

Decentralization & Performance From A Social Equity Lens

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INTRODUCTION

One of the essential tasks of government is to provide services to the community. (Robbins, 1996) notes that organizational structure determines important factors such as: how tasks will be divided, who reports to whom, formal coordination mechanisms, and patterns of interaction that will be followed. (Rainey et al., 2021) expounds on this explanation and states that structure refers to the configuration of hierarchical levels, specialized units and positions, and the formal rules governing these arrangements. Factors, such as environmental complexity, public sector status, goals, and leadership affect the design and structure of organizations (Rainey et al., 2021).

Classical theories of organizational structure in the public sector were based on ideas from the Administrative Management School that suggested that “public” and “private” distinctions are oversimplified stereotypes. However, contingency theory challenged the classical model and claimed that structure must be adapted to key contingencies like uncertainty, changing technology demands, organizational size, and decision-making by managers. Thus, the structure, design, and management of public organizations remain challenging for public managers. highlights four critical dimensions of organizational structure. The first dimension is that of centralization or the degree to which power and authority concentrate at the organization’s higher levels. Public organizations can choose to decentralize

authority vertically and/or horizontally. Vertical decentralization allows decision-making authority to be pushed down to lower levels. In contrast, horizontal decentralization spreads authority across individuals in the organization (Rainey et al., 2021).

Literature claims that decentralization of power and decision-making allows for adjustments or flexibility and increased opportunity for innovation (Rainey et al., 2021). Understanding the intricate functions of organizational structure is important as it plays a significant role in the quality of service between public organizations, their partners, and their clients. In implementing public services, government officials are responsible for providing the best service to the community to create public and social welfare.

Public services provided by the government, can be classified into two main categories, namely basic needs services (covering health, primary education, and essential community needs) and public services (consisting of administrative services, goods, and services). (Lewis & Gilman, 2005) explain that public service is directly linked to public trust. Citizens hope that public servants can serve with honesty and proper management of income sources and can be accountable to the public. Fair and accountable public services generate public trust.

Proper governance includes the strategic role of the bureaucracy/state apparatus in

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protecting, advancing public welfare, and educating the nation. The government has the opportunity to encourage economic growth, increase competitiveness, and increase public trust and welfare on a large scale. Therefore, bureaucratic reform must be compiled systematically and comprehensively, accompanied by genuine efforts. This is interesting phenomena for research because organizational structure problems greatly affect the provision of public services to the community.

In this paper, we investigate how decentralization impacts public organizations' ability to produce social equity in outcomes. Much of the literature states that decentralization is a positive and desirable decision (Robinson, 2007), but arguments for the developmental significance of decentralization rest on a series of assumptions and theoretical justifications. Proponents of decentralization base their assumptions on widely differing criteria, ranging from expected improvements in allocative efficiency, welfare, and equity, to increased participation, accountability, and responsiveness on the part of local authorities (Robinson, 2007). There is a controversial debate over this topic, and we offer a more nuanced review of decentralization in relation to equity. We employ a systematic literature review of previous research and outline the impacts of decentralization on equity.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The literature review section provides information of works related to decentralization and equity and offers a definition of the types of decentralization, arguments for and against decentralization, and equity concerns. Next, we describe our systematic review methodology and how we selected our sample dataset. Finally, we provide the results, and offer discussion on our findings and implications for future research.

Literature Review

Decentralization of government has been a salient topic since the 1980's (Pollit, 2007). Much of the early literature focused on how decentralization of government could help improve efficiency and effectiveness of public funds aimed at greater levels of social welfare. An abundance of this literature centers on the intrinsic value of decentralization as a desirable goal (Robinson 2007). However, the body of evidence that analyzes the impact of decentralization on performance is both contradictory and ambiguous (Riutort & Cabarcas, 2006). In addition, the literature that seeks to determine the impact of decentralization on equity as a specific metric is limited and not cohesive (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021). In this paper, we seek to explore to the relationship between different types of decentralization and types of equity. First, we begin with a historical understanding of the different types of decentralization found in the literature and then discuss the arguments for and against a decentralized model. Next, we discuss the types of equity often linked to decentralization studies and expound on the underlying theories that consider the factors of decentralization that impact equity.

Types of Decentralization

According to Robinson (2007), there are three types of decentralization. The first is that of fiscal decentralization which relates to the transfer of financial resources to sub-units of government. This differs from the second type - administrative decentralization - which involves functions performed by central government being moved to distinct administrative units at a geographical level. Third, Robinson (2007) states that political decentralization occurs when power and responsibility are given to

elected local governments. As we know from (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2004), the theory of organizational decentralization is best aligned with contingency theory that is dependent on the context and situation. So different forms of decentralization may impact corresponding measures of equity in unique ways. To date, the authors of this paper are not aware of a comprehensive study that analyses differential impacts of decentralization type on equity outcomes. Next, we take a deeper dive into the positions of advocacy and concern for decentralization of government.

