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DECENTRALIZATION AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED AREAS OF YOBE STATE

By

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Abstract
Yobe State, located in the volatile and vulnerable Northeast region of Nigeria, has borne the brunt of the protracted Boko Haram insurgency, resulting in widespread devastation of infrastructure, displacement of populations, and a significant disruption of social and governance structures. It is noteworthy that the Boko Haram conflict has not only resulted in immense human suffering and physical destruction but has also severely eroded the capacity of local government institutions to deliver essential services, maintain law and order, and foster community development. The displacement of skilled personnel, the destruction of administrative buildings, and the breakdown of traditional authority structures have created a significant governance deficit at the grassroots level. As the state gradually transitions towards a post-conflict phase, the imperative for effective rebuilding and the restoration of functional governance at the local level becomes paramount.This research seeks to investigate the complex interplay between these two critical dynamics - decentralisation and local governance - within the specific context of conflict-affected areas of Yobe State. The main objective of the study is the critical analysis of the impact of decentralisation policies on local governance and post-conflict recovery in conflict-affected areas of Yobe State, Nigeria.

This qualitative study Uses purposive and snowball sampling, data were collected through Key Informant Interviews with local government officials and traditional rulers, as well as Focus Group Discussions with residents and civil society representatives. Thematic analysis, supported by Qualitative Data Analysis Miner Lite, revealed a complex and often contradictory picture of decentralization's implementation and perceived effects. The findings indicate that while decentralization is seen as a vital tool for rebuilding public trust and fostering a sense of community ownership, its operationalization is significantly hindered by a legacy of insecurity. Participants' responses highlighted a profound erosion of authority, the destruction of critical infrastructure, and a centralizing security-first approach to governance that has sidelined development. The findings also reveal a prevailing fear of local-level corruption and marginalization of minority groups. The paper concludes that for decentralization to be an effective strategy for post-conflict recovery, it must be supported by phased fiscal and administrative autonomy, targeted capacity-building, and constitutional reforms that recognize traditional institutions. A strategic rebalancing of governance from security to development is essential to rebuild public confidence and ensure that the benefits of decentralization are fully realized at the grassroots level.

Keywords: Decentralization, Local-Governance, Conflict, Peace,

Introduction

Yobe State, located in the volatile Northeast region of Nigeria, has borne the brunt of the protracted Boko Haram insurgency, resulting in widespread devastation of infrastructure, displacement of populations, and a significant disruption of social and governance structures. As the state gradually transitions towards a post-conflict phase, the imperative for effective

rebuilding and the restoration of functional governance at the local level becomes paramount. This need coincides with a broader national movement towards decentralisation and the strengthening of local government autonomy in Nigeria. This research seeks to investigate the complex interplay between these two critical dynamics - decentralisation and local governance - within the specific context of conflict-affected areas due largely to Boko Haram insurgency. conflict has not only resulted in immense human suffering and physical destruction but has also severely eroded the capacity of local government institutions to deliver essential services, maintain law and order, and foster community development. Meyer, (2014).

Decentralisation has featured prominently in the reform agenda of many countries including those in sub-Saharan Africa. A common goal of decentralisation is the strengthening of governance at the sub-national with emphasis on local government and non-state actors in addressing the needs and meeting the aspirations of the people at the locality (Meyer, 2014; European Union, 2016). Although decentralisation and local governance are related concepts and often conflated, they are different. While decentralisation describes the downward shift of administrative, political and fiscal responsibilities to sub-nationalities (Wunsch, 2014) local governance encompasses mechanisms for promoting development at the grassroots, which may involve multiple actors such as government, non-state actors and non-profits organisations (Kauzya, 2003).

Countless arguments in lot of literature hinted that weak economic resources apart from spawning regional disparities, may limit the capacity of subnational institutions in attracting experienced personnel with the requisite knowledge. This, coupled with other factors such as poor financial resources and excessive control by the central government may undermine development at the sub-national level. Similarly, one of the arguments against decentralisation is in the realm of its political ramification. It is argued that because it encourages local autonomy and promotes minorities' interest, it may engender separatist agitations which may undermine the corporate existence of a political community (Mbate, 2017). Furthermore, the absence of will power on the part of national political elites to disperse powers to local institutions or sub-national governments may limit the gains of decentralisation (Cheema & Rondinelli, 2007).

