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Leveraging District Service Commissions to Enhance Local/Urban Government Management in Uganda

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The success of decentralised governance, since its rebirth in the late 1980s, required the localisation of the Public Service Commission (DSC), through the DSC, as a means to effectively actualise administrative decentralisation. To constitute the DSC, demands approval of the local/urban council upon recommendation by the executive committee. However, there remains a constant dissatisfaction from every stakeholder regarding the impartiality and efficient operations of the DSCs across the country. This study employs a systematic literature review methodology grounded in the PRISMA framework to analyse 60 scholarly papers concerning DSCs and Local Governments in Uganda. The outcomes reveal that the quality of service, including human resource functions, delivered has little or no relevance to the socio-economic needs of communities they claim to serve. Also, DSCs have lost confidence among the communities they ought to serve, attributed to the missing link between DSCs and effective local/urban government management, as well as systemic corruption. Therefore, Uganda continues to perceive DSCs as politically-driven local/urban structures. Access to employment for local applicants appears to be muddled with a number of challenges throughout the country. There is thus a need for deliberate interventions to reduce socio-political biases engulfing the local/urban government recruitment process. A number of factors inhibiting the DSCs from executing their role appear to be widespread, and most of which are evolving around the issue of high levels of unemployment, which, unfortunately, have global and regional roots. Given the few job openings, it is highly impractical to think of a fair process since everyone is interested in having their close members get employed. In a bid to insulate DSC from political dominance, the members should not be appointed by the district executive committees but by the public service commission, seeing that it serves as an extension of it at the lower level.

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INTRODUCTION

A number of local governments, especially those in less-developed countries, continue to operate at low employee levels, jeopardising the quality of service delivery, contrary to the intent of rolling out decentralisation (Green, 2015). Local government management remains a significant player in democratic processes in SSA, covering issues such as inter-governmental relationships, trends, collaboration, leadership, digitalisation challenges and effective local government (Danso and He, 2025; Shava & Ndebele, 2024; Kekez, Howlett & Ramesh, 2019). The degree to which local/urban governments are capable of transforming local communities in the 21st century is attracting the interest of academics and policymakers internationally. There are signs that the poor quality of local governance in Uganda is organisational in nature (Omodo, Obici & Mwesigwa, 2023a&b), specifically, a number of District Service Commissions (DSCs) have lost the trust of the very communities that they are mandated to serve. This loss of public trust is likely rooted in a missing link between DSCs and effective local/urban government management, coupled with systemic corruption. Despite their persistence under the existing local governance framework, DSCs are

largely perceived to be a vulnerable structure countrywide. Notwithstanding, the fairness expected of a DSC, accessibility to employment for local applicants appears to be muddled with a number of challenges throughout the less-developed world. In Uganda, employment in the local/urban government is still tainted with certain, but very strong, socio-political undertones. With young people lacking fair opportunities to access the local/urban government structure, many remain hopeless. Several factors inhibiting the DSCs from executing their role appear to be widespread, and most of which are evolving around the issue of high levels of unemployment, which, unfortunately, have global and regional roots.

This paper examines the role of DSCs in managing local and urban governments. It seeks to address the following main question: 'How can District Service Commissions (DSCs) be utilised to improve local and urban government management in Uganda?' The study is supported by four specific research questions, namely:

- In what ways does Uganda's model contribute to international best practices or highlight unique challenges in sub-Saharan Africa?

- How do variations in capacity, resources, and political dynamics affect the performance of local governments across districts?
- How do District Service Commissions balance autonomy with oversight from central government structures?
- What structural, political, and resource-related constraints hinder the effectiveness of District Service Commissions in Uganda?

Theoretical & Conceptual Underpinning

World leaders agreed to commit to the values of decentralised governance, through the structures of local/urban government, as a reason to consolidate the principles of good governance (Wänström & Persson, 2023; Liu, Nagao & Hatungimana, 2024). However, there are sustained gaps in a number of decentralised functions, including those associated with human resources. A number of local/urban governments, especially those in less-developed countries, continue to operate at low employee levels, jeopardising the quality of service delivery (Andrews, Beynon & Baafi, 2023). For much of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), the quality of service delivered at the local level remains very poor compared to other regions in the world. The persistent service protests witnessed, particularly across South Africa, could be indicative of gaps within existing endeavours aimed at improving the quality of service delivered and enhancing the level of efficiency since 2000.

