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Decentralisation in a weak state: Traditional and state governance in the DRC

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- What characterises local governance in a “weak” state? This policy brief provides rich descriptive evidence of infrastructural state capacity in the local organisation of the state in 134 rural small towns and large villages in four provinces of the DRC.
- Contrary to the commonly held perception of a weak and failed state, our results show that the Congolese state has a significant presence in the rural localities surveyed and demonstrates a high level of administrative capacity.
- Distinction between traditional and state organisational structure is noticeable. State leaders are part of a larger network connected to higher levels of government, whereas traditional leaders are more isolated and autonomous. Both settings have their advantages with respect to government innovation, and disadvantages with respect to accountability.
- Key challenges in local governance persist, namely lack of democratic accountability, high levels of corruption, and an acute lack of financing for developmental efforts.
- In the absence of drastic changes coming from the central and provincial state in the DRC, recent decentralisation reform could be further embraced through increased empowerment of local leaders, such as traditional chiefs who possess considerable local authority and administrative capacity.

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Introduction

Governance challenges represent one of the major obstacles to growth in the Global South. This is especially true in contexts of fragility. Furthermore, when analysing the governance situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), policy experts and social scientists typically label the country as a “weak” or “failed” state. This characterisation is largely driven by the challenges the state faces in terms of political instability, corruption, and low revenue mobilisation. Additionally, the wider society experiences extreme poverty and significant barriers to accessing education and healthcare.

It is therefore common to assume that local governance in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) would be equally failed or absent. Building upon the intellectual tradition of “real governance beyond the failed state” (Titeca and De Herdt 2011), we embarked on a quantitative examination of local governance in rural areas of the country. What is the level of local state capacity in these areas? How do non-state institutions, such as traditional governance, compare to state structures in terms of governance? And, what are the challenges faced by both state and non-state actors in providing governance in rural localities of the DRC? Our systematic empirical investigation contributes to a more nuanced understanding of important governance questions, which have previously only been studied qualitatively, on a case by case basis, or in cross-country studies.

Policy context

The rural localities in the DRC provide a valuable setting to study local state capacity. The country has implemented a decentralisation reform since 2012, in which both traditional and state officials are responsible for separate local jurisdictions. By examining localities that have recently come under the purview of the central state and those that remain under the control of traditional governance, we have the opportunity to assess local state capacity. This is crucial for gaining insight into the political contest between state and non-state actors and how it contributes to local state capacity. Additionally, it allows us to understand how local state capacity relates to the broader, country-wide image of the “failed” state. Ultimately, the implementation of the decentralisation reform has fallen short of expectations, as seen in the lack of assigned administrators in many towns (Englebert and Mungongo 2016). This, combined with the key governance challenges mentioned below, forms a significant constraint that hampers the state's ability to utilise the existing local state capacity.

Data description

In order to systematically gather evidence of the local governance landscape, we designed surveys that assess multiple dimensions of state capacity for both government and household respondents. These dimensions included the availability of state services, personnel characteristics, bureaucratic structure, collective action, and attitudes towards governance, as well as outcome measures of public goods and economic development.

During the summer of 2022, our team of researchers from [Marakuja Kivu Research](#) conducted surveys of 1,072 households and 532 local leaders in 134 localities (67 towns and 67 large villages) in the provinces of North and South Kivu, Kasai, and Kasai Central. In addition to the locality, government agent, and household surveys, we also assessed attitudes towards governance through a behavioural game, consisting of a series of standard public goods games augmented with real audio messages from authority figures. We also collected all available administrative and financial records from each locality, as well as qualitative reports on local governance from our enumerators.

Figure 1: Map of sample localities here.

Notes: This map shows the location of the 67 towns (maroon triangles) and 67 villages (grey bullets) across the 4 provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu, Kasai, and Kasai Central in the DRC. The capital city of Kinshasa and the continent of Africa at inset are added for geographic elaboration.

The Congolese state is present across the rural localities surveyed, demonstrates a high degree of administrative capacity, and engages in limited developmental effort.

