

Strategic Analysis of Institutional and Structural Obstacles to Decentralization in Sankuru and Their Consequences for Local Governance

TSHEKO TALONDA Isidore¹, YENI NKUMU Edit²

¹Assistant de l'Université patrice Emery Lumumba de Wembo-Nyama (UPEL/WN), Lumumba ville RDC.

²Université Pédagogique Nationale, Département de Physique et Sciences Appliqués

Abstract— Decentralization is one of the major institutional reforms undertaken in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) since the adoption of the Constitution of February 18, 2006. It aims to bring decision-making centers closer to citizens, improve public service delivery, and strengthen citizen participation in local affairs. However, despite the existence of a favorable legal framework, its implementation continues to face numerous obstacles. Sankuru Province particularly illustrates these difficulties due to weak institutional capacities, financial dependence, inadequate infrastructure, geographical isolation, and the persistence of centralized administrative practices. This article analyzes these obstacles through the strategic approach developed by Michel Crozier and Erhard Friedberg. This approach considers local institutions as systems of action in which actors have room for maneuver, mobilize different resources, and develop strategies to preserve or increase their power. The analysis shows that decentralization problems in Sankuru are not solely caused by shortcomings in the legal framework, but also result from power relations, institutional dependencies, structural constraints, and strategies developed by the various actors. The study concludes that effective decentralization requires not only clarification of responsibilities and strengthening of financial resources, but also improvement of administrative capacities, infrastructure, and mechanisms for citizen participation.

Keywords— Decentralization, Sankuru, local governance, strategic analysis, actors, power, institutional obstacles, structural constraints.

I. INTRODUCTION

To date, decentralization stands as a robust institutional mechanism favored by many African states, aiming to translate into action the desire to transform administrative systems historically characterized by a high concentration of power at the central level.

In the DRC, decentralization is thus grounded in a logic of redistributing competencies, responsibilities, and resources among the central state, the provinces, and decentralized territorial entities. It is intended to grant local institutions sufficient leeway to identify development priorities, mobilize available resources, and meet the needs of the population. However, the legal transfer of competencies does not necessarily equate to their effective exercise.

The province of Sankuru offers a particularly interesting case study for analyzing this contradiction between formal and actual autonomy. Since the 2015 territorial reorganization, Sankuru has continued to face significant institutional and structural challenges. Yet, these difficulties must be analyzed beyond a merely technical or legal perspective. Decentralization inherently involves a redistribution of power; it alters the relationships between the various actors involved in local public management. National authorities, provincial authorities, territorial administrations, elected officials, traditional chiefs, civil society organizations, development partners, and the general population all possess differing resources and interests. In this context, the strategic analysis developed by Michel Crozier and Erhard Friedberg is of particular interest. For them, an organization must be understood as a "concrete system of action" in which actors are not merely rule-followers; rather, they possess a degree of

freedom, control specific resources, and devise strategies to defend their interests (Crozier & Friedberg, 1977, p. 69).

Consequently, the fundamental question addressed in this article is: to what extent do institutional and structural obstacles influence the realization of decentralization and the quality of local governance in Sankuru province?

The hypothesis proposed here is that the challenges facing decentralization in Sankuru stem from the interplay between institutional shortcomings, structural constraints, and the strategies adopted by various stakeholders. In other words, the obstacles arise not merely from a lack of resources or inadequate legal frameworks, but also from the power dynamics shaping relationships among the actors involved.

This article therefore aims to identify the key institutional and structural impediments to decentralization in Sankuru and to analyze their impact on local governance through a strategic lens. To achieve this, the study employs a qualitative approach based on document review and a strategic analysis of the relationships between the various local governance stakeholders. The study involves, on the one hand, examining legal texts and institutional documents regarding decentralization in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and, on the other, analyzing the strategies, resources, scope for maneuver, and power dynamics of the key actors involved in the decentralization process. This approach makes it possible to identify the mechanisms that create or perpetuate these obstacles and to assess their effects on local institutions—specifically regarding public service delivery, citizen participation, and the effectiveness of local governance.

II. KEY INSTITUTIONAL AND STRUCTURAL OBSTACLES TO DECENTRALIZATION IN SANKURU

A) Institutional Deadlocks

➤ *Ambiguity in the division of competences*

One of the main obstacles to the effective implementation of decentralization lies in the difficulty of establishing a sufficiently clear separation of powers between the central state, the provinces, and decentralized territorial entities. The Congolese Constitution recognizes the administrative and financial autonomy of the provinces and provides for a division of competencies among the various levels of government (Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2006).

However, in practice, the coexistence of exclusive, concurrent, and shared competencies can lead to overlaps. This situation is liable to trigger jurisdictional conflicts and create uncertainty regarding which authority is actually responsible for a given decision.