According to Chiwarawara (2023a), those protests manifested in manifold tactics, namely, marches, barricading roads, boycotts, mass community meetings, submission of memoranda of grievances, burning of municipal buildings and councillors' houses, street fights with police and land occupations. Even if Chiwarawara (2023b) labelled service protests to have been irregular and muddled, they demonstrated the widening gap in both quality-of-service delivery and other hidden systemic failures in local/urban governance. Additionally, the

protests revealed that despite the huge amounts of resources sometimes invested in the operations of the local governments, individuals charged with delivery of those services may not have the prerequisite skill base to match service delivery with citizen priorities. This is possibly a symptom of local/urban government personnel management systems adopted and/or implemented. While on the one hand, it is known that there are mandatory structures charged with human resource recruitment, on the other hand, their contribution in the management of local/urban governments remains little known. Moreover, how they survive amidst deeply entrenched party politics is likewise unknown, especially in a multi-party local/urban governance.

As a consequence, local/urban government management remains a significant player in democratic processes in SSA through synergies it creates across state and non-state actors (Rosiadi, 2024; Lange, 2013). By the way, it is common knowledge that billions of citizens have been and continue to be served by local/urban governments. Studies suggest that debates on service delivery remain persistent in a number of rural/urban areas, reflecting disparities around the projected development needs (Barnes & Morris, 1997), political operation expenses (Tavares & Camões, 2007), client needs and involvement (Hanberger, et al., 2016) and social change (Savuro, Gair, Braidwood, D'Emden, O'Reilly, Walsh, & Zuchowski, 2022). Yet, while available studies have been conducted on local/urban government management, little research has focused on district [or city] service commissions (Otile & Atukunda, 2020).

Materials and methods

Data Sourcing

This study conducted a systematic literature review (SLR) using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) methodology (Moher et al., 2010). While

Kitchenham (2004) contends that the utility of SLR lies in its ability to scrutinise existing literature to address pertinent research questions, PRISMA has been lauded for being a structured process encompassing identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion to facilitate the efficient collection of relevant data (Moher et al. 2010).