Decentralisation has equally been criticized on the ground that it is about multilayers of government and if there is lack of proper co-ordination by the central government, it may lead to duplication of efforts and increase in the cost of governance. Lack of co-ordination and monitoring on the part of the central government may equally reduce level of accountability at the subnational level. Still on accountability, it has been argued that decentralisation promotes corruption at the subnational level due to a series of factors such as poor accounting practices, ineffective monitoring by central government and elite capture at the local level (Bardhan, 2002).

While deentralisation is seen to have the potential of mitigating local conflicts, it has equally been argued it may spawn contradictions that may spur conflict of different dimensions at the subnational level (Shou & Haug, 2005). The foregoing aptly suggests that despite the amplified virtues of decentralisation, it could spawn some negative contradictions that may undermine its effectiveness. Hence, the success of decentralisation policies depend on how the processes are being managed.

Decentralisation, often advocated as a means of enhancing local participation, responsiveness, and accountability, holds the potential to empower communities in conflict-

affected areas to take ownership of their recovery processes. Increased autonomy could enable local governments to tailor development initiatives to their specific needs, leverage local knowledge and resources, and foster a sense of inclusion among diverse community groups. However, the implementation of decentralisation in a post-conflict setting is fraught with complexities. Issues such as the equitable distribution of resources, the capacity of local government officials to manage increased responsibilities, the potential for elite capture, and the management of lingering social tensions require careful consideration. As evidenced by previous research in the region, including an institutional assessment of Yobe State Local Governments' recovery capacity in a post-conflict setting, adherence to established bureaucratic structures, potentially inherited from colonial administrations, can significantly impede effective governance and recovery efforts, sometimes even more so than a lack of financial resources. This suggests that the success of decentralisation in Yobe State will not solely depend on the devolution of power and resources but also on the reform and adaptation of governance processes to the specific realities of the post-conflict environment.

This research is therefore necessitated by the critical juncture at which Yobe State finds itself. The confluence of a post-conflict rebuilding imperative and a national agenda for decentralisation presents a unique opportunity to examine how these processes can be strategically aligned to foster sustainable peace and development. This study aims to address key questions such as: How is the decentralisation agenda being implemented in conflict-affected areas of Yobe State? What impact is increased local government autonomy having on the effectiveness of local governance, including service delivery, accountability, and citizen participation? What are the key challenges and opportunities that decentralisation presents in the context of post-conflict recovery in the state? And how can decentralisation policies and practices be tailored to best support the rebuilding of destroyed societies and the strengthening of local governance in Yobe State?

By providing an in-depth analysis of these questions through a qualitative approach, this study seeks to contribute valuable empirical evidence and insights that can inform policymakers, practitioners, and local stakeholders involved in decentralisation reforms and post-conflict reconstruction efforts in Yobe State and potentially other similar contexts in Nigeria and beyond. Understanding the dynamics of decentralisation and local governance in this fragile setting is crucial for fostering inclusive governance, promoting community resilience, and laying the foundation for long-term peace and development.

Problem Statement

Yobe State, having endured years of conflict orchestrated by the Boko Haram insurgency, now faces the complex task of rebuilding its society and restoring effective governance. This post-conflict recovery phase coincides with a significant policy shift towards decentralisation and greater local government autonomy across Nigeria. While decentralisation is often touted as a mechanism for improved service delivery, enhanced accountability, and increased citizen participation, its implementation in a context as fragile and complex as post-conflict Yobe State presents unique challenges and its impact remains largely unexplored.

The Boko Haram conflict has severely weakened local governance structures in the state. The destruction of public infrastructure, the displacement of skilled personnel, and the erosion of trust between citizens and government have created a substantial governance deficit. Rebuilding effective local governance is crucial for the sustainable recovery of Yobe State, Major questions remain unanswered regarding the capacity of local governments to effectively manage increased responsibilities and resources in a post-conflict environment, the mechanisms for ensuring accountability and transparency, and the extent to which

decentralisation is fostering inclusive participation and addressing the specific needs of conflict-affected communities.