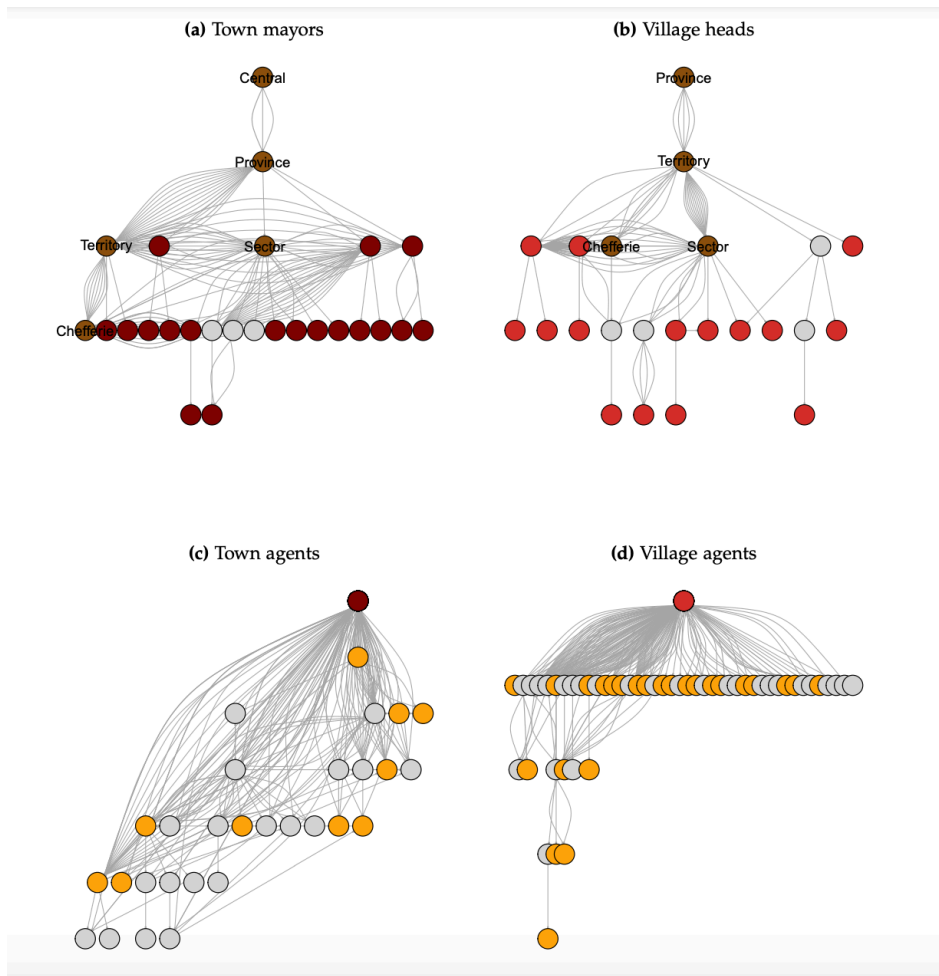
1. The median locality has 18 government agents present. Among them a dedicated head of locality, and administrative and finance secretaries spent an average 30 hours a week on an array of tasks.
2. Instead of the prevailing view of the Congolese state as incapable, we found evidence of a wealth of local records being kept, from detailed financial documents and organisational, to complete household rosters of the localities. 55% of sample localities (36 villages and 38 towns spread proportionally across all four provinces) accounted public tax and expenses. This administrative capacity is often seen as a building block for a developmental state because it can allow the state to mobilise local resources for development projects, yet it could also be misused by a predatory state or predatory officials to extract resources for private gain.
3. We also document a flurry of recent public goods construction activities across our localities. An average locality in our sample has seen 3.9

new schools, 2.7 new health centres, 1.6 new markets and 2.6 new roads constructed in the previous 20 years. Despite this recent construction activity, the services provided are still inadequate to serve all of the population to appropriate standards. Our average locality has 0.6 schools per 1,000 inhabitants—compared to 1.6 in neighbouring Uganda—and 0.19 health centres per 1,000 inhabitants. These go on to show that a sizable presence of the state is evident across our localities.

