



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

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of local government decentralization in enhancing public service delivery in the Philippines. Although decentralization is widely regarded as a strategy to improve governance responsiveness and efficiency, its outcomes remain uneven across local government units (LGUs). This research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach using document analysis of policy frameworks, government reports, audit findings, and academic literature. Through thematic analysis and a comparative perspective, the study identifies key structural challenges shaping decentralization outcomes. The findings show that decentralization has not consistently improved service delivery but instead has amplified disparities between high-capacity and low-capacity LGUs. Successful cases are largely driven by strong local leadership and institutional capacity rather than by the effectiveness of decentralization policy itself. Moreover, increased fiscal autonomy has not always translated into better outcomes due to weak administrative systems, limited accountability mechanisms, and fragmented intergovernmental coordination. The study concludes that decentralization is a capacity-dependent process and highlights the need for institutional strengthening, improved coordination, and performance-based governance to achieve more equitable and effective public service delivery.

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. 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

The research design selected in this study is qualitative research design through a descriptive-analytical approach which critically evaluates the effectiveness of local government decentralization in improving delivery of public services in the Philippines. The qualitative approach is believed to be the best one due to the nature of the study that aims to investigate intricate institutional dynamics, governance frameworks and policy execution procedures that cannot be sufficiently described by quantitative measurement.

The study will be mainly based on the analysis of documents as a primary approach to data collection. The data was systematically collected using diverse credible and authoritative sources which included: (1) national legal and policy documents like the Local Government Code of 1991 and the Mandanas-Garcia ruling implementation guidelines; (2) official government publications of key bodies such

The purposive sampling strategy was used to select the documents and the selection was based on documents that give a lot of empirical evidence, policy evaluation, and institutional insights on the practices of decentralization. New publications and reports have been prioritized to provide a much-needed relevance and timeliness of the analysis, and the foundational legal and theoretical sources have been retained to provide a conceptual basis.

The thematic analysis framework was employed in the data analysis, to find patterns, major issues, and paradoxes in the policy and practice of decentralization. There were a number of steps used in the analysis process. To begin with, a thorough examination and coding of all the documents collected was done according to the emerging issues within the area of governance capacity, fiscal decentralization, accountability mechanisms, intergovernmental coordination, and service delivery outcomes. Second, these codes were classified into wider themes of analysis in terms of structural issues and performance differences between local government units (LGUs). Third, the research was able to form an interpretative synthesis by relating these themes to the larger theoretical arguments of decentralization and public administration.

Besides thematic analysis, the study implements a comparative analytical approach by analyzing the differences in performance and governance practices in various LGUs. The chosen cases, especially the high-performing cities, like Naga, Iloilo and Davao, are compared to the overall trends in the less-capacitated LGUs. The comparison is not aimed at generalizing findings on statistical grounds, but instead to outline structural differences and pinpoint facilitating and limiting factors which affect the outcome of decentralization.

In order to improve analytical validity, the paper uses some form of data triangulation by comparing the results of numerous sources of types such as an audit report, institutional performance analysis and academic analysis. This will enable the researcher to check consistency, minimize bias, and enhance credibility of interpretations. As an illustration, the allegations of fiscal inefficiency or administrative constraints are investigated by both government audit reports and by independent research reports.

It should be pointed out that in this study no primary data will be collected like an interview or survey. Rather it focuses on critical analysis of secondary data as part of policy analysis process. On the one hand, this constrains the capacity to acquire real-time stakeholder views; on the other hand, it allows a more extensive structural evaluation of decentralization, integrating different, large-scale, and longitudinal sources of information.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Uneven Institutional Capacity Across Local Government Units

A successful use of decentralization to enhance public services in the Philippines cannot be generalized across all regions; rather, it is highly contingent upon the asymmetric institutional capacities of local government units (LGUs). Findings from this study indicate that while decentralization has created opportunities for improved governance, its outcomes remain uneven and deeply influenced by local conditions. Cities such as Naga, Iloilo, and Davao are frequently cited as success stories, demonstrating how fiscal autonomy can be leveraged to foster participatory governance, enhance transparency, and improve service delivery (Andrew-Amofah et al., 2022; Hakiman & Sheely, 2023; Ahmad & Islam, 2024).