Advocacy for Decentralization

Advocates for increased decentralization often state that deconcentrating decision-making can generate beneficial gains in financial allocations, efficiency, and quality of services (Robinson, 2007). The idea is that local governments can maximize productivity by efficiently allocating resources (Robinson 2007). In addition, positive benefits from decentralization allow for more accountability in government in terms of resource allocation decisions as these decisions are now transparent to a wider range of stakeholders (Robinson 2007). Moreover, advocates suggest that decentralization can enhance the quality of local services by having a more localized government that is in tune with local needs.

Recent literature on the allocation of public services suggests that vertical decentralization (whether financial, administrative, or political) has a positive impact on measures of equity (Cepiku, 2021). This evidence of vertical decentralization agrees that diffusing decision making allows local governments to respond to local needs in certain conditions (Cepiku, 2021). The equity relationship is influenced by conditions such as: adequate financial and human

resources, clear regulations, and increased responsiveness and accountability of local authorities (Han, 2013; Parry, 1997). As Cepiku (2021) notes, “the development of these conditions can promote and support institutional capacity, which makes decentralization impactful on equity.”

Concerns of Decentralization

In contrast, some studies have cautioned that decentralization incurs additional risks. For example, expanding the allocation of decision-making can result in political elites wielding their power to capture important resources and make equity worse by acting out of selfish intent (Robinson 2007). Additionally, for decentralization to work, local government would need to have certain requirements in place, like adequate technical capacities and human capital to meet the increased needs (Robinson 2007). Pushing for decentralization without adequate human, financial, or technical resources can exacerbate inequity across jurisdictions and work against the goal of improved welfare for all. This can lead to greater disparities in provision of public services (Robinson 2007) which can extend the gap of inequity across regions. Lastly, more localized units are more vulnerable to financial deficits and susceptible to an over-expanding public sector. (Robinson 2007).

Cepiku (2021) found that horizontal decentralization (whether financial, administrative, or political) was more associated with negative impacts on equity of public services as outcomes were more dependent on the ability of users to pay for services. Equity is challenged when citizens are treated as customers instead of humans with rights (Furlong 2013). In this relationship between equity and decentralization, influencing conditions included a politically charged environment, underlying market

conditions, and insufficient options for public managers to make equitable decisions (Cepiku 2021).

The Difficulty of Equity

Conceptually, the term equity is not well defined across studies (Cepiku 2021). For social equity, definitions can encompass a desire for fairness and equal treatment or expound to include redistribution and the reduction of inequalities (Svara & Brunet, 2004). (Gooden & Portillo, 2011) defines equity as concern with the “characterization, measurement, and achievement of fairness in the provision of governmental policies and services.”

In a systematic review on equity in public services, Cepiku (2021) found that explicit definitions of equity are often missing from academic literature, but of those that do offer insight, Cepiku categorized into four groups. The first cluster categorizes differential equity in terms of inputs, process, outputs (Cepiku 2021). Inputs refer equal access to services (Andrews et al., 2019), opportunities (Wang et al., 2018), or funding (Miller et al., 2008). Equitable outputs include fair distribution across citizens (Smith et al., 2012) whereas process equity entails similar treatment across social groups for similar outcomes (Charbonneau & Riccucci, 2008). Lastly, outcome equity is the absence of systematic differences in characteristics of health across populations (Osman & Bennett, 2018).

The second category defines equity as an issue of human rights that is not dependent on a person’s ability to pay (Bailey & Bruce, 2009; Boyne et al., 2001; Wu et al., 2017). A third category of equity that arose from the literature makes a distinction between vertical and horizontal equity and a desire for differential treatment to get more equitable outcomes (Chitwood, 1974; Langørgen, 2011) (. Lastly, Cepiku (2021) categorizes equity studies into a group that focuses on

dichotomous trade-offs between concepts like fairness and justice, or efficiency and effectiveness (de Bartolome & Ross, 2004; Kernaghan, 2008; Martins et al., 2013; Robinson, 2007; Yuan et al., 2017).

For this study, we consider equity from a broad perspective, but organize our findings based on the types of equity established by Litvack (1998). In this framework, we categorize equity as including access to services across different groups of the population within an area such as education, health, and housing. We differentiate population access to services from inter-regional disparities across local government jurisdictions. This second category includes infrastructure of roads and bridges, transportation, and social welfare services. A key contribution of our findings is the correlation between equity incomes by equity type and by the unit of government being analyzed.

