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The Decentralisation- Recentralisation Paradox in Uganda's Local Governance: Dissecting the Drivers

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Abstract

Uganda's governance framework has witnessed a paradoxical shift between decentralisation and recentralisation since the 1990s, sparking debates among scholars and policymakers. This article examines the intricate factors driving the decentralisation–recentralisation phenomenon in Uganda's governance framework. The study employs a qualitative research approach that analyses secondary data drawn from academic journals, policy documents, and existing studies. The decentralisation–recentralisation dialectic results from power struggles between the central government and local authorities, undermining democratic governance. Decentralisation initially promoted participation and accountability, but recentralisation efforts have eroded these gains. Understanding the decentralisation–recentralisation interplay is crucial for policymakers to inform targeted policy interventions which strengthen decentralisation and democratic governance. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on decentralisation and recentralisation, providing insights into the paradoxical nature of Uganda's governance framework. It relies on secondary data, but further research is needed to explore the perspectives of local authorities and citizens. Policymakers must prioritise institutional reforms and citizen participation to achieve balanced governance amidst decentralisation dynamics.

Keywords: Decentralisation, recentralisation, democratic governance, local autonomy, Uganda's governance framework



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1.0 Introduction

Decentralisation, a widely adopted governance reform strategy, promotes participatory governance, accountability, and local service delivery (United Nations, 2015). However, recentralisation tendencies have undermined its effectiveness in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The World Bank and United Nations advocate for decentralisation to improve governance, reduce poverty, and enhance service delivery. This aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (World Bank, 2017; United Nations, 2015). Countries like Indonesia, the Philippines, India, Brazil, Argentina, and Chile, have implemented decentralisation, but recentralisation tendencies have emerged (Pinilla-Rodríguez et al., 2024; Lewis, 2023). In African countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, and Ghana, decentralisation efforts have been undermined as central governments reassert control over local authorities (Rugeiyamu & Msendo, 2025; Makara, 2018; Smoke, 2015; Ndegwa & Levy, 2018).

Uganda's decentralisation policy promotes participatory governance, accountability, and local service delivery (Bataringaya & Mbabazi, 2019). However, the effectiveness of decentralisation has been weakened by growing recentralisation. The central government has tightened its control over local governments by appointing its own officials and restricting financial transfers (Ntayi & Aciro, 2020; Kafuko & Kibirige, 2018; Okidi, 2017). This has resulted in limited autonomy for local governments, hindering their ability to respond to local needs and priorities. Despite these challenges, decentralisation continues to play a central role in Uganda's democratic reforms, as the government actively pursues initiatives to enhance local governance and promote citizen participation. The central government's actions have limited the success of decentralisation. Achieving effective service delivery and citizen engagement requires a balance between central control and local autonomy. Decentralisation Uganda's experience highlights the complexities of decentralisation and the need for careful consideration of the roles and responsibilities of different levels of government.

Uganda's decentralisation experience in the 1990s and 2000s uniquely shaped its governance trajectory. The 1997 Local Governments Act was pivotal, institutionalising decentralisation and establishing district and municipal councils that devolved power and responsibilities to local governments. This enabled local governments to manage their affairs and provide community services, promoting participatory governance and service delivery. Decentralisation contributes to better local service delivery and greater accountability in resource management. It further encourages citizen involvement in the planning and execution of government programmes (Green, 2015; Wunsch, 2018; Lambright, 2017). Scholars argue that transferring decision-making authority to local governments strengthens governance effectiveness by enhancing service delivery and broadening avenues for citizen participation (Fuseini et al., 2025; Larsala & Chaka, 2025; Ndambwa & Moonga, 2024; Gaventa & Barrett, 2016).

Decentralisation promotes active participation by local communities in decision-making processes, thereby enhancing citizen engagement in local council meetings and budgeting (Sjögren, 2015; Gore et al., 2014). This increased participation improves local governments' accountability and responsiveness to local needs (Ogunnubi, 2022). Decentralisation also enhances service delivery in healthcare and education, with notable improvements in rural areas (Kellner et al., 2024; Be-ere, 2023). Uganda's decentralisation reforms have led to improved service delivery, higher participation, and stronger accountability (Biryomumeisho et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the country faces challenges such as limited capacity, inadequate funding, centralised control, and recentralisation tendencies (Galukande-Kiganda et al., 2024; Sjögren, 2015).

Recentralisation tendencies in Uganda are evident in the central government's efforts to consolidate power and control over local governments, undermining the decentralisation policy's effectiveness (Mpiima, 2016; Biryomumeisho et al., 2024). The central government has achieved this through various means, including appointing officials to oversee local government activities, withholding allocated funds, and imposing central policies on local governments (Galukande-Kiganda & Mzini, 2016; Lewis, 2014). These actions have led to a decline in participation, accountability, and service delivery, compromising local autonomy and prioritizing national interests (Galukande-Kiganda et al., 2024). Consequently, decentralisation's gains—such as community participation, accountability, and efficient service delivery—are diminishing, creating profound implications for governance and development in Uganda (Biryomumeisho et al., 2024; Johnson, 2023).

Uganda's governance system grapples with a decentralisation–recentralisation paradox, as the central government strives to retain control despite local governments' limited capacity and resources (Biryomumeisho et al., 2024). This paradox manifests through recentralisation tendencies that undermine the stability and legitimacy of the system (Nabaho, 2013). Manifestations of recentralisation include centralised decision-making authority, reduced local government funding and autonomy, and increased central government oversight (Lugada et al., 2022). The quality of service delivery and accountability for government resources at the local level remain challenging due to centralised decision-making (Mayanja & Akunda, 2023). Factors contributing to recentralisation and its implications for governance and development in Uganda require in-depth examination. This investigation centres on the question: What factors drive Uganda's decentralisation–recentralisation paradox? Recent research provides a foundation for deeper exploration (Aryani et al., 2023).