These cities have effectively utilized their autonomy to build governance systems that are responsive to local needs, including mechanisms for citizen participation and collaborative planning. However, these successes are not representative of the majority of LGUs in the Philippines. Instead, they reflect localized conditions characterized by strong leadership, active civil society engagement, and relatively higher levels of administrative and technical capacity.

In contrast, many LGUs particularly those in rural or less-developed areas continue to face significant challenges in delivering basic public services. Limited human resources, weak institutional structures, and inadequate technical expertise constrain their ability to effectively implement decentralized functions. As a result, decentralization tends to magnify existing inequalities rather than reduce them. This pattern highlights a fundamental issue within the decentralization framework: autonomy alone is insufficient to guarantee improved governance outcomes. Without parallel investments in institutional capacity and administrative capability, decentralization risks creating a dual system in which high-capacity LGUs thrive while low-capacity ones fall further behind.

The Paradox of Fiscal Decentralization and Limited Capacity

One of the most significant findings of this study is the paradox between increased fiscal autonomy and limited institutional capacity. Decentralization policies in the Philippines are grounded in the assumption that transferring financial resources and authority to local governments will improve efficiency and responsiveness. However, empirical evidence suggests that this assumption does not consistently hold true.

Studies by Juco et al. (2024) and Laurio & Malto (2023) demonstrate that many LGUs lack the necessary administrative and financial management capacity to effectively utilize devolved resources. This issue has become more pronounced following the implementation of the Mandanas-Garcia ruling, which significantly increased the share of national tax revenues allocated to LGUs. While this reform expanded fiscal space, it also exposed the limited preparedness of many local governments to manage increased responsibilities.

Audit reports and institutional evaluations further reveal that increased fiscal transfers do not automatically translate into improved service delivery. In many cases, local budgets continue to prioritize administrative expenditures over essential services such as health, education, and infrastructure. This indicates that fiscal

decentralization, in the absence of strong planning systems and accountability mechanisms, may reinforce inefficiencies rather than resolve them.

This condition can be conceptualized as an “asymmetric decentralization trap,” where local governments possess formal authority and resources but lack the capacity to utilize them effectively. As a result, decentralization becomes a structural imbalance, with authority devolved faster than the institutional capabilities required to support it.

Leadership-Driven Success and the Limits of Policy Design

The success of certain LGUs in the Philippines is often attributed to decentralization policies; however, this study finds that such success is more accurately explained by localized leadership and contextual factors. Cities such as Naga, Iloilo, and Davao have demonstrated innovative governance practices, including participatory budgeting, transparent fiscal management, and strong engagement with civil society.

These successes, however, are highly dependent on individual leadership and local institutional dynamics rather than on the effectiveness of the decentralization framework itself. In many instances, local governments have adapted or even gone beyond formal policy guidelines to achieve these outcomes. This suggests that the current decentralization design lacks flexibility and is not sufficiently responsive to diverse local conditions.

Moreover, the absence of systematic mechanisms for scaling successful practices limits the broader impact of these innovations. There is no institutionalized framework for cross-regional learning, knowledge transfer, or replication of best practices among LGUs. As a result, successful governance models remain isolated and do not contribute to systemic improvement. This finding highlights a critical limitation in the design of decentralization policies: the over-reliance on local initiative without sufficient structural support. Without mechanisms to institutionalize and disseminate successful practices, decentralization remains dependent on exceptional cases rather than functioning as a consistent and equitable governance system.

Weak Accountability and Fragmented Governance Systems

Another major issue identified in this study is the persistence of weak accountability mechanisms within decentralized governance structures. Evidence from Commission on Audit (COA) reports indicates that many LGUs allocate a disproportionate share of their budgets to administrative expenses rather than to public services that directly benefit citizens.