Data Search

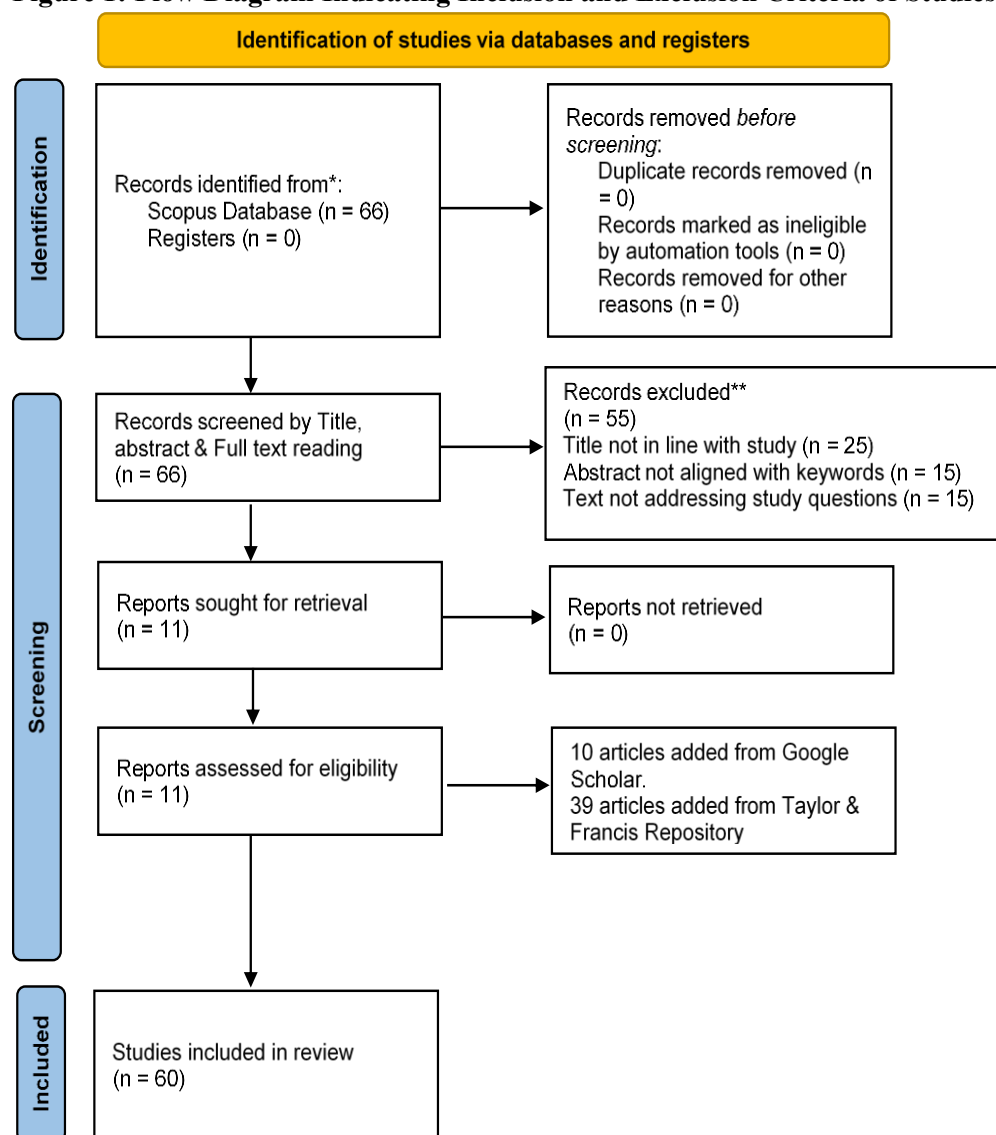
The data for this study was mainly sourced from the Scopus database. The Scopus database was chosen because it is recognised as a reputable and suitable source (Zhu & Liu, 2020). A reputable database combined with a well-tailored search query has been associated with the effectiveness of systematic literature reviews. Although this study aimed to focus on recent scholarship, no limitations were set regarding the time frame. However, the focus was placed on Open Access peer-reviewed journals that are published in English. The search string utilised in the Scopus database is presented below.

("District Service Commission*" OR "DSC*" OR "Local Service Commission*" OR "Public Service Commission*") AND ("local government" OR "urban government" OR "municipal council*" OR "city council*" OR "district administration" OR "local authority" OR "urban governance") AND ("management" OR "administration" OR "governance" OR "capacity building" OR

"institutional performance" OR "public sector reform" OR "service delivery") AND ("Uganda")

Data Screening

The CSV dataset obtained from Scopus underwent a collaborative screening process that included reviewing the title, reading the abstract, and finally examining the full text. This exercise aims to eliminate articles that do not contribute to achieving the study's objectives. Reading the titles led to the elimination of 25 articles, while reviewing the abstracts resulted in the removal of 15 more. These articles were removed because they did not align with the keywords and specific research questions. The remaining 26 articles were then read in full, and 15 were dropped because their content did not specifically address the research question for this study. This led to the identification of 11 articles for inclusion in the study. Due to the small sample size, additional searches were performed in the Taylor and Francis repository using the keywords (*Local government, urban council, DSC, citizen, vulnerability, Uganda*) from this article. This search yielded 39 articles, all of which were included in the study. An extra 10 articles were sourced from Google Scholar, as they specifically focused on Ugandan studies related to District Service Commissions. Figure 1 shows the criteria for including and excluding articles that led to the selection of the 60 articles for this study.

Figure 1: Flow Diagram Indicating Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria of Studies Selected

Source: Author's creation

Data Analysis

To tackle the study questions, this research utilised two analytical methods. The initial specific question was examined through a bibliometric analysis of the dataset obtained from Scopus, which included all 66 articles. For the remaining specific questions, the authors engaged in a collaborative coding process using a shared Excel worksheet. This method reflects the reflective thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and its value is in drawing meaningful conclusions from the data. The main

factors influencing data extraction included: (a) assessing the effectiveness of local governments in Uganda, (b) recognising the role of District Service Commissions in Uganda, and (c) identifying obstacles to the effectiveness of District Service Commissions in Uganda. Based on these findings, proposals informed by evidence were developed to influence policy and practice.