This study pursues three core objectives to address the central research question. First, it investigates the historical trajectory of decentralisation in Uganda, tracing the development and implementation of related policies over time. Second, it critically analyses the underlying drivers of recentralisation, focusing on political, economic, and institutional dimensions that shape this reversal of power. Third, it explores the implications of the decentralisation–recentralisation paradox for local governance, with particular attention to its effects on community participation, accountability mechanisms, and

the delivery of public services. Through a focused examination of these dynamics, the study offers empirically grounded insights into Uganda's evolving governance landscape. Its findings aim to enrich scholarly understanding of the complex interplay between decentralising and recentralising forces, while providing a nuanced perspective relevant to ongoing efforts in promoting democratic governance and effective local administration.

The paper proceeds by presenting, in Section 2, a comprehensive review of relevant literature that critically examines the introduction of decentralisation reforms and evaluates their influence on Uganda's governance framework. Section 3 details the qualitative literature review methodology adopted for this study. Section 4 presents the key findings, highlighting the underlying drivers of recentralisation and examining their effects on the progress and outcomes of decentralisation efforts. Section 5 provides an in-depth discussion of the implications for Uganda's democratic trajectory. Finally, Section 6 concludes with actionable recommendations, underscoring the need for reforms that bolster local governments and foster democratic governance, and offers valuable insights for policymakers and development practitioners.

2.0 Literature Review

Decentralisation and recentralisation constitute core elements of Uganda's governance framework. This examination synthesises existing literature on these dynamics, identifying key drivers, consequences, and implications. It contextualises the historical evolution of decentralisation, investigates the forces propelling recentralisation, and analyses the effects of the decentralisation–recentralisation paradox on local governance, thereby constructing a comprehensive conceptual framework.

Decentralisation remains a layered and evolving concept, widely examined in the context of democratic governance and local development (Efriandi et al., 2019; Onyango-Delewa, 2016). Scholars frequently frame it as a pathway to strengthen local participation, enhance accountability, and promote efficient service delivery (Smoke, 2015; Wunsch, 2018). Yet, its practice often confronts embedded structural and political constraints that complicate implementation. In Uganda, these tensions are starkly visible through a decentralisation-recentralisation paradox, where efforts to devolve power coexist with mechanisms that pull it back to the centre (Green, 2015; Namatovu & Oonyu, 2021). This dynamic reflects deeper political calculations, including central authorities' reluctance to relinquish control and persistent deficits in local administrative and fiscal capacities (Lambright, 2018; Muhumuza, 2020). Rather than a linear process, decentralisation in Uganda operates within a feedback loop shaped by conflicting objectives, limited resources, and evolving governance strategies (Chemouni, 2022). As a result, the state continually renegotiates its legitimacy and the role of local governments. This process raises serious concerns about power distribution, institutional coherence, and democratic accountability within the wider governance framework (Lough et al., 2019; Twongyirwe et al., 2023). Grasping the complexities of Uganda's

decentralisation–recentralisation paradox requires a strong foundation in decentralisation theories, particularly those that highlight the interaction between authority, participation, and governance outcomes. Classical decentralisation theory emerges as a relevant and robust framework for interpreting these dynamics, as it foregrounds principles of local autonomy, participatory governance, and administrative efficiency (Green, 2015). These principles align closely with Uganda’s stated objectives in adopting decentralisation reforms, which aimed to enhance citizen engagement, improve accountability, and strengthen service delivery at the local level (Lambright, 2018). In this context, classical theory enables a clearer analysis of how shifts in power between central and local governments shape governance structures and influence democratic processes. It offers conceptual tools to examine the tensions between devolution and central control, particularly as recentralisation tendencies reconfigure power relations within Uganda’s governance system (Kyohairwe et al., 2024). Empirical insights from Uganda and comparable African contexts reinforce the theory’s relevance, revealing how political and institutional factors often complicate intended decentralisation outcomes (Twongyirwe et al., 2023; Wunsch, 2018).

Classical decentralisation theory highlights local autonomy, participation, and efficiency. This offers a critical framework to analyse Uganda’s complex governance dynamics involving decentralisation and recentralisation. This theory explains tensions between devolved authority and central government control, emphasising the importance of empowering local governments for improved service delivery and citizen engagement (Nastar et al., 2019; Smith & Mwangi, 2021). Uganda’s decentralisation reforms reflect this approach, yet ongoing central interventions complicate governance outcomes (Nalwadda & Byaruhanga, 2020). Critics note that the theory’s strong focus on economic efficiency often neglects political realities such as elite capture, power struggles, and informal institutions that influence decentralisation success (Kasozi, 2018; Mukama & Nakayi, 2022). Recent studies emphasise incorporating socio-political factors into classical theory to illuminate Uganda’s decentralisation–recentralisation paradox more comprehensively (Nabukenya & Kabonesa, 2023). This integration reveals why decentralisation reforms sometimes fail to enhance participation or service quality, despite formal autonomy. Overall, classical decentralisation theory provides a useful foundation, but requires contextual adaptation to address Uganda’s unique political and institutional challenges, ensuring a more comprehensive analysis of governance reforms and their impact on local development.

The decentralisation–recentralisation paradox in Uganda continues to challenge governance, reflecting ongoing tensions between devolving power to local governments and the central state’s reassertion of control. Recent research shows that political elites often manipulate decentralisation reforms to maintain patronage networks and consolidate power, limiting genuine local autonomy and democratic participation (Bashaasha et al., 2018; Ssali et al., 2021). Institutional weaknesses further complicate this dynamic, as local governments struggle with inadequate fiscal resources, capacity deficits, and dependency on central government transfers (Namara & Muwonge,

2020; Okello et al., 2019). These structural challenges, combined with uneven implementation and competing interests, reinforce tendencies towards recentralisation and undermine effective decentralisation (Kasimbazi et al., 2017; Kyamusugulwa & Hilhorst, 2016).

Moreover, policymakers have at times exploited district creation - originally meant to bring governance closer to citizens - for political gain. This has deepened fragmentation and weakened the efficiency of service delivery (Bashaasha et al., 2018; Tumushabe et al., 2019). This paradox remains a critical issue in Uganda's governance landscape, illustrating the complex interplay between political control, institutional capacity, and efforts to promote local participation. Recent research reveals that the Ugandan government has actively worked to reestablish central authority over decentralised bodies, often citing goals of enhancing efficiency and accountability (Green, 2018). Notably, the government implemented several policies to tighten control over local government finances, including a revised local government finance framework introduced in 2015 (Ministry of Local Government, 2015). Despite these measures, local officials and civil society actors have pushed back, contending that such centralisation efforts threaten the core principles of decentralisation and local self-governance (Rugeiyami & Msendo, 2025).