Decentralization and Equity

As previously stated, there is mixed evidence on the role of decentralization on equity as an outcome. Underlying mechanisms that impact equity include representative bureaucracy, administrative burden, the direction of decentralization (horizontal or vertical), privatization, co-production and performance management (Cepiku 2021). Studies have show that factors such as the political commitment of federal or state governments to decentralization impact whether the relationship with equity is positive or negative (Robinson 2007). If a government is not in alignment on decentralization as a priority and committed to the success of communication across regions, then poor outcomes will result.

In addition, the ability of a government to mobilize its poor and get them involved in political decision making is associated with the direction and magnitude of

impact of decentralization (Robinson 2007). Failing to include the voices of those most impacted by systematic change will lead to negative equity outcomes. This feeds into a need for public engagement, consistent feedback, and the institutionalization of oversight between the governing bodies and the citizens (Robinson 2007). Moreover, adequate financial resources and sufficient technical and managerial capacity are important for localities to effectively manage resources. Without adequate resources in place, disparities will persist across regions and can grow worse if better areas have more access to resources to implement plans to meet the needs of the surrounding communities (Robinson 2007).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

After analyzing the 29 articles relevant to the impact of decentralization on social equity, we found that the results differ when considering decentralization type, equity type, and the unit responsible for carrying out the decentralized task. The

relationship of decentralization on equity outcomes is ambiguous as studies saw positive, negative, and neutral impacts for Administrative and Fiscal Decentralization. Political decentralization was not identified with any positive outcomes in the included studies, but was split between a negative and neutral outcome. Our findings indicate that the frequency of negative outcomes on social equity is greater than the frequency of positive and neutral outcomes. However, quantitative analysis is needed to determine if this differential is statistically significant.

Data included in this analysis also found variation by equity type. The majority of studies included in this systematic review were related to equity in health outcomes, which was the key driver to the abundance of negative outcomes, with 13 of 19 negative outcomes being related to health. The data also shows that Health is the only equity category where neutral findings were observed indicating that decentralization did not have a measurable impact on Health equity in 11

Table 1. Publication Summary

Decentralization Type	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Administrative	7	8	4
Fiscal	7	8	5
Political	0	3	2
Total	14	19	11

Equity Type	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Education	2	2	0
Health	6	13	11
Infrastructure	1	1	0
Transportation	1	0	0
Welfare	4	3	0
Total	14	19	11

Unit of Analysis	Positive	Negative	Neutral
District	1	0	5
Local Gov	1	2	2
Municipalities	3	2	1
National	4	5	0
Regional	0	6	1
Sub-national	5	4	2
Total	14	19	11

of the observed metrics in the literature. For other equity types, the number of studies was relatively small to make any generalizable comments.

However, we did find trends of decentralization when looking at the unit of analysis. When decentralization gave power to districts, the results were more neutral than positive, and there were no observed negative impacts. In contrast, decentralization that empowered the regional level of government was more often associated with negative outcomes,

with no positive observances. Equity outcomes were mixed as the other varying units of analysis including local governments, municipalities, sub-national, and national levels. The results of each study are listed below in Table 1.

CONCLUSION

This study investigates how decentralization in public organizations affects social equity through a systematic literature review. Based on our results