Understanding the impact of decentralisation on local governance in conflict-affected Yobe State is not merely an academic exercise. The findings of this research will have significant practical implications for policymakers at both the national and state levels, as well as for development practitioners and local stakeholders involved in post-conflict reconstruction and governance strengthening initiatives.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to critically analyze the impact of decentralisation policies on local governance and post-conflict recovery in conflict-affected areas of Yobe State, Nigeria. The specific objectives are:

i. To assess the current level of implementation and operationalization of decentralisation policies within selected Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Yobe State that have been significantly affected by conflict.
ii. To evaluate the perceived impact of decentralisation on the effectiveness of local governance in these conflict-affected areas, focusing on aspects such as service delivery, accountability, transparency, and citizen participation.
iii. To identify the key challenges and opportunities presented by decentralisation for fostering post-conflict recovery, peacebuilding, and sustainable development at the local level in Yobe State.

Literature Review

2.1 Implementation and Operationalisation of Decentralisation Policies in Conflict Affected Local Governments in Nigeria

The implementation and operationalisation of decentralisation policies in Nigeria, particularly within local government areas (LGAs) affected by conflict, represent a complex and evolving field of study. This review delves into the recent academic literature to examine the progress, challenges, and implications of decentralisation in these fragile contexts, with a specific focus on local government autonomy and its intricate relationship with post-conflict rebuilding initiatives.

Nigeria has a long history of pursuing decentralisation, albeit with varying degrees of commitment and success (Arowolo, 2018; Ojo, 2020). The 1999 Constitution enshrines a three-tier system of government, with local governments recognised as the third tier. However, the autonomy granted to these local entities has often been constrained by the significant influence of state governments, particularly in areas of fiscal control and administrative decision-making (Agba & Ushie, 2021). Recent literature highlights the persistent struggle for genuine local government autonomy, with debates revolving around issues such as the constitutional clarity of their powers, the allocation of financial resources, and the degree of state oversight (Nnoli et al., 2023).

In conflict-affected regions like those in Northeast Nigeria, including parts of Yobe State, the challenges of operationalising decentralisation are further compounded. The erosion of state authority, the destruction of infrastructure, and the displacement of populations have significantly weakened the capacity of local governments to function effectively (ICG, 2022; United Nations Development Programme, 2019). Studies in these areas often reveal a precarious balance between the need for local-level governance to address immediate

recovery needs and the limitations imposed by ongoing insecurity and the overarching influence of state and federal interventions (Muhammad & Ibrahim, 2024).

The implementation of decentralisation policies in conflict zones presents a unique set of challenges. Literature suggests that in such contexts, the focus often shifts towards security and humanitarian aid, potentially marginalising the long-term goals of strengthening local governance through decentralisation (Okello & Højbjerg, 2020). Research highlights the difficulties in establishing functional local government structures when state legitimacy is contested, and when local populations are displaced or have experienced significant trauma (Flanagan, 2021). Furthermore, the influx of humanitarian actors and the establishment of parallel administrative structures can inadvertently undermine the authority and capacity of local governments (Fast et al., 2023).

However, some scholars argue that decentralisation, if implemented effectively, can play a crucial role in building peace and fostering resilience in conflict-affected areas (Jennings, 2019). By empowering local communities and giving them a greater say in decision-making, decentralisation can contribute to addressing grievances, promoting inclusivity, and fostering a sense of ownership over the recovery process (Fisher & Anderson, 2022). The literature also emphasises the importance of adapting decentralisation policies to the specific context of conflict, recognising the need for flexibility and a phased approach that prioritises immediate needs while building towards long-term institutional strengthening (Lund, 2020).

The relationship between local government autonomy and post-conflict rebuilding initiatives is a critical area of inquiry. Literature suggests that genuine local autonomy, encompassing fiscal, administrative, and political dimensions, is essential for effective post-conflict recovery (Call & Wyeth, 2018). Local governments, being closer to the needs and realities of their communities, are arguably better positioned to identify priorities, allocate resources effectively, and implement rebuilding programmes that are contextually relevant and responsive to local demands (Menocal, 2020).

The interrelation between local government autonomy and post-conflict rebuilding initiatives in Nigeria is further complicated by the legacy of centralised governance and the ongoing security challenges in places like Yobe State. This suggests that even with increased autonomy, local governments may struggle to effectively implement rebuilding initiatives if they remain constrained by outdated and inappropriate bureaucratic systems (Mkandawire, 2017). Moreover, the waning of African alternative dispute resolution mechanisms and the dominance of punitive justice (as also noted in the motivation letter) can further complicate local governance and reconciliation efforts in the aftermath of conflict (Ukiwo, 2019).