Despite the limited implementation of the decentralisation reform, organisational distinctions between rural town and large village bureaucracies are noticeable.

1. Figure 2 Panels A and B combine all bureaucratic networks in our sample of 136 administrations, in which each node in maroon or red represents locality heads. Village heads are more connected to their internal administration, but they seldom have connection with higher-level state governments. Towns have a less insular network than villages, having all sorts of links and appointment patterns to the central, provincial, territorial, sectoral, and even traditional governments.
2. We then take a closer inspection of the internal administration of towns and villages. The diagrams in Panel C and D combine all connections between the heads of localities and all unique agents of the bureaucracies. Town administration reveals a high degree of hierarchy between their agents, whereas village administration is flatter, representing a simple, bilateral authority between them and the village head. Despite their organisational simplicity, village heads enjoy more independence as they appoint many of their agents (orange nodes).
3. Both organisational settings have their advantages and disadvantages. Being more independent and insular can allow traditional governance actors to enact local reforms and innovate without interference from higher levels of authority. On the other hand, oversight by higher levels could limit excesses and mismanagement. The connectedness of state officials can help them implement complex reforms that require higher level support but could limit their ability to do the right thing when superiors are corrupt.

Figure 2: Mapping bureaucratic networks



Notes: These network diagrams represent the Congolese bureaucratic administration in our sample of 134 localities. Panel A combines all self-reported bureaucratic networks of representative town heads (maroon), who answer questions about their principals (brown). Each edge connects two leaders, who is distinguished from another by his function and who appointed him. Multiple lines connecting the same two nodes indicates repeated reports of principal structure. Similarly, panel B draws the network for all village heads in the sample (red) who answer the same questions about their principals (brown). Gray nodes are other government appointees. Panels C and D draw the network for the agents of town and village governments. Similar to Panels A and B, each node of the network represents bureaucrats of the same function and appointment. Orange nodes represent government agents who are appointed directly by the town or village agents, whereas gray nodes again represent other government appointees (of the higher-level governments).

Major challenges to local governance that emerge from our data include:

1. **There is an apparent lack in democratic accountability.** Virtually none of the local leaders are elected but instead selected by traditional or provincial leaders. This is despite the Congolese Constitution mandating the election of commune mayors. Furthermore, a significant portion of government agents received their position from a family member and many appointed family members to jobs. While leaders do

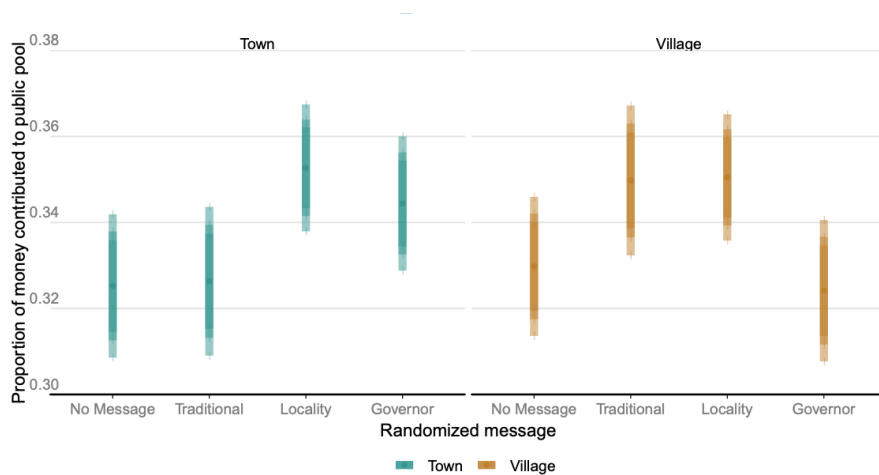
spend over a quarter of their time meeting community members there seems to be a disconnect between citizens' preferences over public goods and their leaders'. Citizens see education as a higher priority than their leaders while leaders have a higher priority for combating crime and improving agriculture. If democratic accountability was functioning well, we would see smaller differences in priorities between leaders and citizens.