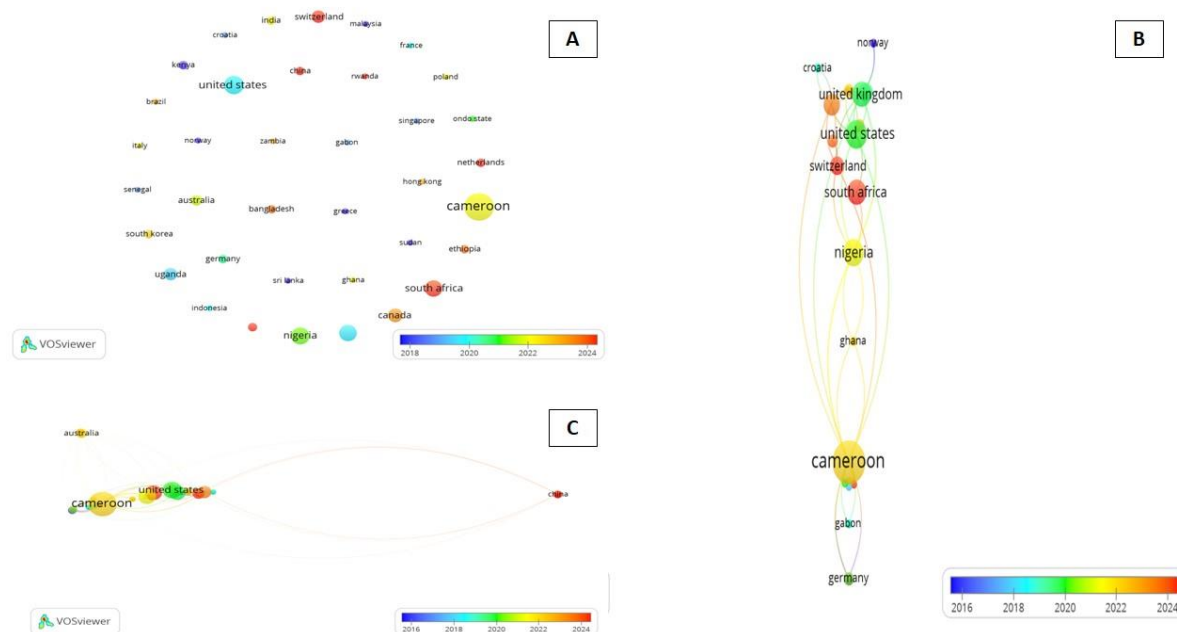
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ugandan Perspectives in the Global Discourse on District Service Commissions

Scholarly output from a specific context provides a distinct perspective for understanding a phenomenon within that context, while also playing a crucial role in shaping and directing discourse. Neumann (2008) highlights that “frequent repetition and confirmation of representations” are essential in shaping discourses. Furthermore, the number of

publications and citations from a specific context acts as an indicator of power (thematic contestations) and agency, which are essential for influencing participatory governance pathways, especially in underserved areas (Acanga, Mwesigwa, Oryang & Oboi, 2022a). To understand Uganda's contribution to the discussion on DSCs, this study performed bibliometric analyses using the CSV file downloaded from the Scopus database with VOSviewer software, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Bibliometric Analysis Outputs from Acquired Data



Source: created by authors using VOSviewer software

Frame A, of Figure 2, displays citations of at least one document that has received at least one citation from authors in the countries represented in the dataset. Frame B illustrates the co-authorship of articles by country, emphasising at least one document that has garnered at least one citation from the countries featured in the dataset. Frame C illustrates the bibliographic coupling of at least one document that has been cited at least once from the countries represented in the dataset. Among the three frames created from the dataset, Cameroon demonstrates the highest contribution of scholarly

articles. The output from Cameroon, however, comes before 2024 in all three frames. The frames indicate notable output from South Africa, Switzerland, China, Rwanda, and the Netherlands after 2024. In contrast, Uganda is highlighted in frame A with contributions from approximately 2018. Further analysis of the data from Uganda showed that 4 articles were published in collaboration with scholars from Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. This low level of scholarship, particularly among local scholars, diminishes the likelihood of achieving a

well-informed and contextual understanding of the effectiveness of DSCs in service delivery in Uganda. However, depending only on data from the Scopus database might also lead to these low figures, even though they indicate a low level of scholarly output. To tackle this challenge, grey literature from the Google Scholar database and extra articles sourced using the keywords from this article were obtained from the Taylor and Francis repository to inform the following sections of this work.