2.2 Impact of Decentralisation Policies on the Effectiveness of Local Governance in Conflict Affected Local Governments in Nigeria

Decentralisation as broadly defined as the transfer of authority and responsibility for public functions from the central government to subordinate subnational units (Rodríguez-Pose & Garcilazo, 2015), is often advocated as a tool for enhancing local responsiveness, accountability, and ultimately, governance effectiveness. Local governance, in this context, encompasses the capacity of local authorities to deliver essential services, maintain security, facilitate citizen participation in decision-making, and promote socio-economic development within their jurisdictions (Ribot, 2004). However, the impact of decentralisation on these aspects of local governance becomes particularly complex in areas ravaged by conflict, where pre-existing institutional weaknesses are often exacerbated, and the social fabric is severely damaged (Menocal, 2020).

The effectiveness of decentralisation policies in conflict-affected LGAs is intrinsically linked to post-conflict rebuilding initiatives. Literature suggests that when local governments have genuine autonomy and are adequately resourced, they can play a pivotal role in coordinating and implementing rebuilding programmes that are tailored to local needs (Call & Wyeth, 2018; Menocal, 2020). They can facilitate the reintegration of displaced populations, oversee the reconstruction of infrastructure, and promote reconciliation efforts. However, adherence to centralized practices can significantly impede the ability of even autonomous local governments to effectively manage and implement rebuilding initiatives. This suggests that decentralisation efforts must be accompanied by institutional reforms that address these underlying bureaucratic constraints (Mkandawire, 2017). Furthermore, the literature emphasises the importance of a coordinated approach between different levels of government and other actors involved in post-conflict rebuilding. Lack of clarity in the division of responsibilities and inadequate coordination can lead to duplication of efforts, inefficient resource allocation, and ultimately, undermine the impact of both decentralisation and rebuilding initiatives (Lewis & Mosse, 2023).

Several challenges and constraints hinder the positive impact of decentralisation on local governance in conflict-affected LGAs in Nigeria. Despite decentralisation policies, many LGAs in Nigeria, particularly those affected by conflict, remain heavily reliant on state and federal allocations, limiting their ability to independently finance and implement development and rebuilding projects (Oyedele, 2022). Conflict often leads to a significant loss of skilled personnel within local governments, hindering their capacity to effectively manage devolved responsibilities and implement complex rebuilding programmes (Muhammad & Ibrahim, 2024). Ongoing insecurity in conflict-affected regions can severely restrict the ability of local governments to operate effectively and deliver services to their populations (ICG, 2022). Additionally, weak institutional oversight and the urgency of post-conflict rebuilding can create opportunities for corruption and the capture of resources by local elites, undermining the intended benefits of decentralisation (Heller & Turbitt, 2021). Resultantly, ineffective coordination between different levels of government, humanitarian organisations, and local actors ensues which can lead to fragmented and inefficient responses to the needs of conflict-affected communities (UNDP, 2019).

2.3 Challenges and Opportunities of Decentralisation for Fostering Post-Conflict Recovery

This section critically examines the recent academic literature concerning the challenges and opportunities presented by decentralisation policies for fostering post-conflict recovery, peacebuilding, and sustainable development within conflict-affected Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Nigeria. It specifically analyses how these dynamics are shaped by issues of local government autonomy and their intricate interrelation with post-conflict rebuilding initiatives. Scholars widely acknowledges that decentralisation in post-conflict contexts presents both significant opportunities and considerable challenges (Bösl & Meagher, 2019; Reilly, 2018). On the one hand, decentralisation is often viewed as a crucial mechanism for promoting local ownership of peacebuilding and recovery processes, enhancing the legitimacy and responsiveness of governance, and fostering more inclusive and sustainable development (Gibson, 2015). By empowering local actors and institutions, decentralisation can potentially address local grievances, facilitate the reintegration of ex-combatants and displaced populations, and promote reconciliation at the grassroots level (Lund, 2020). However, the transition to decentralised governance in the aftermath of conflict is fraught with risks. The very factors that make conflict-affected areas vulnerable – weak institutions, deep-seated social divisions, the proliferation of arms, and the absence of trust - can also undermine decentralisation efforts (Heller & Turbitt, 2021). Premature or poorly managed

decentralisation can exacerbate existing inequalities, create new avenues for corruption and elite capture, and even fuel further conflict if not carefully implemented with appropriate safeguards and support (Stepputat, 2017).