This ongoing friction between decentralisation and recentralisation underscores a significant paradox within Uganda's governance landscape. It also illustrates the persistent difficulties in balancing the desire for effective oversight with the need for meaningful local participation. These dynamics reveal the complexities involved in shaping governance systems that are both accountable and inclusive. They also show that central control and local autonomy often coexist uneasily rather than harmoniously. This interplay remains a critical area for understanding governance reforms and their broader social and political implications in Uganda.

Empirical research from recent years demonstrates that decentralisation often enhances participation, accountability, and service delivery, fostering more responsive governance structures (Chen et al., 2021; Lutoti et al., 2015). Nonetheless, these improvements face significant obstacles, particularly in Uganda, where local governments frequently struggle with limited capacity and insufficient resources. This undermines the potential benefits of decentralisation (Nannyonjo & Okot, 2013; Tapscott, 2017). The central government's persistent dominance further complicates efforts to empower local authorities, highlighting structural challenges that impede effective decentralisation (Lutwama, 2012). In contrast, trends toward recentralisation appear to weaken civic engagement and reduce accountability, while service quality suffers as decision-making shifts away from local stakeholders (Resnick, 2014). This shift also reinforces existing power imbalances, intensifying tensions between central and local levels of governance (Lutoti et al., 2015). Therefore, the dynamics between decentralisation and recentralisation reveal complex trade-offs that require careful navigation to balance authority distribution without compromising democratic participation or service effectiveness.

A persistent paradox of decentralisation and recentralisation shapes governance across Africa, where efforts to devolve power and resources to local governments frequently encounter resistance or reversal by central authorities. Research from Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania reveals the intricate nature of this dynamic. In Ghana, decentralisation has fostered greater citizen participation and enhanced accountability, yet the implementation of reforms struggles within a predominantly centralised political framework (Mohammed, 2016; Ayee, 2013). For example, Antwi-Boasiako (2010) demonstrated that decentralisation reforms increased public involvement and improved service delivery. However, the central government's tight control over financial resources and staffing significantly constrained local government autonomy. This tension highlights how decentralisation initiatives, though promising in theory, often encounter systemic obstacles that undermine their effectiveness. These country case studies illustrate the difficulties of balancing power between central and local authorities, revealing how entrenched centralised control can erode progress in local governance, hinder sustainable transformation, and challenge the practical application of decentralisation in the region.

In Kenya and Tanzania, decentralisation has enhanced service delivery, but also created tensions in the balance of power between central and local governments. In Kenya, reforms have notably improved healthcare and education access in rural communities (Barasa et al., 2017). Yet, the central government retains significant control over funding and policy decisions, which restricts the autonomy of local authorities (Kisumbe et al., 2024). Tanzania exhibits a similar dynamic where decentralisation coexists with strong central oversight. The central government's dominance over local government finances limits local officials' capacity to address community-specific needs effectively (Kessy & McCourt, 2010; Kessy, 2011). This tension reveals a complex decentralisation-recentralisation paradox, highlighting the challenges of empowering local governments while maintaining national coherence (Cheeseman et al., 2016; Pastory, 2014). Such findings suggest that while decentralisation can drive improvements in public services, its success depends heavily on the degree of fiscal and administrative autonomy granted to local entities, as excessive central control undermines local responsiveness and innovation.

In Uganda, the decentralisation-recentralisation paradox reflects a strategic effort by the central government to retain control over power and resources, thereby constraining the intended advantages of decentralisation (Lambright, 2014). This paradox reveals inherent tensions among the fundamental elements of decentralisation, such as participation, accountability, and efficiency (Green, 2008). Scholarly work highlights this issue as a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that requires more nuanced investigation (Green, 2010). Despite extensive scholarly discourse, substantial knowledge gaps persist. The effects of decentralisation and recentralisation on participation, accountability, and service delivery within Uganda's governance framework remain insufficiently understood (Tapscott, 2017). Notably, empirical studies addressing these impacts are sparse, creating a critical void in the literature (Green, 2013). Existing research tends to

emphasise theoretical and conceptual perspectives, often relying heavily on quantitative methods that inadequately capture the intricate realities of decentralisation and recentralisation processes (Faguet, 2021). Such methodological limitations hinder a comprehensive understanding of the paradox and its practical implications for governance outcomes, underscoring the need for more diverse and context-sensitive research approaches.

Existing research pays limited attention to Uganda's historical and political context. This omission weakens understanding of how decentralisation and recentralisation evolve within the country's governance structures (Kiwanuka et al., 2022). Analyses often abstract complex realities into generalised frameworks that miss the nuanced influences shaping local governance. Empirical investigations into how decentralisation affects participation, accountability, and service delivery remain limited, leaving significant gaps in evidence (Curtale et al., 2016). Broader political and institutional factors, including power struggles, weak local institutions, and overlapping mandates, shape these processes yet receive little focused scrutiny.

Comparative insights across similar contexts could enhance understanding of these dynamics, although current studies rarely integrate such perspectives in depth. Dominant narratives often overlook how central and local actors contest authority, negotiate autonomy, and manage competing interests. Within Uganda, these tensions have produced a fluid and unstable balance between centralised control and localised governance. The decentralisation-recentralisation dynamic reflects not only administrative adjustments, but also broader political agendas and institutional pressures, which continue to shape governance outcomes in practice (Kiwanuka et al., 2022; Curtale et al., 2016).

