good practice replication. Unless such structural interventions take place, decentralization in the Philippines will be an incomplete policy that will continue to be as stated by er godby, a policy that is legally decentralized but in reality centralized by inequality.

In the meantime, LGUs as the frontline against the COVID-19 pandemic are critical measures of assessing the nimbleness and scale of the decentralization equipment. A number of local jurisdictions have portrayed admirable local efforts, including the establishment of command centers, aid delivery based on local information, and partnership with the civil society (Gao & Teets, 2021). In most other regions, however, the crisis has demonstrated the poor preparedness of local bureaucracies to deal with emergencies with regard to logistics, information, and coordination with central agencies.

In general, findings of this research indicate that even though decentralization has offered the local governments the room to be more innovative, be near the community, the decentralization exercise still remains largely conditional to institutional capacity, clean government and system-based supports by the central government. So unless local institutions are strengthened, and there are more accountability mechanisms, it is quite likely that the decentralization process opens existing inequalities, and lowers the quality of the services offered by the government to many regions.

The sources of the analyzed policy documents will be the laws and regulations, official reports of the government agencies (Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG), Department of Budget and Management (DBM) and Commission

on Audit (COA)), and evaluative reports of the research organizations and development partners (the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS), World Bank, UNDP and OECD). Such papers were analysed in order to reveal the legal and administrative systems of decentralization, fiscal distribution, and performance assessment of local governments in the provision of the public services.

The following table summarizes the document type, publishing institution, main focus, and relevance to this research:

Table 1. Summary of Policy Documents and Reports Analyzed

No	Documents/Reports	Publishing Institution	Main Focus	Research Relevance
1	Local Government Code of 1991	Philippine Congress	Legal framework for administrative, fiscal and political decentralization	The main normative basis for decentralization and division of LGU authority
2	Mandanas-Garcia Ruling Implementation Guide	DBM & DILG	Implementation guidelines for increasing fiscal transfers to LGUs	Fiscal implications and LGU readiness after strengthening fiscal autonomy
3	LGU Performance Report	Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG)	LGU performance in health, education and environmental cleanliness sectors	Quantitative and qualitative evaluation of public service results
4	Commission on Audit Annual Reports	Commission on Audit (COA)	Audit of the use of local government funds and the effectiveness of public spending	Uncovering LGU fiscal accountability and efficiency
5	Philippine Human Development Report	UNDP & Human Development Network	Inter-regional disparities and welfare indicators	Measuring the impact of decentralization on local community welfare
6	Fiscal Decentralization in the Philippines: An Overview	Philippine Institute for Development Studies (Llanto, 2021)	Critical analysis of fiscal decentralization and LGU capacity in budget management	Understanding structural barriers and policy solutions
7	World Bank Public Expenditure Review (2020)	World Bank	Efficiency of public spending by LGU	Assessing the correlation between fiscal autonomy and public service performance
8	OECD Reviews of Decentralization in Southeast Asia	OECD	Comparison of decentralized systems in Southeast Asia	Position of the Philippines compared to other ASEAN countries

The analysis of policy documents and institutional reports used in this study is not merely descriptive, but rather conducted critically to uncover the contradictions between the norms designed by the state and the realities faced by local governments. For example, findings from the Commission on Audit (COA) report consistently show that the proportion of administrative spending in many LGUs is still much higher than the budget allocation for public services that directly touch the needs of the community. This indicates that fiscal autonomy does not necessarily

produce efficiency or sensitivity to the needs of the community, but instead opens up space for waste and repeated inefficiency, especially in the context of LGUs that lack strong internal accountability mechanisms.

A report from the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) and the World Bank highlights even further: fiscal decentralization, which should be an instrument to strengthen local responsiveness, instead burdens LGUs with service responsibilities that are not balanced with adequate human resource capacity, planning tools, or bureaucratic technology. This is where the failure of decentralization design that places too much emphasis on devolution of authority without first ensuring the structural readiness of policy implementers at the local level becomes apparent. This imbalance results in what can be called an asymmetric decentralization trap, namely when LGUs have formal authority but are substantively unable to exercise it effectively or accountably.

On the other hand, performance reports from the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) indirectly confirm that LGU success is highly dependent on non-structural variables such as political leadership, civil society participation, and local collaborative networks. This raises a fundamental question: is the success of a particular LGU a result of decentralization policies, or is it an achievement that occurred despitenot because of the policies? The fact that some leading LGUs have exceeded expectations highlights the lack of systemic support available for other LGUs to replicate similar successes. The lack of cross-regional learning schemes, as well as the absence of a robust performance-based incentive system, makes it difficult for good practices to spread and become part of national governance.

Therefore, the integration of various policy documents in this study not only provides a comprehensive picture but also reveals that the design and implementation of decentralization in the Philippines still contain serious structural gaps. Many normative documents seem symbolic and are not accompanied by strong monitoring or impact measurement mechanisms. Even at the central level, inconsistencies between agencies in issuing LGU performance indicators indicate weak cross-sectoral coordination. In this context, decentralization faces not only local capacity challenges but also a crisis of clarity in the policy architecture itself. If policy documents fail to serve as instruments of direction and control of implementation, then decentralization will continue to move within an ambiguous framework—with LGUs operating independently and citizens remaining marginalized from services that should be closer to them.