The literature highlights several key opportunities presented by decentralisation for fostering post-conflict recovery and sustainable development in conflict-affected LGAs in Nigeria. Decentralisation can empower local communities to identify their specific needs and priorities for recovery and development, leading to more contextually relevant and effective interventions (UNDP, 2019). Increased local autonomy allows for the tailoring of policies and programmes to address the unique challenges faced by different communities within the LGA (Ahmad & Brosio, 2017). By bringing governance closer to the people, decentralisation can foster greater citizen engagement in decision-making processes, thereby enhancing the legitimacy and accountability of local authorities (Fox, 2015; Jennings, 2019). This can be particularly crucial in rebuilding trust between citizens and the state in the aftermath of conflict. Increased fiscal autonomy, a key aspect of decentralisation, can enable local governments to mobilise local resources and allocate them more effectively to address immediate recovery needs and long-term development priorities (Oyedele, 2022). This can reduce reliance on often-delayed or insufficient central government funding. Local governments, with their understanding of the local context, are well-positioned to play a crucial role in the reintegration of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees by providing access to land, housing, and livelihood opportunities (Crisp, 2003). Decentralisation can empower local authorities to design and implement economic recovery programmes that are tailored to the specific strengths and needs of their local economies, fostering sustainable livelihood opportunities for conflict-affected populations (World Bank, 2017).

The degree of local government autonomy is a critical factor influencing the extent to which decentralisation can contribute to post-conflict rebuilding. Genuine autonomy, encompassing fiscal, administrative, and political dimensions, is often argued to be a prerequisite for local governments to effectively plan and implement recovery initiatives that are responsive to local needs (Call & Wyeth, 2018). However, the literature also suggests that autonomy without adequate capacity, resources, and accountability mechanisms can be counterproductive, potentially leading to mismanagement and further instability (Stepputat, 2017). A nuanced approach is therefore required, focusing on a gradual and phased devolution of powers and responsibilities, coupled with targeted support for capacity building and the strengthening of local institutions. This underscores the complex and often contradictory nature of decentralisation in conflict-affected settings like those in Nigeria. While it presents significant opportunities for fostering post-conflict recovery, peacebuilding, and sustainable development by empowering local communities and enhancing the responsiveness of governance, these opportunities are often undermined by a range of challenges, including capacity deficits, security risks, and the potential for exacerbating existing inequalities. The degree of local government autonomy and its effective interrelation with post-conflict rebuilding initiatives are crucial determinants of success.

Findings and Discussions

Implementation and Operationalization of Decentralization Policies

The findings reveal that the implementation and operationalization of decentralization policies in the selected Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Yobe State have been severely hindered by the pervasive impact of the Boko Haram insurgency. While policies may exist on paper, their practical application has been compromised, leading to a significant breakdown

in local governance. The participants' accounts collectively highlight four key themes: the erosion of trust, the destruction of infrastructure, the securitization of governance, and the resulting de-legitimization of local authorities.

The pervasive insecurity and lack of protection during the peak of the Boko Haram insurgency led to a fundamental breakdown in the social contract between the government and its citizens. Participants' statements, such as "Boko Haram at its peak, caused disrespect for authority, to the extent that people don't respect government at local levels," demonstrate a direct link between the security crisis and a loss of faith in local governance. This finding is consistent with the work of O'Regan (2018), who argues that a government's primary function is to provide security and that its failure to do so can lead to a complete erosion of legitimacy and public trust, especially at the local level. The citizens' feeling of being unprotected directly challenged the core premise of decentralization: that local authorities are best placed to serve and protect their communities.