Despite extensive literature on decentralisation and recentralisation in Africa, major gaps persist in understanding their deeper dynamics (Logan, 2011; D'Arcy & Cornell, 2016). Cases from Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania show both the promise and the shortcomings of decentralisation reforms, yet cross-country comparative analysis remains limited. This restricts broader insights into shared obstacles and structural patterns. Longitudinal studies are also scarce, weakening the evidence base on the sustainability and long-term consequences of decentralisation policies. Traditional authorities continue to shape governance in many African contexts, but their role in decentralisation processes is often underexplored (Logan, 2011). Similarly, the experiences of marginalised groups—particularly women, youth, and ethnic minorities—receive minimal attention despite their critical importance to inclusive governance (Rigon et al., 2020). These gaps reflect a broader tendency to focus on formal institutions while sidelining informal and social dimensions of governance. This study focuses on how Uganda explores the evolving relationship between decentralisation and recentralisation. Using qualitative analysis of existing data, it investigates how competing agendas, power dynamics, and institutional arrangements shape the outcomes of these reforms.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach to examine the decentralisation-recentralisation paradox in Uganda. The research focused on understanding the historical, political, and institutional dynamics shaping the interaction between decentralisation and recentralisation. A literature review methodology guided the process, drawing on peer-reviewed academic journals, policy documents, legal texts, and institutional reports published between 2010 and 2025 (Green, 2015; Tapscott, 2017). Secondary data analysis formed the basis of the research design, enabling a critical exploration of existing knowledge without direct fieldwork. This approach provided access to a wide range of sources, offering a comprehensive and contextualised understanding of Uganda's decentralisation experience. The researchers emphasise synthesising findings from multiple disciplines and perspectives to capture the multidimensional nature of governance reforms.

Data collection involved a systematic review of literature from sources such as Public Administration and Development, African Affairs, and the Journal of Eastern African Studies. Relevant legal frameworks, including the Uganda's Local Governments Act. The researcher analysed the Decentralisation Policy alongside reports from the World Bank, IMF, Uganda Bureau of Statistics, and Uganda's Ministry of Local Government. The researcher consulted databases including Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Scopus to locate relevant studies and grey literature (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2015) and employed documentary and content analysis methods to evaluate official policies, reform strategies, and governance outcomes (Bowen, 2009). This enabled the identification of key themes, recurring challenges, and institutional patterns within the decentralisation-recentralisation discourse.

Data analysis followed a thematic and content-based strategy, incorporating tools such as NVivo and Atlas.ti to facilitate coding and organisation of textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thematic analysis helped uncover connections between decentralisation practices and broader political developments, while content analysis supported a structured examination of legal and policy texts (Krippendorff, 2018). A contextual framework allowed the research to situate governance reforms within Uganda's evolving political economy, while a comparative lens introduced insights from similar regional cases (Makara, 2018). The researcher analysed the functionality, capacity, and autonomy of local governments through institutional analysis, while evaluating power relations among the central government, local authorities, and citizens using a decentralisation–recentralisation framework (Tapscott, 2017).

Themes such as democratic participation, administrative efficiency, fiscal control, and local autonomy were central to the analysis. Coding of the data focused on identifying how policy intentions aligned—or diverged—from implementation realities. The role of informal power structures, political patronage, and elite interests emerged as recurrent themes across the literature. The content analysis of legal documents and academic studies revealed both structural enablers and

constraints within Uganda's decentralisation model. Although the use of secondary data limited the ability to capture real-time developments or community-level perspectives, the study benefited from the breadth and depth of existing research. This methodological framework provided a robust foundation for analysing the evolving governance landscape in Uganda.

Ethical considerations guided every stage of the research process, despite the exclusive reliance on secondary data. The study upheld the principles of academic integrity, transparency, and accountability in the collection, interpretation, and citation of sources (Tracy, 2019). The researcher obtained all materials from publicly accessible and reputable sources, ensuring proper referencing to respect intellectual property rights. Findings were carefully and accurately represented to avoid misinterpretation or selective reporting. While human subjects were not directly involved, sensitivity to the political context of Uganda remained essential, especially in analysing documents related to government authority, local governance, and public accountability. The researcher consulted multiple sources to verify information, reduce bias, and present a balanced range of perspectives.

4.0 Findings

This study explored the decentralisation- recentralisation paradox in Uganda's governance system, examining the extent of decentralisation, factors driving recentralisation, and implications on governance and service delivery. A qualitative approach was employed, utilising secondary data collection and analysis methods, including document analysis, thematic analysis, and content analysis. The findings are organised into three thematic areas: historical context, driving forces of recentralisation, and the paradox's impact.

Decentralisation and recentralisation in Uganda reveal a deeply intertwined dynamic that shapes governance through persistent tensions between central authority and local autonomy. Though these processes are often framed as opposing, they coexist and interact, reflecting power negotiations within Uganda's postcolonial context (Bandyopadhyay & Green, 2016). The influence of colonial administrative structures remains visible, reinforcing centralised control while nominally promoting local participation. Despite policies aimed at devolving power, Uganda's central government maintains dominance through fiscal and administrative constraints, thereby weakening local governments and limiting their functional independence (Tapscott, 2017). Local authorities often lack adequate resources and decision-making power, reducing their capacity to meet community needs or pursue meaningful development strategies. This imbalance is further intensified by uneven economic investment, as underfunded infrastructure and service delivery obstruct local economic growth and reinforce dependency on central allocations (Lewis, 2018). These patterns demonstrate a governance system in which decentralisation functions more as a symbolic gesture than a substantive reform, reflecting a deliberate calibration of authority

instead of an authentic redistribution of power. Such arrangements reflect broader struggles over legitimacy, control, and state-building in Uganda's contemporary political landscape.

Uganda's decentralisation policy sought to enhance participation, accountability, and service delivery by transferring authority and resources to local governments (Mulumba et al., 2021). Yet recent developments indicate a reversal, with the central government reclaiming influence over vital sectors such as health, education, and finance. Advocates for this shift argue that it improves coordination, ensures uniform standards, and strengthens oversight. Critics, however, contend that it erodes local autonomy and restricts citizens' engagement in governance, weakening democratic accountability (Ngabirano, 2020). This evolving interplay between decentralisation and recentralisation reveals a governance model shaped by shifting political incentives and institutional fragility. Power struggles between national and local actors reflect broader tensions over control and legitimacy, often driven by the central government's desire to manage political risk and maintain authority (Mulumba et al., 2021). While decentralisation was initially framed as a tool for grassroots empowerment, its implementation has faced constraints that limit its transformative potential. These include unclear mandates, resource gaps, and inconsistent policy enforcement. As a result, the state's attempt to balance local responsiveness with central oversight continues to shape Uganda's governance trajectory in complex and contested ways.