Status of Local Governments in Uganda

The degree to which local/urban governments are capable of transforming local/urban communities in the 21st century is enticing the interest of academics and policymakers internationally. This attention emanates from two major issues. Firstly, there are signs that patterns of local/urban governance are rapidly shifting with new sectors evolving, and with information science and technology (ICT), bipolarity and multi-polarity, rapid climate change and volatile demographic dynamics significantly reforming not only development but democratic processes (Grinin & Korotayev, 2024; Muyambo et al., 2024; Byrne, 2024; Roper, 2024; Hossain & Roy, 2019). For instance, a study by Thijssen and Van (2016) reveals that local/urban governments progressively apply digital approaches to reinforce the political involvement of residents in both policy and politics (Acanga, Mwesigwa, Oryang, & Oboi, 2022b). Other studies, including those by Wendji, Bertin, and Achuo (2026), Wagner and Lima (2023), and Mwesigwa, Bogere, and Ogwal (2022), indicate a connection between public participation and local or urban governance. This relationship is crucial for effective climate action and ensuring that strategies are developed with respect for the civil liberties of local or urban residents. Relatedly, recent evidence from Uganda shows that the implementation of decentralisation has improved the effectiveness of District Health Management Teams and Human Resources Management. This improvement is attributed to better decision analysis

and a more responsive approach to the needs of the local workforce (Mansour, Aryaija-Karemani, Martineau, Namakula, Mubiri, Ssengooba & Raven, 2022).

The result of this transformation is that local and urban governments no longer need to possess the necessary financial resources alone; they must also employ individuals with the appropriate skill set to effectively implement the local or urban government budget through efficient service delivery (Fouopi, Manga, Onana & Bitoto, 2024; Frimpong, Mensah & Nkrumah, 2023a&b; Brunetto et al., 2015). Secondly, the current local and urban governance seems to lack the level of professionalism expected by communities, hindering the achievement of a developmental local or urban government. As a result, local and urban governments have faced criticism for providing services that often do not align with the socio-economic needs of the communities they are supposed to serve (Wang, Zhang, Parrado & Ni, 2024). This disconnect can lead to both direct and passive protests regarding service delivery. In South Africa, for example, deadly service delivery protests occurred between 2014 and 2016. These protests highlighted that, despite the presence of various local and urban governments as a sign of increased democratisation, there was a lack of quality services, leading to growing frustration among citizens (Morudu, 2017; Wasserman, Chuma & Bosch, 2018; Day, Cornell & Malherbe, 2021; Chiwarawara, 2023). In Uganda, there has been notable public discontent regarding corruption and the poor management of waste, particularly in emerging cities like Mbarara (Gumisiriza & Kugonza, 2020). Furthermore, Guma (2017) highlights how post-colonial civil society in Uganda has utilised "collective action, civic activism, and engagement" to improve democracy and service delivery through initiatives like the popular weekly Black Monday movement demonstrations.

The Failure of Local Governments

A recent study conducted in South Africa revealed that local and urban governments have failed to provide basic services due to the immediate dishonesty and incompetence of the personnel in charge (Zhou & Utele, 2023). Furthermore, citizen disappointment has resulted in citizen *barazas* designed to create a direct connection between service providers and consumers, while also pursuing citizen-led strategies to improve service quality. The effectiveness of citizen participation, as demonstrated in studies like participatory budgeting in South Korea (Park, Yoon & Cho, 2023), the participatory budget cycle in Argentina (Signorelli, 2023), and participatory decision-making in Italy (Farinosi, Cirulli & Fortunati, 2023), reinforces the idea that in many instances, direct citizen involvement is crucial for enhancing communication between citizens and government. However, evidence from Sri Lanka suggests that while participatory budgeting serves as a catalyst for local democracy, it also has notable drawbacks. These include the potential for elitist capture and personal gains, which can create significant obstacles to local democratic processes, especially in the global south (Kuruppu, Adhikari, Gunarathna, Ambalangodage, Perera & Karunarathna, 2016).