The widespread destruction of essential infrastructure like boreholes, schools, and hospitals - as noted by a participant - undermined the basic capacity of local governments to function. This lack of essential services and resources led to a crisis of confidence among local authorities, who felt they could not "govern, since people were not having even the basics." This finding aligns with the research of Brouwer & van Wijk (2020), who highlight that physical and institutional damage in post-conflict settings often cripples local governments' ability to deliver services, thereby making decentralization efforts a mere formality. The operationalization of policy requires a minimum level of functional infrastructure and capacity, which was absent in these areas.

The fear and insecurity felt by local and traditional authorities who "were not having soldiers or police" shifted governance priorities. As one participant noted, this necessitated a focus on "governance at federal levels." This finding supports the argument of Adejumobi (2007), who posited that in times of extreme crisis, central governments tend to centralize power under the guise of security, effectively halting any meaningful decentralization. The entire governance apparatus became preoccupied with "security, humanitarian aid and surveillance," sidelining development-focused decentralization policies that were designed to empower local communities. This demonstrates a clear conflict between the exigencies of a security crisis and the long-term goals of democratic decentralization.

Another finding, that "nothing was done on development which would have given the local authorities legitimacy," is crucial. It reveals that the singular focus on security, while necessary, came at the expense of developmental projects that would have solidified the LGAs' legitimacy in the eyes of their people. This is a powerful counterpoint to theoretical arguments that decentralization automatically empowers local actors. The findings suggest that legitimacy must be earned through tangible benefits and development, not just through legal or political frameworks. This is a view supported by Schou & Hauge (2018), who argue that decentralization's success in fragile or conflict-affected states is contingent upon its ability to deliver visible development benefits that rebuild the social contract and enhance the authority of local governance institutions.

Viewing the interviews with participants from the angle of optimism and pessimism reveal a complex and nuanced view on the implementation of decentralization policies in Yobe State. The findings are not monolithic; they reflect a spectrum of opinions ranging from strong support for further decentralization to outright opposition, all tied to the practical realities of governance in a post-conflict environment. The responses highlight a critical disjunction

between the theoretical benefits of decentralization and its current, imperfect application on the ground.

One perspective strongly advocates for further decentralization, arguing that it is essential for fostering localized solutions and building community trust. A participant's statement, "Further decentralisation can enhance local context in Alternative Dispute Resolution, inclusion and community development," underscores the belief that local authorities are better positioned to address community-specific needs. This finding aligns with the work of Ostrom (1990), who in her seminal work on self-governance, argued that local institutions are more effective at managing common-pool resources and resolving disputes because they possess context-specific knowledge. The participant's sentiment that "we like decentralising governance" suggests that there is a strong desire among some stakeholders for genuine local empowerment that goes beyond the current political framework.

Another major finding is the criticism that decentralization in Nigeria is largely political, lacking true administrative and fiscal autonomy. The participant's assertion that "the decentralisation is only political but never administrative, much less fiscal," points to a significant flaw in the current system. This idea is supported by Smoke (2015), who examined fiscal decentralization in developing countries and concluded that without the power to generate and manage their own funds, local governments remain fiscally dependent and functionally weak. The participant's view that "fiscal dependency will not allow local authorities to develop" and that true decentralization must begin with a "constitutional amendment" reflects a scholarly perspective that sees constitutional reform as a prerequisite for meaningful decentralization. This shows that participants are aware of the systemic issues that prevent them from fully embracing decentralization.

In direct opposition to the pro-decentralization views, some participants voiced serious concerns about the potential for corruption and the mismanagement of resources at the local level. The sentiment that "I am against decentralisation if it means giving local governments full autonomy because it can lead to corruption," highlights a deep-seated distrust in local accountability. This fear is further compounded by another participant's statement that "even now there is no transparency and accountability at local levels." This finding resonates with the work of Ribot (2004), who argued that without strong local accountability mechanisms and civil society oversight, decentralization can devolve into the "de-concentration of corruption," simply moving it closer to the people without providing the benefits of good governance. The fear is that granting more power to local authorities without checks and balances could lead to increased political competition and instability, potentially reigniting tensions in the polity.

Perceived Impact of Decentralization on Local Governance

The findings for this objective reveal a strong consensus among participants regarding the positive perceived impact of decentralization on local governance in conflict-affected areas. The responses collectively highlight that bringing governance closer to the people enhances service delivery, accountability, citizen participation, and the speed of decision-making. These perceptions are rooted in the belief that local authorities, unlike their federal counterparts, possess a unique understanding of community needs and dynamics, which is crucial for effective post-conflict recovery.