Uganda's decentralisation–recentralisation paradox reveals a complex and contested governance landscape shaped by many intersecting forces. At its core lie ongoing power struggles between national and local authorities, as both sides compete for control over resources and decision-making (Tapscott, 2017). Institutional weaknesses, such as limited technical capacity, poor coordination, and uneven resource distribution, have constrained the effectiveness of local governance and justified recentralisation (Titeca, 2018). National security concerns and political interests have further strengthened the central government's role, often at the expense of local autonomy. The reassertion of central authority is most evident in key sectors such as education, health, and finance. Here, strategic control is presented as essential for national coherence and stability. However, these shifts have weakened local governments' ability to plan, allocate, and manage resources in ways that reflect local priorities. The result is a governance system where decentralisation remains more rhetorical than functional, constrained by structural limitations and shaped by political calculations that prioritize control over empowerment.

Power dynamics between Uganda's central government and local authorities continue to shape the country's governance landscape, with recentralisation gaining momentum as a response to contested authority and administrative challenges. The central government's efforts to retain control over key decisions and resource allocation often manifest through direct intervention in local development initiatives, bypassing established local government structures and limiting their operational autonomy (Chigwata & Ziswa, 2018). This pattern reflects not only a political

desire to consolidate influence but also a response to persistent institutional and capacity deficits at the local level. Many local governments struggle with inadequate technical expertise, weak financial management, and limited human resources, hindering their ability to effectively carry out decentralised responsibilities (Katusiimeh et al., 2024). These deficiencies reinforce dependency on the central government, creating a cycle where limited local capacity justifies further central intervention. As a result, the decentralisation agenda in Uganda has become constrained by a governance logic that favours central oversight over meaningful devolution, raising critical questions about the viability and intent of local empowerment within the current institutional framework.

National interests and security concerns play a critical role in driving recentralisation in Uganda. The central government prioritises national stability, tightening its grip on key sectors such as defence, internal security, and foreign affairs (Tapscott, 2017). Economic interests, patronage networks, and clientelism further reinforce this central control. International donor influence also shapes governance patterns, often reinforcing central government dominance rather than local empowerment. Rapid urbanisation and demographic shifts add complexity to governance, prompting the state to recentralise functions to manage emerging challenges effectively. Technological advancements influence power distribution by reshaping communication and surveillance capacities, often favouring centralised oversight.

Moreover, limited civic engagement weakens local accountability and participation, indirectly supporting recentralisation (Lewis, 2014). These interconnected factors form a web of influences that together fuel the recentralisation trend in Uganda. The convergence of political, economic, social, and technological drivers creates a multifaceted governance environment, where recentralisation reflects a response to both perceived threats and practical governance challenges rather than a simple policy reversal. Recentralisation in Uganda profoundly affects the country's governance framework by undermining local government autonomy. It also curbs citizen participation and accountability, weakening the overall effectiveness of decentralisation (Katusiimeh et al., 2024). Economic interests strongly influence this trend, as the central government seeks to control lucrative sectors like oil, gas, mining, and forestry to maximise revenue and consolidate economic power (Makara, 2018). Patronage and clientelism further entrench recentralisation, with central politicians and bureaucrats using control to maintain networks by distributing jobs, contracts, and other benefits to loyal supporters (Kasozi, 2013).

Additionally, limited civic engagement diminishes public pressure for decentralisation, enabling the central government to reassert authority with little resistance (Kabwegyere, 2009). These factors create a complex and multifaceted environment where recentralisation reflects overlapping political, institutional, and economic dynamics. Power struggles, weak institutions, national priorities, and economic interests shape governance, limiting meaningful decentralisation and

reinforcing central government dominance (Rugeiyamu & Msendo, 2025; Galukande-Kiganda et al., 2024; Michael et al., 2022; Tapscott, 2017). The decentralisation–recentralisation paradox in Uganda significantly affects local governance by shifting power and control back to the central government, thereby weakening local government autonomy. This shift limits local authorities' capacity to address community-specific needs and development priorities effectively (Atisa et al., 2021). As a result, service delivery suffers, and development outcomes remain poor. The erosion of local decision-making authority also undermines democratic governance, reducing citizen participation in decision-making and weakening accountability mechanisms (Yilmaz et al., 2010). This disconnect between citizens and local governance processes diminishes public ownership and engagement in development efforts.

Service delivery inefficiencies become more evident as local governments face significant challenges in managing key sectors such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure (Ricart-Huguet & Sellars, 2021). The recentralisation trend disrupts the intended benefits of decentralisation, creating a governance environment where local institutions are constrained, and public services fail to meet community demands. This dynamic underscores the difficulty of balancing central control with local empowerment in Uganda's governance system. The decentralisation-recentralisation paradox disrupts local governance in multiple critical ways. Citizens often disengage from public affairs, as they perceive limited influence over decision-making, reducing civic participation and weakening democratic processes (Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2017). Disparities in resource allocation persist, as certain local governments secure more support than others, deepening structural inequalities (Michael et al., 2022; Tapscott, 2017). This uneven distribution contributes to inefficient resource use and hinders equitable service delivery. Accountability mechanisms also erode, with transparency faltering under blurred lines of authority between central and local administrations (Anayochukwu et al., 2022; Kimengsi & Akhere, 2017).

In addition, the paradox impairs local economic development, as centralised control limits the responsiveness and agility of local institutions (Tangri & Mwenda, 2019). Capacity building stagnates, reinforcing a cycle of dependency on central authorities, which in turn weakens institutional resilience and trust at the community level (Dickovick & Wunsch, 2014). The constrained policy space further restricts the autonomy of local governments, reducing their flexibility to tailor solutions to specific local contexts (Smoke, 2015; Michael et al., 2022).