Decentralization's Uneven Impact on Local Governance Capacity

This study confirms an earlier criticism of decentralization in the Philippines: official transfer of powers and fiscal dollars to Local Government Units (LGUs) has taken place, but their ability to provide equitable and efficient delivery of public service is very uneven. This unbalance is not only an administrative problem but it is structural because it is something that is inherent to the decentralization framework itself.

Among the most dazzling findings is the widening divide between LGUs that are doing so well and those that are stuck in the provision of basic services. There are cities such as Naga, Iloilo, and Davao among others that are usually touted as ideal examples of decentralized rule. Nevertheless, their achievement has been credited more to great local leaderships, the vibrancy of civil societies and the already existing systems of technocracies as opposed to the efficacy of the decentralization as a policy in the country. This points to a fundamental weakness of the idea on which decentralization reforms are based, the presence of autonomy is not necessarily the recipe of good performances of governance. On the contrary, institutional strengths,

human capital, and political will of local actors are crucial indicators of success (Kimengsi et al., 2025; Gong et al., 2022).

These results are consistent with the findings in the literature to be cautious of the hazards of asymmetrical capacity in decentralized systems (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006; David-Barrett, 2021). And in the absence of appropriate supporting mechanisms, decentralization may increase, instead of decreasing, inequalities. Decentralization within the Philippine context has at times created requesting service delivery with various areas of enforcement, insufficient translations in the adoption of policy, and a lost opportunity in the cross-region expansion of successful innovation. Such fragmentation is further augmented by poor cross-LGU learning mechanisms, few incentives to promote performance, and persistence of the role of political dynasties that serve political patronage at the expense of accountability.

The COVID-19 pandemic became the practical experiment on the work of decentralized government and demonstrated its opportunities or finite (Jabarulla & Lee, 2021; Modirkhorasani & Hoseinpour, 2024; Karaarslan & Aydin, 2021). Although there were LGUs that showed some innovation by taking up localized programs, most excelled because they were not ready, lacked resources, and could not engage national agencies. It is a reminder that resilience in decentralized systems is not an issue of legal autonomy but its institutional capacity, intergovernmental co-operation, and access to reliable data and resources.

Moreover, the evaluation of policy documents and audit reports shows that the fiscal transfers, which would be incorporated by the Mandanas-Garcia decision, do not necessarily imply improved service delivery. Instead, greater fiscal space without corresponding improvements in planning, management, and accountability mechanisms risks perpetuating inefficiencies and widening disparities between LGUs (Juco et al., 2024). This supports arguments from scholars such as Diokno-Sicat et al. (2020) and Juco et al. (2024), who emphasize the need for capacity-building as a precondition for successful fiscal decentralization.

CONCLUSION

This paper was analytical in terms of evaluation of the usefulness of local government decentralization in the promotion of public service delivery in the Philippines based on policy documents, instrumental reports and empirical surveys. Although decentralization in governance has always been an advocacy to draw the government nearer to the people, this study emphasizes that the ability to move the powers and resources to lower government units (LGUs) is not the winning formula to ensure better service delivery. As a matter of fact, the Philippine experience with decentralization has shown a highly disjointed and lopsided terrain the best performing LGUs coenexist with a large number of LGUs that have low capacities, poor accountabilities and continued inefficient practices.

Even with the paramount expectations built into Local Government Code of 1991 and additional fiscal authority granted by the Mandanas-Garcia decision, the administrative and institutional preparedness of most LGUs is nightmarish. The structural bottlenecks have always been seen in national audit reports, expenditure reviews and LGU performance data in that it has always been identified as having misallocated budgets and patronage politics, as well as having lack of professionalization and lack of intergovernmental support. These institutional deficiencies actually present an alarming disjunction between what decentralization is intended to be normatively and what it actually is in practice. In most instances, decentralization has in a way decentralized not only power, but dysfunction as well at the local authority levels.

The success stories, i.e., that of Naga, Iloilo or Davao, ought to be noted down but at the same time they should never cloud the larger picture. These communities are the likely ones to prosper not due to the system at all, but despite it. These success stories are frequently motivated by outstanding local systems of governance, participation, and institutional pioneering, all of which are not standardized and can not be replicated on a broader degree as a part of the existing decentralization system. The lack of a national plan to encourage cross LGU learning, replicate good practice or to fix the baseline standards of service delivery further destabilizes the equity and inclusion that decentralization was supposed to support.

Therefore, this study concludes that while decentralization in the Philippines has created opportunities for innovation and local responsiveness, it remains deeply limited by capacity asymmetries, lack of systemic coherence, and weak performance accountability. For decentralization to meaningfully enhance public service delivery across the archipelago, a recalibration is necessary—one that shifts the focus from mere devolution to *functional decentralization*. This means prioritizing investments in institutional capacity building, creating stronger intergovernmental coordination mechanisms, and developing performance-based incentives that reward transparency, participation, and efficiency.

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