From a strategic perspective, this ambiguity constitutes a zone of uncertainty. Actors who control the interpretation of rules can leverage this resource to strengthen their influence over other actors (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977, pp. 73–74).

The consequences include, notably, limited decision-making autonomy for local authorities, delays in the implementation of decisions, and a persistent dependence on national structures.

➤ *The administrative weakness of local structures*

Decentralization requires local administrations that are robust enough to translate legal mandates into concrete public policies. However, local administrations in Sankuru face a shortage of qualified human resources, material assets, and technical capacity.

This situation creates a gap between the responsibilities assigned to local bodies and their actual capacity to act. Thus, the mere existence of a local institution does not automatically guarantee its effectiveness.

Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan highlights the importance of considering the discrepancy between official administrative norms and the actual practices of African administrations (Olivier de Sardan, 1995). In the case of Sankuru, this gap is evident in the challenges surrounding planning, administrative management, and resource mobilization.

This institutional weakness reinforces the dependence of local bodies on higher-level administrative authorities, technical and financial partners, and external organizations.

➤ *Financial dependence*

Financial autonomy is an essential prerequisite for political and administrative autonomy. A local authority that lacks sufficient control over its resources remains dependent on those who hold the financial means.

Congolese legislation provides mechanisms for funding provinces and decentralized territorial entities; however, their effective operation is hampered by challenges regarding revenue mobilization, resource transfers, and financial management (Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2008).

In Sankuru, this dependency limits the ability of local authorities to plan long-term public policies. It can also lead to

projects being prioritized based on available funding rather than the actual needs of the population.

From a strategic perspective, financial resources represent a major area of uncertainty. Whoever controls these resources wields significant bargaining power.

➤ *The persistence of centralizing practices*

Decentralization does not instantly alter administrative habits. Practices inherited from a highly centralized system can continue to influence the behavior of the actors involved.

Reforms that shift power dynamics often meet with resistance. Those who benefited from the old system may seek to retain their resources, prerogatives, or influence (Friedberg, 1993).

In Sankuru, this persistence manifests as a concentration of key decision-making, intervention by higher authorities in local affairs, and limited community participation in public decision-making.

B) Structural Obstacles to Decentralization

➤ *Geographical and infrastructural constraints*

The geographical context of Sankuru poses a significant challenge for local governance. The vastness of the territory, inadequate road infrastructure, and communication difficulties hinder the movement of people, goods, and information.

Yet, effective decentralization requires a degree of proximity between institutions and the population. When administrative bodies are difficult to access, the ability to bring government closer to the citizens remains limited.

Geographical constraints can also drive up administrative operating costs and slow the implementation of public policies. Consequently, they can create new dependencies between those who control means of transport and those who require access to them.

➤ *Human resource deficiencies*

An institution's capacity depends largely on the skills of its staff. An administration lacking sufficiently trained managers struggles to handle planning, budget management, revenue mobilization, and public policy evaluation.

Pierre Muller emphasizes that institutional capacity is a key factor in the effectiveness of public policies (Muller, 2018). In this context, a skills gap at the local level can significantly limit the expected impact of decentralization.

This situation can also increase reliance on external expertise and diminish the ability of local institutions to define their own priorities.

➤ *Actor dynamics and power relations*

Local governance in Sankuru involves various categories of actors. Provincial authorities, territorial administrations, elected officials, traditional chiefs, civil society organizations, and the general population do not share the same resources or interests.

Traditional chiefs, for instance, possess significant social and cultural legitimacy, particularly regarding land management, conflict resolution, and community mobilization. Administrative authorities, on the other hand, hold institutional and legal resources.

These varying resources give rise to power dynamics. As Crozier and Friedberg demonstrate, power stems notably from

the control of areas of uncertainty and of resources upon which other actors depend (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977).

Interactions between actors generate conflicts, yet they can also foster compromises when consultation mechanisms are in place.

➤ Sociopolitical resistance

Citizen participation is a key aspect of decentralized governance. However, such participation depends on several factors: access to information, transparency, trust between the governing and the governed, and the existence of spaces for dialogue.

Alexis de Tocqueville views participation in local life as an important element of democratic learning and the management of public affairs (Tocqueville, 1986, pp. 93–94).

In Sankuru, low participation levels are linked to a lack of information, weak consultation mechanisms, and local political rivalries. Consequently, decentralization risks remaining primarily institutional in nature, failing to bring about genuine democratization of local governance.

