

## Intergovernmental relations: Fixing the gaps between political and administrative officials in urban councils in Uganda

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56293/IJMSSSR.2024.5124>

IJMSSSR 2024

VOLUME 6

ISSUE 4 JULY - AUGUST

ISSN: 2582 - 0265

**Abstract:** This paper discusses the dynamics of the intergovernmental relations in Uganda particularly in fixing public management and governance gaps between political and administrative officials in urban councils. Intergovernmental relations were perceived an integral and pervasive part of modern political systems and of growing importance as complexities of contemporary urban governance increased in the country. The study was informed by reported increases of conflicts between administrative and political staff in many local governments that became a national concern in the implementation of the decentralized political system in the country. This was a qualitative study conducted in the year 2020 in selected districts in Northern Uganda and targeted administrative and political leaders of urban councils and how they perceived the effect of their relationships on service delivery in their respective local governments. Several interviews and group discussions were conducted with urban governance experts, urban managers and political leaders in the participating urban councils. Further, there was extensive review of existing literature and performance reports that informed findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study. The study concluded that effective design and implementation of intergovernmental relations were essential for sustainable delivery of public services in urban local councils. The study recommended continuous training of political staff in functional leadership skills in functional leadership programmes that after successful completion should be accredited to be equivalent to an advanced certificate of education and also to establish a national emoluments framework for local political staff.

**Keywords:** Intergovernmental Relations; Political and Administrative Officials; Urban Councils; Uganda.

### Introduction and background

Intergovernmental relations are both formal and informal mechanisms that ensure coordination and cooperation among different levels of governments in decentralised and other political systems. Demir, (2009) believed that coordination between different levels was essential because often competences overlap and different policy issues requires cooperation among different levels of governments. In this case, intergovernmental relations facilitate the processes in which government functions are shared between the central government, local governments as well as other actors under the political systems (Phillimore; 2013). These relations could be between the central government and local governments termed as vertical or relations among the local government structures themselves termed horizontal.

For the purpose of this paper, intergovernmental relations were investigated as interacting networks of institutions at national, and local levels, created by statutes and other administrative interactions to enable the various parts of government to cohere in a manner more or less appropriate to enable their respective institutional mandates to be executed. It is an evolving system of institutional cooperation that seeks to address the relations of equality and interdependence and governance continuity.

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Mookherjee; (2015) gives several reasons in support of maintaining credible intergovernmental relations. For example, he urges that intergovernmental relations that are based on inclusion and power-sharing ensure the concentration of decision-making, and contributing to functional decentralisation, strengthening local governance and ensuring that each level in a decentralised system has appropriate competences and resources to execute its statutory tasks. This form of power-sharing ensures cooperation, transparency, and effectiveness in governance by ensuring policy coherence, consultation, cooperation and guaranteeing sustainable dialogue among the several levels of government. In the same line, functional intergovernmental relations ensure that both national and local policies are implemented basing on consensus and on consideration of the different perspectives in public policy development and implemented.

In many parts of the developing world, intergovernmental relations were exasperated by decentralization that become a large trend in governmental reforms over the past few decades, in particular in with a poor history of public service delivery. Yet the potential benefits of decentralization were outweighed by a number of factors, in particular by the problem of poor administrative capacity and a greater potential for elite capture (Bardhan 2002; Robinson 2007). This contradictory and confusing nature of the relationship between decentralization and local service delivery led some scholars like Mookherjee (2015) and Treisman (2007) to argue that generalizing about the relationship between decentralization and government effectiveness was effectively impossible as the later was dependent on a number of context-specific factors. One of such dependent factors, was the relationship between political and administrative staff.