2. **Our data reveal high levels of corruption.** Government agents report that over 40% of other agents in their position ask for bribes and most agents we survey admit to potentially doing the same. With an average size of \$28, bribes are sizable especially compared to the low salaries these agents receive. Citizens confirm widespread corruption, paying an average extraneous bribe of \$21 to the locality administration in addition to the \$57 of tax payments when setting up new businesses. Furthermore, 19% of citizens reported having had to pay a bribe to other government agents, such as locality leaders or the police. Extrapolating this number using each locality's population estimates suggests that government agents earn considerably more in bribes than in official salary. Considering that half the agents in our sample do not receive a salary and the low pay for those that do, the presence of widespread corruption should not come as a surprise.
3. **Our evidence suggests an acute lack of financing in towns and villages.** Leaders simply do not have the resources to significantly expand the state. On average, annual revenue is about \$10,331 or \$0.37 per citizen. The median revenue per year is only \$1,995. This is largely due to the limited economic activity and ability to raise taxes from citizens with little cash-flow. Revenue is generated through various taxes on land and property, sale and retail, manufacturing and services. In predominantly agricultural settings, citizens have little additional income that government agents can mobilise even with their considerable administrative capacity in addition to the payments they already make in the form of bribes. Thus, while we find that government agents use their administrative capacity to extract resources from citizens for their private gain, there is little evidence that they similarly mobilise resources for local development. Corruption is likely to crowd out legitimate resource generation.

However, the lack of democratic accountability and high degree of corruption have not resulted in apathetic and disengaged citizens. Over 80% of citizens report regularly participating in the weekly public works programme (Salongo) and report doing so out of a sense of duty. Furthermore, citizens respond to their leaders when asked for contribution. We implemented

a behavioural game where we provided different prompts by authority figures that encourage contribution to public goods. Citizens were more likely to contribute if their locality head encouraged them to (Figure 3). Once the state solves the governance challenges we outlined, citizens are ready to do their part.

Figure 3: Public goods game with randomised message



Notes: This figure plots the means and the confidence intervals of the distribution of contribution from the public goods game in towns and villages. The x-axis shows which randomized voice recording of leaders encouraged citizens to contribute to the public pot. After hearing the message (or not, to be intended as a control group), each household played 2 practice rounds of the game. The game was then played 5 times with different endowment amounts (400, 600, 800, 1000 = \$0.50, and 1200 Congolese francs with randomised order), one round of which was then realised at random. The amount kept by the citizen would then be kept, and the remaining amount, along with 7 other household contributions in the same locality, would be paid to the locality leader. The figure plots the proportion of endowment contributed from all 5 rounds of the game.

Conclusion

The research findings highlight the present yet precarious state of governance in rural areas of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Our study documents the presence of various government agents across our sample localities, who are charged with performing various state functions and exhibit substantial administrative proficiency. Nevertheless, these agents face significant challenges due to a lack of financial support, as only half of them receive a salary, and those who do receive a meager compensation. This absence of structural support has presumably led to widespread corruption and the near non-existence of local taxation. As a result, government agents are unable to expand the state and provide essential services to the population due to a scarcity of resources.

The local governance situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo presents a challenging scenario. The limited resources available to government agents hinder their ability to provide essential services to the citizens of rural villages and towns. The lack of adequate salary and support also exacerbates the issue, as it forces agents to rely on local resources to supplement their income. Combined with a lack of democratic accountability and insularity of many locality heads this situation leads to a predatory state that does not serve its citizens, despite having a considerable infrastructural local capacity for development. However, with the proper support and resources, this capacity could be leveraged for local collective interest.

In the absence of drastic changes coming from the central and provincial state in the DRC, two paths for local change could vitalise local governance. Firstly, the recent decentralisation reform could be further embraced through increased empowerment of local leaders, enabling them to collect taxes and control their own funds, as well as through the organisation of elections for decentralised units. Secondly, local governance in the DRC still largely rests in the hands and on the shoulders of traditional chiefs, who are present in virtually every village in the country. Possessing considerable local authority and administrative capacity, they could be made a more active and constructive part of state governance. This would tap into their potential and put the DRC on a path towards a developmental state.

References

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