This pattern suggests that fiscal autonomy, in the absence of strong oversight and accountability systems, does not necessarily lead to improved efficiency or responsiveness. Instead, it may create opportunities for inefficiency, misallocation of resources, and, in some cases, patronage-based governance. The continued dominance of political dynasties in many regions further complicates efforts to strengthen accountability and promote performance-based governance.

In addition to accountability challenges, the study also identifies significant fragmentation in governance systems. Coordination between national and local governments remains inconsistent, with variations in policy interpretation and implementation across regions. This lack of coherence is further exacerbated by differences in performance indicators and monitoring systems among national agencies.

As a result, decentralization operates within a fragmented institutional environment, where policies are implemented unevenly and outcomes vary significantly across

LGUs. This fragmentation undermines the effectiveness of decentralization and limits its potential to deliver consistent and equitable public services.

Decentralization Under Crisis: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a critical test of decentralized governance in the Philippines, highlighting both its strengths and limitations. As frontline actors, LGUs played a central role in managing the crisis, providing a unique opportunity to assess the operational effectiveness of decentralization under pressure.

In several cases, local governments demonstrated remarkable adaptability and innovation. They established local command centers, implemented community-based aid distribution systems, and collaborated with civil society organizations to address urgent needs (Gao & Teets, 2021). These efforts illustrate the potential of decentralization to enable flexible and context-specific responses to complex challenges.

However, the pandemic also exposed significant disparities in capacity across LGUs. Many local governments struggled with limited logistical resources, inadequate data systems, and weak coordination with national agencies. These limitations hindered their ability to respond effectively to the crisis and revealed underlying weaknesses in institutional preparedness. The uneven responses observed during the pandemic reinforce the argument that decentralization effectiveness depends not only on formal autonomy but also on the strength of local institutions. Without adequate capacity, coordination mechanisms, and access to resources, decentralization may fail to deliver effective governance outcomes, particularly in times of crisis.

Structural Gaps in Policy Design and Implementation

The analysis of policy documents including laws, government reports, and institutional evaluations reveals a fundamental disconnect between the normative design of decentralization and its practical implementation. Key sources analyzed in this study include documents from the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG), Department of Budget and Management (DBM), Commission on Audit (COA), Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS), World Bank, UNDP, and OECD.

The following table summarizes the main documents analyzed:

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	LGU performance in health, education and	Quantitative and qualitative evaluation of

		Government (DILG)	environmental cleanliness sectors	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 (Llanto, 2021)	Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS)	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

A critical review of these documents shows that many decentralization policies remain largely normative and are not supported by robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. For example, COA reports consistently highlight inefficiencies in budget allocation, while studies from PIDS and the World Bank indicate that fiscal decentralization often places disproportionate burdens on LGUs without sufficient capacity-building support.

Furthermore, inconsistencies in policy frameworks and performance indicators across national agencies reveal weak coordination at the central level. This lack of coherence creates ambiguity in implementation and limits the effectiveness of decentralization as a governance strategy.

Ultimately, these structural gaps result in a system where decentralization operates within an unclear and fragmented policy environment. While LGUs are granted autonomy, they are not provided with sufficient guidance, support, or accountability mechanisms to ensure effective implementation. This disconnect significantly constrains the ability of decentralization to achieve its intended goals of improving public service delivery and promoting equitable development.

Decentralization's Uneven Impact on Governance Outcomes

The findings of this study challenge the conventional assumption that decentralization inherently leads to improved governance and enhanced public

service delivery. While decentralization has long been promoted as a mechanism to increase efficiency, responsiveness, and citizen participation, the Philippine experience demonstrates that its outcomes are highly contingent upon underlying institutional conditions. This aligns with broader scholarship in Public Administration, which emphasizes that governance reforms do not operate in isolation but are deeply embedded within existing political, administrative, and socio-economic structures.

A key insight emerging from this study is that decentralization in the Philippines functions as an amplifier of pre-existing institutional inequalities rather than as a corrective mechanism. This finding is consistent with the theoretical arguments of Pranab Bardhan and Dilip Mookherjee (2006), who argue that decentralization can exacerbate disparities when local capacities are uneven. In contexts where institutional capacity is strong, decentralization enables innovation, flexibility, and responsiveness. However, in weaker LGUs, it often leads to administrative fragmentation, inefficient resource utilization, and limited service delivery outcomes. Thus, decentralization should not be understood as a uniformly beneficial reform, but rather as a conditional process shaped by capacity asymmetries.