The above perspectives on service delivery present a challenge to traditional notions of local and urban governance. They reinforce the need for an examination of the importance of decentralising authority, particularly concerning personnel, to lower levels of administration. Local and urban communities generally hope to receive quality and timely services. However, as noted by Carmichael & Knox (2024), this hope may have seemed dependable from the perspective of devolution, which designates local and urban governments as corporate entities within their jurisdictions. Yet, it has not met the expectations of most citizens. However, in the current context, the lack of quality services leads to community

dissatisfaction, resulting in various consequences like uneven growth and service protests (Hoole, Collinson & Newman, 2023; Chiwarawara, 2023). This situation makes the hope for improvement seem misleading for many local and urban governments in Sub-Saharan Africa, including Uganda.

The State of District Service Commissions in Uganda

This paper discusses the role of DSCs in managing Local Governments in Uganda, focusing on their contributions to the appointment, confirmation, promotion, disciplining, and removal from office of all designated employees, especially in light of the declining quality of service delivery at local and urban government levels (Bainomugisha et al., 2023). Despite researchers' efforts to study DSCs within their context, none seem to be entirely appropriate for the current situation in Uganda, where local and urban governance conditions differ significantly. Furthermore, there is a lack of studies on DSCs in Uganda. The few exceptions, like Bainomugisha et al. (2023), usually provide a list of various skills and attributes that local or urban government councils require from potential commissioners, along with endorsements. For example, Bainomugisha et al. (2024) examined the performance of statutory boards and commissions. Additionally, Biryomumeisho, Ocan, and Adyanga (2024) investigated the recentralization of local government functions. Similarly, Apolot and Emoron (2024) concentrated on employee training, with minimal emphasis on the DSC. They, however, overlook the important topic of DSCs and how they can be created or strengthened in local or urban governments. These findings are consistent with those of Schoeman and Chakwizira (2023), who observed that in developing countries, ongoing gaps in service delivery by local governments are linked to weak legal frameworks and strategic tools. These factors together create an extra bureaucratic layer in performance management that reinforces the need for collaborative governance (Danso & He, 2025).

The main focus of this paper is the prevailing state of local and urban government management in Uganda, which significantly influences the quality of service delivery in the country. Evidence indicates that the poor quality of local and urban governance in Uganda stems from organisational issues. Many DSCs have lost the trust of the communities they are meant to serve. This loss of confidence is linked to a disconnect between DSCs and effective local and urban government management, along with systemic corruption (Odeng, 2023; Otile & Atukunda, 2020). For example, a report from the Internal Security Organization (ISO) indicated that 90% of the DSCs are corrupt, considering the extent of extortion and inducement (Tumuhimbise, 2023; 2019). This condition challenges the importance of local and urban governance. Several commentators on decentralised governance, including Biryomumeisho et al. (2024), have proposed various factors that support the disbandment of DSCs through a thorough recentralization of administrative powers that were previously devolved to local and urban governments. Unless the ongoing presence of DSCs in local or urban government management is analysed, the current trend of recentralization (Madinah et al., 2015) may not protect DSCs in the near future.

For example, the government of Uganda has taken steps to recentralize the management of Kampala city and the appointment of chief administrative officers (Lwanga, 2016). Although the pretext has highlighted concerns regarding electoral politics, ethnic politics, and financial accountability, it continues to pose a significant challenge to the democratization process. Younda and Nzomo Tcheunta (2025) reviewed data from twenty-one Sub-Saharan countries between 2002 and 2019. They found that the funding mechanism for local government units acted as a mediator in the relationship between fiscal decentralisation and the risk of internal conflict. Their findings showed that policies based on intergovernmental transfers and expenditure decentralisation reduce the risk of

internal conflicts. In contrast, those that rely on the financial empowerment of decentralised communities and resource decentralisation increase the likelihood of internal conflicts. These insights may offer additional understanding of the recentralization that occurred at Kampala City Council Authority, as well as in municipalities and urban lower governments that are not performing well.