The findings strongly suggest that decentralization improves service delivery by ensuring it is culturally appropriate and context-specific. As a participant stated, "local authorities have better understanding of the culture of both host and IDP communities and can deliver services

that align with their culture." This perspective is supported by scholarly work on post-conflict governance. Mansuri and Rao (2013) argue that decentralization's effectiveness in fragile states is often tied to local knowledge, which allows for the design of programs that are more likely to be accepted and utilized by communities. The proximity of local authorities to the people they serve is perceived as a critical factor in moving from generic, top-down service provision to a more needs-based, culturally sensitive approach.

Participants believe that decentralization increases accountability and transparency by bringing governance closer to the people. A respondent's comment, "When governance is closer to the people they monitor what is happening. but here we are, how can we know what is happening in Abuja?" perfectly encapsulates this sentiment. This finding is consistent with Fung and Wright (2003), who have written extensively on "empowered participation" and argued that a key benefit of local governance is the ability of citizens to directly monitor and hold officials accountable. The physical and social proximity between citizens and their local leaders creates a mutual relationship where informal mechanisms of accountability supplement formal ones, which is nearly impossible to achieve at a centralized, federal level.

The findings also highlight that decentralization is perceived as a catalyst for genuine citizen participation. A participant's statement, "At the local level, we are participating whether directly or indirectly... But this cannot happen if there is no decentralisation," underscores the belief that proximity facilitates engagement. This is because decentralization moves the locus of decision-making to a level where citizens feel they have a voice and an ability to influence outcomes. This "bottom-up approach" is seen as a key benefit, contrasting sharply with the "top-down" approach of a centralized system where "everyone will be receiving orders from above." This idea is echoed in the work of Ribot (2004), who emphasizes that effective decentralization is about "local democracy" and providing citizens with meaningful opportunities to participate in the decisions that affect their lives.

Finally, the findings suggest that a major advantage of decentralization in conflict-affected areas is its ability to facilitate quick decision-making. As one participant noted, "there is need for quick decisions. Some issues cannot wait." In the face of dynamic and urgent crises - such as those brought on by insurgency - the bureaucratic delays inherent in a centralized system can be detrimental. Decentralization empowers local officials to make rapid, context-appropriate decisions without having to wait for approval from distant federal authorities. This agility is perceived as a critical factor in responding effectively to both the immediate aftermath and the long-term recovery from conflict.

Challenges and Opportunities of Decentralization in Post-Conflict Recovery

The final set of findings from the interviews provides a balanced view of the major challenges and opportunities presented by decentralization in Yobe State. The responses highlight the potential of local governance to foster community rebuilding, while also exposing significant constraints related to capacity, security, and inter-group trust.

Participants see decentralization as a powerful tool for rebuilding the social fabric of conflict-affected communities. The sentiment that "after conflict there is need to rebuild confidence and sense of ownership, and no level of government can do it better that the grassroots level," is a core finding. This view aligns with the work of Paris (2004), who argued that post-conflict peacebuilding is most effective when it is locally driven, as it encourages community members to take ownership of their own recovery. The proximity of local government is perceived as a critical factor in mending the broken social contract and fostering a sense of shared responsibility for development. Furthermore, the idea that local authorities facilitate

information sharing due to familiarity, as one participant stated, provides a crucial opportunity for intelligence gathering and security. This informal cooperation is a significant advantage that a centralized security approach truly lack.

A significant challenge identified by the participants is the lack of technical and expert capacity at the local level. The statement, "These local authorities are lacking the technical and expert capacity to handle post-conflict rebuilding efforts," suggests that while local governance may be desired, it may not be equipped to handle the complex demands of recovery. This is a common finding in the academic literature on decentralization in Nigeria and other developing countries. World Bank (2005) reports have consistently shown that transferring power to sub-national governments without a corresponding transfer of technical and financial capacity often leads to the failure of decentralization initiatives. The findings also highlight a loss of traditional authority, with a participant noting the exclusion of traditional rulers from the constitution and governance, which has undermined the capacity of local governments in alternative dispute resolution. This is supported by Osaghae (2010), who has written extensively on the erosion of traditional institutions and their diminishing role in contemporary Nigerian politics. The suggestion to "recognise and involve traditional rulers" points to an opportunity to leverage existing social structures to enhance local governance.