Section 3(1) of the Local Government Act (Cap. 243) of the Laws of Uganda, provides a framework of local governance in the country based on the district as the unit with other lower local government sub-units that are both urban and rural. Under this Act, local councils are mandated to execute the devolved functions and as well as to protect the constitution. Among the devolved functions, the Act provides political powers that are exercised through democratically elected leaders assuming office after every after five years at all levels of decentralisation from village to the district level. Local leaders are supported by professional administrative staff and together (political and administrative staff) constitute the urban councils. The condominium arrangement where political and administrative officers jointly manage councils has experienced both achievements and challenges. The good lessons have been manifested in the transfer of skills from professional administrative staff to political officials (who do not require any form of education to assume office) to effectively manage local policy. Indeed, evidence alludes that since establishment of decentralisation, service delivery has greatly improved in almost all local governments in the country (Galukande-Kiganda & Kabatwairwe; 2018). This improvement in local service delivery has unfortunately been dressed in numerous challenges, one of which is the deteriorating working relationships between political and administrative staff that has torn apart many local governments especially in urban areas and if not addressed, risks tearing even widely more apart the achievements that have been so far realised under the decentralisation system.

This paper presents some of the recommendations of improving the intergovernmental relationship between political and administrative staff in urban councils in Uganda based on a series of discussions conducted by practioners (both political and administrative) and makes recommendations to smoothen the dual functions of the two officer categories.

### Conceptualisation

Boguslaw (2002); in defense of the functionalist theory suggests that in the study of any society, we need to look at how its various parts or institutions combine to give society continuity including how different government institutions relate. This theoretical preposition is commonly used to explain how partnerships emerge, persist, and how they are eventually shaped to fulfil organizational and broader societal needs. However, this theory has faced some criticisms especially from Wunsch and Olowu, (2000) who counter urged that the functionalist theory fails to incorporate an understanding of power in the environment or the role of organizations as agents in shaping society, those failing to make explicit the implicit order of relations that underlie political relationships and thereby failing to connect the institutional and societal interests. The challenge is to determine the relationships that need such consistency and cohesion, and how to structure relationships amongst the various organizations and still maintain their relative authority, autonomy, and independent spheres of action.

Hague and Harrop (1982); hence urged that power relations in the government systems occur in various forms and should not be viewed in a fragmented manner, although government structures may appear divided. What is important is to regard government as an integral whole, a giant amorphous system of semi-autonomous institutions, that must establish inter working relationships in order to function. Indeed, Boguslaw (2002) extends this argument, noting that what makes organizations work are the relations and the culture that underlie partnerships. Thus the government system tends to be broad and includes the private, cultural, political, social, economic, institutional and other contexts that operate within intergovernmental relations and sub-systems. Thus, as French, (2005) puts it, the same governance or intergovernmental relations structures exist in many places, but the unique relationships mediate how these institutions operate to produce dissimilar outcomes.

These intergovernmental relations function through both political and administrative officials. Political officials relating with the state, the government, the body politic, the public administration, or even the policy-making structures. Therefore, political officials are ordinarily involved in policy-making and to the civil aspects of governments, relating to politics, political parties and the partisan aspects of politics organized or ordered with respect to government.

Administrative officials, on the other side, are persons either hired or appointed to work for a particular unit of government and are representing the bureaucracy. In Uganda, urban councils are statutorily composed of both political and administrative officials and are jointly responsible to execute the decentralised responsibilities for local governance. Together, political and administrative officials exercise the six devolved government functions of planning, revenue management, local legislation, local executive politics, local administration, and local custom based quasi-judicial roles (Galukande-Kiganda & Mzini, 2016).

The relationship between political and administrative staff in urban councils has been riddled by manifested conflicts. Conflict in this case is regarded as a 'breakdown in standard mechanisms in decision making' (March & Simon, 1958:112). Conflict is not just a dichotomy but more like a continuum going from no conflict, via hidden conflict to manifest conflict (Pondy, 1967). As Jacobsen (2003); contended, conflict and gaps between politicians and administrative officials arise from several factors such as differences in interests and from interdependence. The differences in perceptions or interests may either be objective or subjective and may even arise from lack of information and subsequently creation of 'pictures of the enemy' as Jacobsen (2003) put it. Objective interests are situations where one party may gain something at the expense of another party and where one party is losing and another is winning. Such scenario may affect the whole urban council or the entire decentralisation system.