Furthermore, the study reveals a critical mismatch between fiscal decentralization and institutional readiness. Despite increased fiscal transfers following the Mandanas-Garcia ruling, many LGUs remain ill-equipped to manage expanded responsibilities effectively. This supports findings from Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) and World Bank reports, which highlight that fiscal autonomy without corresponding investments in administrative and technical capacity can undermine governance outcomes. This imbalance reflects what can be conceptualized as an “asymmetric decentralization trap,” where authority and resources are devolved faster than the development of institutional capabilities required to utilize them effectively.

Another important contribution of this study lies in its identification of leadership-driven governance as a central determinant of decentralization success. While high-performing LGUs such as Naga, Iloilo, and Davao are often cited as evidence of effective decentralization, the findings suggest that their success is largely attributable to localized leadership, strong civil society engagement, and favorable institutional conditions. This observation resonates with arguments in governance literature that emphasize the role of agency and leadership in shaping policy outcomes (Teng-Calleja et al., 2017). However, the reliance on leadership as a primary driver of success raises concerns about sustainability and scalability, as such conditions are difficult to replicate across diverse local contexts.

In addition, the persistence of weak accountability mechanisms and fragmented intergovernmental coordination further constrains the effectiveness of decentralization. Evidence from audit reports and institutional analyses indicates that fiscal autonomy has not been matched by robust monitoring and evaluation systems. This finding supports the critique advanced by Liz David-Barrett (2021), who highlights how weak accountability structures can enable inefficiencies and reinforce elite capture in decentralized systems. In the Philippine context, the continued influence of political dynasties exacerbates these challenges, limiting transparency and undermining performance-based governance.

The COVID-19 pandemic provides an important empirical lens through which to assess the resilience of decentralized governance systems. The study finds that while some LGUs demonstrated adaptability and innovation, others struggled due to limited institutional capacity and weak coordination mechanisms. This uneven response underscores the importance of institutional preparedness and intergovernmental collaboration in crisis contexts. It also reinforces the argument

that decentralization effectiveness is not determined solely by formal autonomy, but by the strength of underlying governance systems. These findings suggest the need to reconceptualize decentralization as a dynamic and capacity-dependent governance process rather than a static institutional reform. This perspective calls for a shift from a purely devolution-oriented approach toward a more integrated model of “functional decentralization,” in which authority, resources, and institutional capacity are developed simultaneously. Such an approach would require sustained investments in capacity-building, the establishment of performance-based incentive systems, and the strengthening of coordination mechanisms across levels of government. Ultimately, this study contributes to ongoing debates in decentralization and governance by demonstrating that the effectiveness of decentralization is not inherent, but contingent. Without addressing structural inequalities, institutional weaknesses, and accountability gaps, decentralization risks reinforcing the very disparities it seeks to overcome. Therefore, future reforms must move beyond the assumption that decentralization is inherently beneficial and instead focus on building the institutional foundations necessary for it to succeed.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that decentralization in the Philippines has not uniformly enhanced public service delivery, but instead has produced highly uneven governance outcomes shaped by significant disparities in institutional capacity, accountability, and resource management across local government units (LGUs). While decentralization has enabled innovation and responsiveness in high-performing LGUs, its broader implementation reveals structural limitations, including weak administrative capacity, fragmented intergovernmental coordination, and persistent accountability gaps that undermine its effectiveness. The findings demonstrate that decentralization, rather than functioning as a universally beneficial reform, operates as a conditional and capacity-dependent process that may reinforce existing inequalities if not properly supported. Therefore, achieving meaningful improvements in public service delivery requires a shift toward a more integrated and capacity-driven decentralization framework one that aligns fiscal autonomy with institutional strengthening, embeds performance-based governance mechanisms, and fosters cross-LGU learning and coordination to ensure more equitable and sustainable governance outcomes.

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