III. SUMMARY TABLES OF BLOCKAGES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

TABLE 1. Summary of key institutional obstacles

N°	Institutional deadlocks	Key events	Implications for governance
1	Ambiguity regarding the division of competences	Overlapping responsibilities, divergent interpretations of the texts	Jurisdictional conflicts, slow decision-making, limited autonomy
2	Administrative weakness	Shortage of qualified personnel and material resources	Limited capacity for action and technical dependence
3	Financial dependence	Low revenue mobilization and reliance on transfers	Planning difficulties and low project completion rates
4	Centralizing practices	Maintenance of central control mechanisms	Limitation of provincial and local autonomy

Source : Our conceptualization based on the literature drawn upon.

TABLE 2. Summary of structural bottlenecks

N°	Structural bottlenecks	Manifestations	Conséquences
1	Geographical and infrastructural constraints	Isolation, inadequate roads, poor communications coverage	Citizen alienation, high costs, and administrative slowness
2	Insufficient human resources	Shortage of specialized managers and limited continuing education	Poor quality of services and reliance on external expertise
3	Acting dynamics and power relations	Rivalries, negotiations, differentiated control of resources	Conflict, instability, and poor coordination
4	Sociopolitical resistance	Low turnout, political rivalries, centralizing habits	Challenges regarding participatory governance and low ownership of the reform

Source : Notre conception à partir de la littérature mobilisée.

IV. DISCUSSION: OBSTACLES IN LIGHT OF STRATEGIC ANALYSIS

An analysis of institutional and structural bottlenecks reveals that the challenges facing decentralization in Sankuru cannot be reduced merely to a lack of legal texts. While a legal framework is a necessary condition, it is insufficient on its own to transform administrative practices.

The approach developed by Crozier and Friedberg offers a way to understand this situation by examining the interactions between actors. Each actor seeks to preserve a degree of autonomy and to control the resources that enable them to influence the system. For instance, the central state may attempt to retain certain control mechanisms, while provincial authorities demand greater autonomy.

Institutional ambiguities can thus be interpreted as arenas for negotiation and power dynamics. Financial dependency also creates an asymmetry between those who control resources and those who rely on them.

Structural constraints reinforce these dependency relationships. Geographical isolation, for example, restricts the flow of information and makes local institutions more dependent on structures that possess logistical capabilities. Similarly, a shortage of human resources increases reliance on external experts.

It is evident, then, that institutional and structural bottlenecks reinforce one another. A local institution that is administratively weak is more likely to be financially and technically dependent. An institution that is financially dependent has less room for negotiation. Geographical remoteness, in turn, exacerbates the difficulties associated with supervision and coordination.

Consequently, local governance in Sankuru must be understood as a system in which resources, constraints, and actor strategies are interdependent.

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL GOVERNANCE

The various identified bottlenecks have several consequences for local governance :

They limit the ability of local institutions to make decisions autonomously. Legal autonomy thus remains partially disconnected from actual capacity for action;

- they slow down the implementation of public policies. Financial, administrative, and infrastructural shortcomings make it difficult to carry out local programs;
- they affect the quality of public services. When administrations lack human, financial, and material resources, their ability to meet the population's needs diminishes;
- they can reduce citizens' trust in institutions. An administration that is remote, inaccessible, and unable to provide services consistently risks being perceived as ineffective;
- finally, these obstacles limit citizen participation. When consultation mechanisms are weak and information flows poorly, the public has fewer opportunities to participate in defining local priorities.

- Local governance thus emerges as the result of a combination of institutional capacities, available resources, and the relationships between stakeholders.

VI. CONCLUSION

A strategic analysis of the institutional and structural obstacles to decentralization in Sankuru reveals that the successful completion of this reform depends on more than just the existence of a legal framework. Despite constitutional and legislative provisions recognizing the autonomy of provinces and decentralized territorial entities, various factors continue to limit the ability of local institutions to fully exercise their responsibilities.

Key institutional hurdles include ambiguous divisions of authority, administrative weakness, financial dependence, and the persistence of centralizing practices. These are compounded by structural constraints such as geographical isolation, inadequate infrastructure, a shortage of human resources, power dynamics between stakeholders, and socio-political resistance. The approach developed by Crozier and Friedberg offers a way to move beyond a purely technical interpretation of these challenges. The obstacles also emerge from interactions between actors who possess varying resources and seek to preserve their own room for maneuver. Decentralization thus becomes a arena for negotiation, cooperation, and conflict regarding the control of resources and competencies.

Ultimately, the success of decentralization in Sankuru requires a combination of institutional reforms and structural measures. It is essential to clarify competencies, strengthen administrative capacity, enhance financial autonomy, develop infrastructure, and establish more effective mechanisms for citizen participation. Such an approach would help reduce institutional dependencies and gradually build a system of local governance that is more autonomous, participatory, and effective.

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