## Methodology

The study was qualitatively conducted by investigators who held several focus group discussions with practitioners in urban councils in Uganda on questions of improving working relationships between administrative and political staff. Besides, researchers collected useful information from several other stakeholders in the urban councils including head of departments, Town Clerks, Mayors, members of different urban fora, representatives from the Ministries of Local Government and Lands, Housing and Urban Development; members from civil society organisations, as well as contractors and service providers in urban councils in some selected municipalities in Northern Uganda.

## Findings

The study came up with several findings pertaining to the working relationships that exist between political and administrative staff in urban councils in the county. By and large, it was found out that intergovernmental relations between political and administrative staff negatively affected performance and service delivery in urban councils in Uganda. The deteriorated relationship between political leaders and administrative staff was mainly informed by perception gaps and failure to manage expectations especially by political staff when they joined councils<sup>3</sup>. The broader picture was that this relationship was not healthy for many the urban councils in the

<sup>3</sup> Political leaders are elected volunteers referred to as Honourable Councilors without regular emoluments other than some minimal facilitation when conducting official duties such as council meetings. Administrative staff on the other hand are full

country and was particularly worrying more so when Uganda was hailed for having one of the most detailed and comprehensive legislative frameworks in Africa.

It was also found out that intergovernmental relations were a vehicle for promoting and facilitating cooperative governance and integrated development by promoting policies, programs and activities across different spheres of government that encourage effective service provision to satisfy the needs of society in a sustainable way.

Lastly, during this study, it was also realized that political leaders entered politics with unusually high expectations which in most cases when not met. This precipitated the tensions with administrative staff ending up in frustrating council activities. P

To the far extreme end, some political staff perceived that councils employing some administrative staff was luxurious and ripped the councils of their hard earned financial and other resources that would otherwise be used for other public services.

### **Gaps between political and administrative staff**

Gaps between political and administrative officials in urban councils were on the increase in all councils involved in this study. First and foremost, political staff through urban councils exercise leadership over administrative staff who were by appointment employees of these urban councils. In practice, however, administrative staff were in control of the resources councils use to deliver services. One councilor regretted that political staff were merely 'eyes on, but hands off'. Whereas administrative staff were publically facilitated to execute their functions, political leaders were expected to be volunteers, performing their duties on almost pro-bono terms, with only limited facilitations that in any case should statutorily not exceed 20% of the previous year local revenue collections. These conditions curtailed the facilitation available to political leaders to execute their mandate and in some reported instances, some urban councils could not raise revenue to facilitate the statutory council sittings that should be held every other two months. This created a facilitation gap between the two cadres at councils and widened the relationships between the two staffs.

Secondly, the relationship between political leaders and administrative officials in urban councils in Uganda has been a contest for superiority<sup>4</sup>. Political leaders are vested with powers to monitor service delivery even when some of them are not as qualified as the administrative staff they are mandated to oversee. In fact, many urban political leaders lack formal education qualifications but are mandated to supervise administrative staff majority of whom are university graduates. Researchers witnessed urban political leaders supervising graduates undertaking road constructions works even when they could not be comprehended the attendant technical terminologies applied by engineers. This and other similar scenarios engenders conflict among the two staff cadres ending up negatively affecting inter-governmental relations, and eventual performance in urban councils.

Relatedly, the other gap identified was in the huge focus on power that allows for concepts like interests, bases of power and authority to be interrogated in the urban governance contexts. Given the nature of decentralization in Uganda and the powers conferred on political leaders and the administrative officials, there were differences in interests between the two cadres. Administrative staff depend on political leaders for political decisions, direction and funding while conversely, political leaders also dependent on the professional advice and technical guidance from administrative staff to implement of political decisions. These and similar arrangements caused raptures in relationship between political and administrative staff in urban councils that riddled even more conflicts.