The findings reveal a fear that decentralization could exacerbate existing ethnic and tribal tensions. A participant's statement that "there are many smaller tribes and ethnic groups that will not feel safe when issues are handled here at the locality," raises a critical challenge. This concern is valid, as scholars like Moser (2001) have cautioned that in highly diverse and fragmented societies, decentralization can sometimes lead to the capture of power by a dominant group, potentially marginalizing minority populations. The preference for centralized authority ("There is more sanity at the top") stems from a perception that a higher level of government can act as a neutral arbiter, ensuring fairness and security for all groups. This highlights a critical balance that must be struck: how to empower local governance while safeguarding the interests of all communities.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore that decentralization in conflict-affected areas is a complex, double-edged sword. While it is widely perceived as a vital mechanism for rebuilding trust, enhancing service delivery, and fostering a sense of community ownership, its successful implementation is not guaranteed. The research in Yobe State reveals a critical disjuncture between the theoretical promise of decentralization and the practical realities on the ground, where its operationalization is crippled by the legacy of conflict.

On one hand, the study confirms that local governance offers unique advantages in post-conflict environments. Its proximity to communities enables culturally sensitive service delivery, empowers citizen participation, and provides a crucial platform for bottom-up decision-making and information sharing - elements that are indispensable for sustainable peace. On the other hand, the findings expose significant systemic weaknesses. The lack of true fiscal and administrative autonomy, coupled with a dire shortage of technical capacity at the local level, transforms decentralization from a tool for development into a source of frustration. Furthermore, the exclusion of traditional authorities and a lingering fear of local-level corruption or ethnic favoritism present major obstacles to achieving inclusive and effective governance.

Ultimately, the future of decentralization in Yobe State—and similar conflict-affected regions - depends on a strategic, multi-pronged approach. For decentralization to fulfill its potential, it must be accompanied by targeted capacity-building, constitutional reforms that formalize the role of traditional institutions, and a deliberate shift in focus from a top-heavy, security-centric approach to one that prioritizes grassroots development and accountability. Only by addressing these foundational challenges can the state truly harness decentralization to build resilient, peaceful, and prosperous communities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, here are specific recommendations to improve decentralization in Yobe State, addressing the challenges and leveraging the opportunities identified.

1. The Federal and State governments should initiate a phased approach to granting fiscal and administrative autonomy to local governments, rather than a full, immediate overhaul. This should start with a pilot program in selected LGAs, providing them with the authority to manage specific development budgets and local revenue streams.
2. State and Local Governments, and international development partners, should engage in a comprehensive capacity-building program designed and implemented to train local government officials and traditional rulers in post-conflict management, fiscal transparency, and project administration. This directly addresses the concern that local authorities lack the technical expertise for rebuilding. The training should focus on skills like conflict-sensitive planning, resource mobilization, and financial accountability.
3. The National Assembly should review the constitution to formally recognize and empower traditional rulers in governance, particularly in alternative dispute resolution and community security. This aligns with the participants' call for their inclusion to rebuild trust and use their unique local knowledge.
4. Each Local Government Area should establish a local accountability forum where citizens can regularly review public budgets and monitor the progress of projects. Citizens and CSOs should be empowered with access to information and a clear process for filing complaints, thereby addressing concerns about a lack of transparency and trust in local officials.
5. While security remains crucial, post-conflict policy must rebalance its focus to include tangible development projects. All levels of government should allocate funds specifically for rebuilding critical infrastructure like schools, hospitals, and boreholes. This will help local authorities regain legitimacy by visibly delivering essential services, as the findings suggested.
6. To address the fears of marginalized ethnic groups, local governments should create inclusive governing committees that include representatives from all major ethnic and tribal groups within each LGA. These committees would ensure all communities, including displaced but hosted communities feel safe and fairly represented in decision-making processes.
7. Federal and state government agencies, NGOs and other development partners should collaborate closely with local authorities to ensure all humanitarian aid and development projects are designed with local knowledge and cultural context in mind. This acknowledges the finding that local authorities have a superior understanding of their communities' specific needs and can deliver more relevant services.

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