The Vulnerability of DSCs in Uganda

It becomes clear that the entity of DSC is not merely a vulnerable structure that has endured under the local and urban government institution, but rather one that continues to function as a fragile structure on a national scale (Biryomumeisho, Ocan, and Adyanga, 2024; Mutebi, Nsabagasani, Makumbi, & Rutebemberwa, 2019; Lwanga, 2016; Madinah et al., 2015). National legislation has traditionally examined employee recruitment rights within a political context, balancing the political agenda with the desires of citizens while ensuring fair recruitment processes (Agaba & Turyasingura, 2023). In several African countries, the laws allow for administrative decentralisation on broad issues. This can be seen as enabling local or urban staff to manage administrative processes. However, there are still some restrictions on employment access that have not yet been removed from political influence in many Sub-Saharan African countries (Mayanja & Akunda, 2023; Twinamatsiko et al., 2023). The discussion surrounding the depoliticisation of local and urban government jobs remains complex, resulting in a significant majority being limited in their access to these depoliticised positions. It is also noted that many of these DSCs are tied to national politics, which limits their capacity for impartiality in the employee recruitment processes. Consequently, several countries, including Uganda, still view DSCs as local or urban structures driven by political motives.

The Challenges from Outside the DSC

Although a DSC is expected to promote fairness, local applicants in the less-developed world face various challenges that complicate their access to employment. Kayaga (2009) identifies several challenges: pressure from policymakers, insufficient funding, corruption, and bureaucracy. These pose significant challenges, including the fact that most qualified and experienced potential employees are not being chosen for job interviews. For instance, while many potential employees are aware of the practice in local or urban government jobs, the DSCs encourage individuals who are skilled in the local language to submit their applications. As a result, filling a vacant position in the local or urban administrative structure appears to be more challenging for potential applicants, especially for those who have the required technical skills but struggle with proficiency in the local languages. This complexity increases as many job openings appear to depend on connections to a particular group of applicants who have specific unofficial socio-political attributes. This situation is concerning, particularly because public statements about employment in local or urban governments can be controversial and often do not align with the technical requirements specified in the job advertisements. However, a discourse analysis of the new service model in Australia reveals several interesting issues regarding how policy discourses shape problems and responses (Papadopoulos & O’Keeffe, 2024). These insights could be useful for contexts such as the global south, where DSC still struggle to gain public trust.

Situational Outlook

In Uganda, employment within local and urban government is still influenced by significant socio-political factors. Many young people feel hopeless due to the lack of fair opportunities to access the local and urban government structure. The 2017-18 Ugandan Auditor General’s Report highlighted concerning percentages of local and urban government employees affiliated with the ruling

political party. This indicated that qualified candidates who were affiliated or deemed to be affiliated with opposition political parties could not be considered for the job. As a result, it is necessary to implement intentional measures to minimise socio-political biases affecting the local or urban government recruitment process. A recent study conducted by ACCORD reveals that the prevalence of kickbacks among DSCs and their associates has been steadily increasing. However, there are no clear statistics available in Uganda regarding how potential employees individually experience the challenges of searching for jobs in local or urban government.

CONCLUSION

While Uganda's academic contribution to the global discussion on DSCs are scarce, examining the limited studies on the role of DSCs in local and urban government management in Uganda reveals a concerning situation. Although DSCs have the potential to improve local government effectiveness, their present condition is plagued by corruption, political interference, and a lack of professionalism. This situation has resulted in public discontent and a decline in trust. Additionally, high unemployment levels appear to obstruct the DSCs in fulfilling their role by affecting employment opportunities within local governments, often overlooking qualified candidates due to their political affiliations. The situation appears to be exacerbated by the high level of poverty, which is made worse by the tax system that many people navigate. The government of Uganda seems to have adopted a contractionary approach, making it challenging for businesses to thrive and survive due to the number of taxes and the funds collected from citizens by the country’s revenue authority. A few of them are probably going to continue limping until they finally give in. Therefore, it is our opinion that the DSCs, like the public service commission, will not have a positive impact on the growth and development of local and urban governments in Uganda.

Recommendations

From this review, we draw three recommendations, namely:

- In a bid to insulate DSC from political dominance, the members should not be appointed by the district executive committees but by the Public Service Commission, seeing that it serves as an extension of it at the lower level.
- Due diligence should always be sought before a member is selected to serve on the DSC because the work requires a higher level of integrity.
- Individuals serving on the DSC should always be required to serve in districts outside their areas of origin with a view to mitigating against districts or localism.

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