The other gaps were manifested in the high expectations of urban political leaders which places undue pressure on administrative staff. In many cases, political leaders enter politics with unusually high expectations which in most cases when not met precipitate tensions with political leaders frustrating the work of administrative staff in urban councils in return. This was worsened by the general feeling that administrative staff were ripping councils of their hard earned financial and other resources.

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time salaried employees of council whose regular benefits are nationally determined and exceed those of their *de-jure* bosses. This is perceived as the primary origin of the ill feelings between the two officials.

<sup>4</sup> See Perrow 1986 for a better understanding of the organisational theory

Local elite capture was also cited as a dilemma that ushered in gaps between political leaders and administrative staff in urban councils. In many cases, power, knowledge and networks were harnessed in a way that favoured those in authority and those with the powers of decision making. Administrative staff who implemented these activities on the other hand sometimes resisted such tendencies thereby engendering some form of conflict in urban councils also affecting intergovernmental relations.

Discrepancy in levels of education between politicians and administrative staff was yet another gap identified in urban councils. The Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment (ACODE), a local Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) that regularly conducts performance assessments of political institutions in the country, has continuously recommended (in their annual scorecard initiative for local government councils), the need for academic qualifications of councils to be raised. This was to improve on their monitoring roles and legislative roles in the urban councils. The irony is that sometimes the less educated councillors take decisions based on limited information and understanding while in some other instances the more educated administrative staff take advantage of them to implement activities to desirable standards.

Ambiguity in policy and legislation was another gap identified in urban councils. There were clear gaps in legislation that translated into wider gaps between political leaders and administrative staff. There were also tensions arounds who is practically responsible for directing urban authorities. In the case of Kampala Capital City Authority, there were reported regular contestations between the Lord Mayor (the political head) and the Executive Director (the head of administrative staff). The structure of this urban authority as well as the Kampala Capital City Authority Act created this problem by institutionalizing and setting stage for conflicts between political and administrative staff. Similar ambiguity in was also attributed to the processes of establishing urban councils. Experts opined that establishing urban councils was highly based on frameworks of political considerations and not on the pronounced objective bringing services closer to the urban communities. Many deserving towns were denied urban council status while seemingly rural areas were gazetted as urban councils.

Coupled with all the above gaps, the study identified absence of lack of clear lines of authority between political and administrative staff with respect to services provided by council as yet another gap. The achilles heel was the struggle to define these roles among themselves. This problem was worsened by political interference from 'above' especially cadres from the central government institutions and other high ranking officials outside the local governance framework who continuously exerted undue influences on urban councils. Such parties asserted political influence on the already conflict riddled councils, precipitating the crashes and consolidating the existing anti parties in urban councils. In the final analysis, this made it even more difficult for urban authorities to coordinate and integrate the two governance actors to achieve peaceful co-existence.

### Political and administrative relations

The politics-administration dichotomy has long been a subject of considerable debate in public governance. As Georgiou, (2014) contended, despite the argument that there is no clear line of separation between politics and administration, tension between the two continues to be significant. The Local Governments Act (Cap.243) sought to maintain political neutrality and restrict political involvement by public servants in local politics. Practically, however, the dynamics and complexities in forging an appropriate balance between politics and local administration varied from urban council to another. As Galukande-Kiganda (2019); revealed, it was difficult to establish distinctive patterns in the relationship between politics and administration when analysing indicators of government capacity and effectiveness in urban councils. However, recently the conditions under which political and administrative officials operate have changed a great deal. Traditionally, relationships between politicians and public managers were characterised by the concept of strict separation and dichotomy. However, with the entrenchment of urban governance, the tendency changed by witnessing more interactions in their duties and responsibilities. Indeed, Peters (1987), developed five models of relationships between political and administrative staff who asserted they function along a continuum ranging from the 'formal model', characterised by the subordination of administrative staff to politicians, to the administrative state where the pivotal role is played by administrative staff that lead the policy making process because of their strong expertise.