5.0 Discussion

The decentralisation-recentralisation paradox in Uganda continues to provoke active discourse among scholars and policymakers, reflecting divergent views on governance, efficiency, and accountability. Supporters of recentralisation maintain that stronger central oversight is essential to address persistent inefficiencies in local service delivery and to enhance the effective use of public resources (Tapscott, 2017; Mwesigwa et al., 2022). They argue that the central government must

protect national priorities and promote a fairer distribution of resources. This is especially important in regions with weak administrative capacity (Anayochukwu et al., 2022). However, critics warn that recentralisation reduces local government autonomy and undermines the progress made under earlier decentralisation reforms. These reforms had strengthened participatory governance and improved responsiveness to community needs (Green, 2015; Dickovick & Wunsch, 2014). They emphasise that central dominance may lead to bureaucratic inefficiencies and reduce space for innovation at the local level (Smoke, 2015). This ongoing tension reflects broader concerns about balancing state control with local empowerment, especially in contexts where political and fiscal decentralisation remain uneven and contested (Michael et al., 2022; Tapley et al., 2022).

Classical decentralisation theory argues that devolving power enhances participatory governance, improves service delivery, and promotes efficient resource use (Smoke, 2015). Yet, Uganda's recentralisation trend raises questions about the practical application of these ideals. The central government has increasingly reclaimed authority in areas once delegated to local governments, particularly in sectors such as education, health, and finance (Tapscott, 2017; Michael et al., 2022). This reassertion often comes through tighter control over fiscal transfers, administrative oversight, and policy direction, leaving local governments with limited decision-making power (Mwesigwa et al., 2022). While proponents may view this shift as a response to inefficiencies or weak local capacity, critics see it as a systematic erosion of decentralisation's foundational goals (Anayochukwu et al., 2022). Research indicates that this pattern has reduced local governments to administrative units rather than autonomous entities capable of planning and implementing context-specific development (Green, 2015). As recentralisation advances, it increasingly undermines the core principles of classical decentralisation theory, particularly in fragile governance contexts where political and fiscal asymmetries shape central–local relations (Tapley et al., 2022; Dickovick & Wunsch, 2018).

Recentralisation has emerged as a strategic move by central governments seeking to reassert authority over critical sectors while addressing what are perceived as persistent inefficiencies in local service delivery (Tapscott, 2017). This shift, while framed as a corrective mechanism, has raised substantial concerns regarding its broader implications for democratic governance. Scholars contend that these centralising tendencies threaten to undermine the core objectives of decentralisation, especially its commitment to participatory governance and the delivery of locally responsive public services (Chen et al., 2021; Derow, 2021). The retraction of power from local authorities not only narrows opportunities for civic engagement, but also tends to centralise decision-making in ways that obscure accountability structures and deepen regional inequalities (Tapscott, 2017; Chen et al., 2021). Moreover, critics contend that recentralisation often unfolds under the guise of efficiency, yet lacks sufficient empirical support demonstrating clear gains in service outcomes (Tsofa et al., 2017). As a result, the ongoing tension between central oversight and local autonomy continues to provoke critical debate within governance scholarship, particularly

concerning its long-term impact on democratic practices and equitable development (Chen et al., 2021; Faguet, 2014).

The decentralisation-recentralisation paradox in Uganda has significantly strained the quality and responsiveness of public service delivery, exposing tensions between central authority and local autonomy. As local governments lose discretion over resources and decision-making, the ability to tailor services to community-specific needs diminishes, fostering inefficiencies and citizen dissatisfaction (Efriandi et al., 2019; Golooba-Mutebi & Hickey, 2016). This dynamic not only weakens democratic accountability, but also disrupts the intended participatory framework that underpinned initial decentralisation reforms (Ibrahim, 2024). While recentralisation may be justified by concerns over corruption or capacity at local levels, its unchecked expansion has constrained meaningful local engagement and skewed developmental priorities away from grassroots realities (Obonyo & Muhumuza, 2023; Green, 2015). The governance system faces growing challenges as the erosion of local authority undermines trust in institutions and destabilises the delicate balance needed for effective policy implementation and political legitimacy (Ojok & Kiwanuka-Tondo, 2024; Tapscott, 2017). The long-term effects of these shifts suggest an ongoing struggle between central control and democratic localism. This leads to implications that ripple through public administration, state–citizen relations, and national development planning.

The recent trend of renewed centralisation in Uganda demonstrates the central government's deliberate effort to reassert authority over key sectors. This is driven by concerns about perceived inefficiencies and performance gaps in local service delivery systems (Tapscott, 2017; Biryomumeisho et al., 2024). Although presented as a response to mismanagement, this shift has substantially eroded the foundational principles of decentralisation. It limits local governments' decision-making authority and reduces opportunities for meaningful citizen participation (Mulumba et al., 2021; Bataringaya & Mbabazi, 2019). The reassertion of central government fiscal and administrative control has disrupted the delivery of essential services at the local level. This is particularly evident in sectors such as health, education, and infrastructure, where responsiveness to local needs remains crucial (Biryomumeisho et al., 2024).

Increased central oversight has constrained the ability of local councils to innovate, allocate resources strategically, and maintain meaningful engagement with their constituencies (Ojok & Kiwanuka-Tondo, 2024; Golooba-Mutebi & Hickey, 2016). This centralising trend raises critical concerns about the long-term viability of participatory governance and the degree to which recentralisation reflects a pursuit of political dominance rather than administrative efficiency (Green, 2015). The shifting distribution of power signals a deeper contestation over institutional authority, public accountability, and the legitimacy of governance structures within Uganda's evolving political and administrative framework.

The decentralisation-recentralisation paradox in Uganda has constrained citizen participation

and weakened accountability within the governance system. This concentration of control by the central government fosters dependency among local communities, diminishing their autonomy and capacity to act independently (Beeri, 2023; Kiwanuka et al., 2022). As a result, local governments face significant obstacles in driving economic development, creating employment, and alleviating poverty, since their diminished autonomy limits responsive and context-specific initiatives (Madinah et al., 2015; Katusiimeh et al., 2022). The dynamic tension between decentralisation's promise of empowerment and recentralisation's practical constraints challenges the effectiveness of governance reforms in Uganda. It further reveals complex structural and political factors that inhibit the realisation of local development goals (Green, 2013). This paradox requires a nuanced understanding to grasp how centralised fiscal and administrative control shapes local governance outcomes in the country.