Table 2. Decentralization, Equity, and Outcomes Across Studies

Database	Authors	Decentralization Type	Equity Area	Direction	Country	Unit Of Analysis
JSTOR	Lakshminarayanan (2003)	Administrative	Health	Negative	Phillipines	Municipalities
JSTOR	Lakshminarayanan (2003)	Political	Health	Negative	Phillipines	Municipalities
JSTOR	Bahall (2012)	Administrative	Health	Negative	Trinidad & Tobago	National
JSTOR	Geo-Jaja (2006)	Administrative	Education	Negative	Nigeria	National
JSTOR	Geo-Jaja (2006)	Fiscal	Education	Negative	Nigeria	National
JSTOR	Gonzalez-Block et al (1989)	Administrative	Health	Negative	Mexico	Regional
JSTOR	Gonzalez-Block et al (1989)	Political	Health	Negative	Mexico	Regional
JSTOR	Xu (2011)	Administrative	Welfare	Negative	China	Regional
JSTOR	Xu (2011)	Fiscal	Welfare	Negative	China	Regional
JSTOR	Dwicaksono et al (2018)	Fiscal	Health	Negative	OCED	Sub-national
JSTOR	Guess (2005)	Fiscal	Welfare	Negative	Pakistan	Sub-national
JSTOR	Bossert et al (2002)	Fiscal	Health	Neutral	Ghana	District
JSTOR	Bossert et al (2002)	Fiscal	Health	Neutral	Phillipines	District
JSTOR	Bossert et al (2003)	Administrative	Health	Neutral	Zambia	District
JSTOR	Bossert et al (2003)	Fiscal	Health	Neutral	Zambia	District
JSTOR	Seshadri et al (2016)	Political	Health	Neutral	India	District
JSTOR	Bossert et al (2002)	Fiscal	Health	Neutral	Uganda	Municipalities
JSTOR	Bossert et al (2002)	Fiscal	Health	Neutral	Zambia	Regional
JSTOR	Dwicaksono et al (2018)	Administrative	Health	Neutral	OCED	Sub-national
JSTOR	Dwicaksono et al (2018)	Political	Health	Neutral	OCED	Sub-national
JSTOR	Martín et al (2010)	Administrative	Transportation	Positive	Spain	Municipalities
JSTOR	Kubal (2006)	Fiscal	Education	Positive	Chile	Municipalities
JSTOR	Kubal (2006)	Fiscal	Health	Positive	Chile	Municipalities
JSTOR	Dwicaksono et al (2018)	Fiscal	Health	Positive	OCED	Sub-national
JSTOR	Ezcurra et al (2011)	Fiscal	Welfare	Positive	OCED	Sub-national
JSTOR	Guess (2005)	Fiscal	Welfare	Positive	Indonesia	Sub-national
JSTOR	Guess (2005)	Fiscal	Welfare	Positive	Phillipines	Sub-national
WOS	Cepiku et al (2021)	Administrative	Infrastructure	Negative	Various	Local
WOS	Cavagnero (2008)	Fiscal	Health	Negative	Argentina	National
WOS	Geng et al (2015)	Administrative	Health	Negative	Laos	National
WOS	Hao et al (2021)	Fiscal	Health	Negative	China	Local
WOS	Fiedler et al (2002)	Fiscal	Health	Negative	Honduras	Regional
WOS	Pavolini et al (2012)	Political	Health	Negative	Italy	Regional
WOS	Brixi et al (2013)	Administrative	Health	Negative	China	Sub-national
WOS	Brixi et al (2013)	Fiscal	Health	Negative	China	Sub-national
WOS	McCullum et al (2019)	Administrative	Health	Neutral	Kenya	Local
WOS	Elgin et al (2019)	Administrative	Health	Neutral	United States	Local
WOS	Nunes et al (2007)	Administrative	Health	Positive	Portugal	National
WOS	Smith (1998)	Administrative	Health	Positive	United States	National
WOS	Chansa et al (2020)	Administrative	Health	Positive	Zambia	District
WOS	Cepiku et al (2021)	Administrative	Infrastructure	Positive	Various	Local
WOS	Esty (1999)	Administrative	Welfare	Positive	Various	National
WOS	Wyss et al (2000)	Administrative	Health	Positive	Switzerland	National
WOS	Reyes et al (2004)	Fiscal	Education	Positive	England	Sub-national

there is still ambiguity in relationship between decentralization and equity we found positive, negative, and neutral relationship for fiscal, political and administrative decentralization. Furthermore, Our findings indicate that the frequency of negative outcomes on social equity is greater than the frequency of positive and neutral outcomes and one particular interested job about our finding is Health Equity posit the neutral relationship.

A potential reason behind more negative impact than positive could be the method we used, and quantitative analysis is needed to determine if this is statistically significant. Another reason could be related to the concerns for decentralization which we discussed in the paper, that we are in the beginning steps of decentralization, and the infrastructure to carry out its needs is not enough, and it could be possible to have more positive effects in future. There were also more negative findings for equity in the health sector which seems to be odd, but an explanation for that based on the theories provided earlier in the article could be that in health sector, since it is related to people's lives, they already are doing things the best they can to impact lives. Therefore, health equity doesn't change with structural changes. Since health was the only category with neutral results, it could be that it may take a more extended timeframe to see changes in health outcomes than what these studies looked at. An interesting point to mention is that our results indicate that most of the works in this area and related to this topic are in health sector. To have better intuition and understanding of social equity and what is affecting it, we suggest working on other areas in which equity, especially social equity plays a critical role, such as welfare.

There several limitations in our research. First, in our analysis we only used

systematic literature review to analyze the relationship between decentralization and social equity. Hence, for the further research is important to add quantitative analysis to create more comprehensive result. Second, the number of research in this area is still limited that's lead to ambiguous result that we have, especially for health equity that create more neutral relationship because it may takes longer time frame to see the actual impact.

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