In this study, two intermediate models of the 'functional village life' and 'adversarial politics' in agreement with Robinson, (2007); were discovered in urban councils. Town councils that exhibited the village of life model, were



politicians and administrative staff showed strong cohesion, acted within common objectives and shared logics of action and had reciprocal convenience in acting for promoting a good governance of their urban councils, that generated positive effects on careers of both political and administrative staff. For the urban council that practiced this functional village of life model; politicians and administrative staff built alliances to get the best allocation of funds and resources against all sectors. However, for the urban councils that practiced the adversarial model, politicians and administrative staff were always in competition for gaining primacy over the policy process.

### **Decentralization reforms and inter-government relations**

Decentralized local governance was introduced in the country as a major policy tool for helping to improve governance and the provisionning of public goods at local levels. Indeed, as Seabright (1996) urged, there were theoretical reasons to expect greater public accountability at lower levels of government due to competition between units. In this study, and in agreement with Faguet and Sánchez (2013), evidence suggested that indeed decentralization allowed local governments to respond better to local needs than national governments particularly in ethnically or religiously diverse urbanities where public policy preferences originally varied widely.

Decentralization policy in this context therefore, and in agreement with Rondinelli (1981); transferred legal, political, administrative and financial authority to plan, make decisions and manage public functions and services from the center to local governments. Such transfers empowers local population through democratization, participation, accountability, responsibility, efficiency and effectiveness.

### **Conclusions**

In final conclusion, gaps in political and administrative leadership in urban councils were interrogated within the framework of intergovernmental relations. The study explored the state and causes of these gaps and came to the following conclusions:

Good intergovernmental relations, as Treisman, (2007) earlier urged, were a vehicle for promoting and facilitating cooperative governance and integrated development in urban councils by promoting policies, programs and activities across different spheres of government that encouraging effective service provision to sustainably satisfy the needs of local communities. The thrust to achieve common goals through mutual relationships between and across vertical and horizontal governmental arrangements, alignment and cohesion across all levels of government was proved as pivotal in inclusive and sustainable urban governance.

In addition, the study was in agreement with the theoretical assertions that intergovernmental relations do promote governmental activities through synergies for efficiency and effectiveness in order to sustain democracy and strengthen delivery capacity across all levels of government for the common good.

Lastly, delivery of services in urban councils that was fostered by the decentralization policy did not consider the relationship between political leaders and administrative staff as a pertinent factor that was informed by perception gaps and failure to manage expectations. The broader picture was that this relationship was not healthy for urban governance in Uganda. This should particularly be worrying because of the extensive decentralisation the country was undertaking with so far almost eighty thousand local governments in place and more to be created in both rural and urban areas.

### **Policy recommendations**

The paper makes the following policy recommendations:

First, there should be continuous orientation and training of all staff in urban councils to bridge the gaps identified between political administrative staff. Although it may be early to set minimum academic qualifications for local political leaders, government should conduct regular functional training programmes tailored towards the day –to-day functions of the political leaders so as to enhance their leadership and supervisory skills. After successful completion of such training programmes, participants should qualify for award of a nationally accredited certificate equivalent to the Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education (UACE) Doing so shall not

only empower political leaders to comprehend the functioning of urban councils and help in bridging leadership gaps; but also shall create a pool of competent and trained leaders whose skills may be relied upon to climb the national leadership ladder.

Secondly, emoluments and benefits of political leaders should be enhanced so as to motivate them into more effective local governance. As human beings, political leaders have personal expectations that should be satisfied before they effectively commit themselves to serve urban councils. To this, the study recommends a national remuneration structure for political leaders at all levels in the decentralisation framework and expanding provisions for political leaders to be facilitated from locally generated revenues.

Lastly, a policy should be enacted to streamline the roles and responsibilities of political and administrative staff in urban councils and to create avenues of improving working relationships between the two staffs. Such a policy should establish locally constituted tribunals for solving conflicts among local actors and lessen the alarming conflicts that risk eroding the benefits of urban decentralisation so far achieved.

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