Research indicates that decentralisation has enhanced service delivery in Uganda, especially in healthcare and education sectors, by allowing local governments to address specific community needs more effectively (Makara, 2012; Kasozi, 2018). This localised approach has improved both efficiency and responsiveness in public service provision (Johnson, 2023; Kakumba, 2010). However, recentralisation has undermined these gains by shifting control and resources back to the central government, which has disrupted service continuity and reduced the quality of public services in critical areas like health and education (Ssonko, 2013; Lwanga, 2016). The tension between decentralisation and recentralisation creates a paradox that weakens service delivery, restricts citizen engagement and accountability, and impedes efforts toward economic growth and poverty alleviation (Omweri, 2014). This ongoing challenge shows how fluctuating governance structures influence the effectiveness of local administrations and their ability to meet public needs in Uganda.

Furthermore, some argue that recentralisation represents the central government's strategic effort to consolidate control over resources and key sectors like healthcare and education. This restricts local government autonomy (Mwesigwa et al., 2022; Tapscott, 2017; Green, 2013). This perspective shows how such control undermines decentralisation's intended benefits, including enhanced citizen participation and improved governance outcomes (Makara, 2012). Conversely, others contend that recentralisation addresses inefficiencies and inconsistencies in local service delivery. This aligns local actions with national priorities and improves service quality (Kasozi, 2019; Tapscott, 2017). These scholars emphasise the pragmatic need for central oversight to ensure coherent development strategies across regions (Awortwi, 2011). This ongoing dialogue underscores the complexity of balancing power between central and local governments. It exposes the tensions and trade-offs inherent in Uganda's governance structure and its implications for sustainable development.

Research from various African countries sheds light on the decentralisation-recentralisation

paradox beyond Uganda's borders. In Ghana, decentralisation has improved citizen participation and service delivery, but recentralisation trends have appeared as the central government reclaims control over vital sectors (Arkorful et al., 2021; Ayee, 2015). South Africa presents a similar pattern, where decentralisation initially strengthened democratic governance and local service provision. However, recentralisation efforts have diminished local governments' autonomy and effectiveness (Muzekenyi et al., 2022; Enaifoghe & Cotties, 2019). Meanwhile, studies in Kenya and Tanzania reveal that recentralisation has often compromised decentralisation's benefits, leading to inefficiencies and weakened service delivery (Kiambati, 2020; Tsofa et al., 2017). These cross-country experiences indicate that the paradox is widespread in the African context. It reflects the common governance challenges tied to power dynamics between central and local authorities. Understanding these patterns is key to recognising how decentralisation and recentralisation influence governance and service outcomes across the region.

The study's findings, particularly as presented in *Factors Influencing Recentralisation of Local Government Functions in Uganda*, demonstrate that since approximately 2003, the central government has actively undermined decentralisation by reclaiming key administrative and fiscal powers. It has centralised the appointment of critical officials—such as Chief Administrative Officers and Town Clerks—previously under the mandate of district and local commissions. Additionally, it has recentralised control over payroll systems, local revenue collection, and drug procurement, transferring responsibilities from district-level institutions to national bodies like the National Medical Stores. The governance of Kampala has similarly shifted, with administrative authority consolidated under a centrally appointed Executive Director.

These reversals undermine institutional autonomy, local responsiveness, and financial agency that are central to Uganda Vision 2040's strategic pillars, particularly "Governance" and "Strengthening Fundamentals for Harnessing Opportunities" such as human resource development and decentralised service delivery. Vision 2040 envisions an upper-middle-income, modern, and prosperous society founded on strong institutions, democracy, and the rule of law. Local government development plans are coordinated under the NPA and implemented with participatory input from local governments (National Planning Authority, 2007; New Vision, 2025). When local governments are deprived of power to manage technical staffing or local revenues, the capacity to deliver on flagship projects (like regional cities, infrastructure, and referral hospitals) is weakened. The practice of recentralisation thus creates a mismatch between Vision 2040's targets (e.g. improved local service delivery, equitable development, skilled human resources, infrastructure across regions) and the practical constraints local governments face due to curtailed authority (Biryomumeisho et al., 2024; New Vision, 2025).

The African Charter on the Values and Principles of Decentralisation, Local Governance and Local Development provides legal and normative standards that bear strongly on the study's findings.

The Charter, which came into force in 2019, requires member states to adopt domestic laws recognising different levels of government with clearly defined competencies. It also mandates that local governments manage their finances and administration through democratically elected assemblies and mobilise resources for local development with transparency and accountability (AU, 2014/2019). The study's evidence that key decisionmaking powers have shifted back to central bodies—e.g. CAO appointment powers now handled by Public Service Commission rather than District Service Commissions, local revenue collection controlled centrally—contradicts those principles. Such recentralisation dilutes downward accountability, making local governments more answerable to central authorities than to citizens. It also undermines transparency, blurs public financial management lines, and may violate the Charter's expectation that central governments adopt measures to support local governments' resource mobilisation and autonomous administration (AU, 2014/2019; Biryomumeisho et al., 2024). Several examples illustrate how policymakers and practitioners can address this paradox and better align with Vision 2040 and the Charter. For example, allowing local governments to collect and manage their own revenues directly - rather than relying on centralised transfers - would enable them to plan, budget, and respond more effectively to local priorities.

Reinstating or sharing authority over the appointment of key technical officers- such as Chief Administrative Officers and Town or Municipal Clerks- would restore their capacity to recruit personnel aligned with local development needs. Ensuring financial transparency requires the provision of predictable, unconditional grants to reduce overreliance on conditional transfers that often limit flexibility.

Strengthening institutional capacity within local governments- particularly in areas such as financial management, procurement, planning, monitoring, and accountability - would enhance their operational efficiency. Establishing robust oversight and bottom-up accountability mechanisms, including regular reporting to local councils and the public, would improve transparency and trust. Furthermore, revisiting and amending existing legal and regulatory frameworks—such as the Local Government Act and Public Service Commission regulations—would help institutionalise the core principles of the African Charter, including clearly defined competencies, local autonomy, and fiscal decentralisation, while constraining the potential for unchecked recentralisation. Implementing pilots in selected districts to test restored decentralisation could help demonstrate benefits before scaling.

