



## Bringing services closer to people: How distance to administrators affects public service delivery in Uganda

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- Reducing the geographical distance between citizens and district headquarters significantly improves access to essential public services, including electricity, roads, education, health services, and water.
- Proximity to administrative centres enhances citizen engagement with government officials, strengthens state capacity, and improves monitoring of public services.
- Strategic creation of local government administrative offices can improve service delivery but must be carefully balanced against potential inefficiencies and implemented with strong coordination between government levels.

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## Introduction

Governments across the globe face significant challenges in providing public goods and services efficiently and effectively (World Bank, 2016). In response, many low- and middle-income countries have drastically increased the number of administrative units over the past three decades, aiming to bring government closer to citizens (Cohen, 2024; Dahis and Szerman, 2024).

A key aspect of this decentralisation strategy involves reducing the geographical distance between citizens and government administrators. This approach is based on the premise that if geographical distance constrains government effectiveness in developing countries (Asher et al., 2018), increased proximity could enhance policymakers' responsiveness to local needs.

However, the benefits of bringing government closer to citizens may be hindered if creating new administrative units leads to reduced economies of scale or local government capture (Oates, 1972). Given that the location of administrative offices relies heavily on existing public services, establishing the causal impact of geographical distance to administrative headquarters on public goods provision has remained empirically challenging.

This study examines whether geographical distance to district headquarters affects the provision of public goods and services. Specifically, it analyses whether proximity to district local government centres improves access to key services such as electricity, roads, education, health, water, and agricultural inputs.

## Methodology

To understand the impact of distance on access to public services, this study leverages a government rule that guided the placement of new district headquarters. When districts are created in Uganda, headquarters are meant to be established in the geographic centre of the new district (Green, 2010). This rule introduced natural variation in household distances to administrative centres, allowing for a causal analysis of the effects of geographical distance between citizens and local administrators on public service delivery.

The analysis combines household survey data with geographic information to examine how proximity to district headquarters influences access to public goods and services. The main dataset is the 2021 National Service Delivery Survey, which includes over 9,000 households. Households were geolocated using their parish centroid, enabling estimation of the distance from the geographical centre of the district—an exogenous variable that allows for identifying causal impacts (Campante and Do, 2014).

## Key findings

### 1. Improved infrastructure access

- Electricity: Households closer to district headquarters are significantly more likely to have electricity access. On average, a 1.59 km reduction in distance increases electricity access from 48.3% to 53.8%.
- Roads: Proximity to district headquarters improves road infrastructure, increasing access to tarmac roads, which community leaders rate as higher quality.
  - These infrastructure improvements are concentrated around newly established district headquarters. Since they are provided by the central government, they benefit from larger-scale planning, reducing the risk of inefficiencies associated with fragmented local service delivery.

### 2. Reduced travel times to public services

- Education: Households living closer to district headquarters experience significantly shorter travel times to both primary and secondary schools.
  - Primary schools near district headquarters are more likely to have an auditor, improving oversight and accountability. However, school attendance rates do not vary significantly by distance.
- Health: Proximity to government centres leads to a reduction in travel time to health centres, improving access to medical services.
  - Health centres in areas closer to district headquarters are less likely to experience absenteeism problems, reflecting the monitoring role of district administrators.
- Agriculture: While access to agricultural inputs does not significantly improve, communities closer to district headquarters are more likely to have access to agricultural extension services and coffee mills.
- Water: Households near district headquarters travel shorter distances to access clean water sources for consumption, particularly during the dry season.

### 3. Strengthened state capacity

- Households closer to district headquarters are more aware of government institutions such as magistrate courts, the Ugandan police, land offices, the Office of the Auditor General, and the judiciary system.
- The presence of administrative centres increases state capacity in areas that previously had limited access to district offices due to their remoteness, improving governance and public service oversight.

## 4. Higher citizen engagement with the government

- Households near district headquarters are more likely to participate in decision-making and express higher satisfaction with district authorities.
- Proximity increases citizens' likelihood of having a family member working in the government, reflecting greater political and civic engagement.
- There is suggestive evidence that district investments align more closely with local priorities when reducing the distance between citizens and administrators.
- Awareness of corruption is higher near district headquarters, but direct experiences with corruption do not increase, suggesting stronger citizens' oversight of public officials.

## Policy recommendations

### 1. Leverage proximity to improve service delivery

Reducing the geographical distance between citizens and administrators can enhance public service delivery, particularly if it facilitates greater engagement of community members.

### 2. Strengthen citizen participation mechanisms

Policymakers should strive to establish channels that actively include the local population in decision-making processes. Increasing transparency and accountability in local governance can enhance public trust and improve service outcomes.

### 3. Enhance accountability and governance

Proximity to administrative centres can improve oversight of public officials, reducing inefficiencies and promoting better governance practices. Strengthening monitoring mechanisms can ensure that services reach those intended.

### 4. Assess the costs and benefits of district creation

While redistricting can bring government closer to citizens, it must be strategically planned to ensure long-term sustainability. Policymakers should conduct rigorous cost-benefit analyses before creating new administrative units to prevent resource fragmentation and inefficiencies.

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