5.1 Conclusion

The decentralisation–recentralisation paradox in Uganda's governance system poses a complex challenge that deeply shapes the country's political and developmental path. Decentralisation reforms aim to enhance local autonomy and improve service delivery, but recentralisation trends have undermined these efforts, concentrating power and resources at the central government level.

This concentration restricts local governments' capacity to address community-specific needs and weakens the broader goals of decentralisation. Several factors drive this paradox, including political and economic interests that favour central control, institutional weaknesses that hinder effective decentralisation, and limited citizen participation that reduces accountability. The resulting tension between decentralisation and recentralisation disrupts local governance structures, weakens public oversight, and complicates efforts to deliver services and public goods. These disruptions generate inefficiencies and slow progress toward economic development and poverty reduction. Examining this paradox sheds light on the complex dynamics involved in balancing power within Uganda's governance framework, emphasising the critical importance of fostering governance systems that are responsive, accountable, and capable of supporting sustainable development goals throughout the country.

5.1.1 Contributions of the Study

This study offers fresh perspectives on the intricate relationship between decentralisation and recentralisation within Uganda's governance system. It deepens understanding of how shifts in power between central and local governments influence governance quality and development outcomes. The findings highlight the critical role of decentralisation in promoting local autonomy and citizen participation, emphasising its potential to improve service delivery and accountability. By exploring these dynamics, the study adds valuable insights to existing scholarship, reinforcing the importance of participatory governance. It also provides a nuanced view of the challenges faced in balancing authority, which is essential for effective policy and practice formulation in Uganda.

The analysis reveals how recentralisation, through the concentration of power and resources at the central level, compromises the benefits that decentralisation aims to achieve. This recentralisation limits local governments' capacity to respond to community needs, diminishing service quality and citizen engagement. Such dynamics expose persistent tensions across governance levels, hindering progress toward inclusive development. Beyond academic contributions, the study offers a conceptual framework that aids policymakers and practitioners in understanding and navigating the decentralisation-recentralisation paradox. It underscores the complexities involved in achieving effective governance and sustainable development in Uganda.

5.1.2 Recommendations

Based on the study's findings and analysis, the following recommendations and strategies aim to address the decentralisation–recentralisation paradox in Uganda:

5.1.2.1 Practical Recommendations

Strengthening local government institutions requires targeted efforts to develop the administrative

and technical skills of local officials. Establishing a national training institute dedicated to local government capacity building can provide ongoing training programmes. These programmes would equip officials with the knowledge and skills needed to manage local affairs effectively and efficiently. Enhancing local government capacity creates a foundation for stronger governance, improved service delivery, and institutions that respond professionally and competently to community needs. Enhancing citizen participation and accountability calls for the development of structured participatory governance mechanisms. Introducing tools like citizen report cards and social audits encourages public involvement in evaluating local government performance. Establishing a national citizen participation framework can set clear guidelines and standards for meaningful citizen engagement. This framework supports transparency and responsiveness by ensuring citizens have platforms to voice concerns and hold local officials accountable, fostering a more inclusive governance environment that respects and incorporates public input.

Promoting transparency and accountability in governance involves creating robust mechanisms to monitor and report on government activities. Implementing open budgeting and procurement processes increases visibility in financial decisions, reducing opportunities for corruption. Coupling these practices with strong accountability measures, including empowered anti-corruption bodies, reinforces the integrity of public institutions. Establishing a national transparency and accountability framework can provide comprehensive guidelines that standardise these efforts across government levels, ensuring consistent application of transparency principles and strengthening trust between government and citizens.

5.1.2.2 Policy Recommendations

The government needs to review and revise the current decentralisation policy framework to address core issues driving the decentralisation-recentralisation paradox. A key problem lies in the unclear division of roles and responsibilities between central and local governments, which creates confusion and inefficiency. Establishing a national decentralisation policy review committee could provide a structured approach to reassessing and updating the policy framework. This committee would focus on clarifying governance roles and enhancing coordination, thereby strengthening the foundations for effective decentralisation and reducing the tensions that fuel recentralisation.

Building a decentralised governance system requires empowering local governments to make decisions and take responsibility for their communities. Establishing a national decentralised governance framework can guide this process by defining clear principles and practices for participatory governance and accountability. This framework would help promote transparency and responsiveness by giving local authorities the mandate and tools to engage citizens meaningfully. Empowered local governments could better reflect community needs and enhance democratic participation, fostering governance that is both inclusive and accountable.

Securing adequate resources and funding is essential for the successful implementation of decentralisation reforms and the strengthening of local government institutions. Creating a national decentralisation fund would provide a dedicated financial mechanism to support these efforts consistently. This fund could enable local governments to build capacity, deliver essential services, and sustain decentralisation initiatives. Ensuring reliable financial support would reinforce the structural changes needed to move decentralisation forward, enabling local governments to operate effectively and fulfil their roles in governance and development.

5.1.2.3 Future Research Directions

Future research must explore innovative ways to strengthen local governance, especially through ICT-based platforms that can enhance citizen participation and improve governance processes. Creating a national research institute focused on local governance would provide a dedicated space to investigate such innovative mechanisms. This institute could examine how technology facilitates engagement, transparency, and responsiveness in local government, offering new tools to bridge gaps between authorities and communities. By focusing on digital solutions, future studies can contribute to more dynamic and inclusive governance structures that adapt to changing societal needs.

Investigating the effects of fiscal decentralisation on local government performance also demands attention. Understanding how financial autonomy influences service delivery and accountability is critical for improving governance outcomes. Establishing a national research institute on fiscal decentralisation would enable targeted analysis of budgetary processes, funding allocation, and fiscal management at the local level. This research could reveal the strengths and weaknesses of current fiscal policies and identify ways to optimise resource distribution, ensuring local governments have the capacity and incentives to meet community needs effectively.

The role of civil society organisations in enhancing local governance deserves deeper examination as well. These organisations often serve as vital links between citizens and government, promoting participation and ensuring accountability. Setting up a national research institute dedicated to studying civil society's contributions could shed light on their impact and potential. Research can clarify the role of these organisations in supporting more democratic and responsive local governance by analysing how they mobilise citizens, advocate for transparency, and hold officials accountable.

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