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Implementing Administrative Decentralization In Bobonaro Municipality, Timor-Leste: Human Resource Capacity And Local Governance Challenges

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ABSTRACT
Decentralization has emerged as a critical component of governance reform in developing countries, with the goal of enhancing local accountability, efficiency, and citizen participation. This study examines the implementation of administrative decentralization in Bobonaro Municipality, Timor-Leste, focusing on the relationship between human resource capacity and local governance performance. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were gathered through interviews, observations, and document analysis involving twelve key informants from municipal institutions and local communities. The findings indicate that while legal frameworks establish a robust foundation for decentralization, practical implementation is hindered by institutional weaknesses, fiscal dependency, and misallocation of human resources. Although many local officials possess adequate academic qualifications, deficiencies in merit-based recruitment, technical specialization, and managerial competence prevent effective administration. Additionally, limited citizen participation and gender imbalances detract from accountability in local decision-making processes. The study concludes that successful decentralization necessitates integrated reforms aimed at strengthening institutional capacity, promoting meritocratic governance, and ensuring fiscal autonomy. This research contributes to the literature on post-conflict state-building by illustrating how human resource readiness influences the sustainability and effectiveness of local governance in emerging democracies.

Keywords: Administrative decentralization, human resource capacity, local governance, institutional reform.

Introduction

Decentralization has emerged as a pivotal strategy in contemporary governance, particularly in developing nations aiming to enhance local democracy and elevate the quality of public services (Bueno & Salapa, 2022; Mohammed et al., 2025; Pradana, 2021). The fundamental principle of *decentralization* is to transfer decision-making authority closer to the populace, thereby ensuring that policies are more attuned to local needs (Minj, 2024). Numerous foundational studies underscore that decentralization can

bolster local government accountability, encourage citizen participation, and enhance administrative efficiency (Arkorful et al., 2021; Swastika et al., 2024). However, experiences from various countries indicate that the results frequently do not meet expectations (Webb et al., 2021). Decentralization often encounters significant challenges, particularly concerning human resource limitations, weak institutional capacities, and deficiencies in fiscal and infrastructural preparedness (Shao & Razzaq, 2022).

Timor-Leste, as a relatively nascent nation, has prioritized decentralization as a central element of its institutional development since gaining independence (Gomes, 2025). The 2002 Constitution underscored the significance of decentralization, which was subsequently operationalized through various regulations, including Decree Law No. 3/2016 on local governance, amended by Decree Law No. 84/2023 and Ministerial Diploma No. 85/2023. These regulations establish the legal framework for the establishment of municipal authorities tasked with executing governance functions at the local level (El Kezazy & Hilmi, 2023; Rieck et al., 2022). In conjunction with this regulatory framework, the government has also initiated community-based development programs, such as the Local Development Program (PDL), the District Integrated Development Program (PDID), and the National Village Development Program (PNDS) (Berriet-Solliec et al., 2022). These initiatives exemplify the government's dedication to strengthening regional autonomy and promoting more inclusive development (Prabhakar, 2025; Pratiwi & Susiyanto, 2021).

The implementation of administrative decentralization in Timor-Leste has encountered several challenges (Barros & Ribeiro, 2024; Do Rosario & Novaria, 2025). International evaluation reports indicate that the limited capacity of local civil servants is one of the most significant barriers (Elvira & de Fátima Bruno-Faria, 2021; Rafique et al., 2023). The number of staff at the municipal level is insufficient relative to the workload, and the technical competencies of these personnel remain inadequate (Andiani & Jayanagara, 2023). Recruitment processes are not entirely merit-based, and existing training programs have not yet reached their full potential (Ahuja & Pandit, 2020; Lopes, 2023). These conditions hinder local authorities in executing the newly delegated powers, thereby obstructing the full realization of decentralization objectives (Atisa et al., 2021; Tendengu et al., 2025).

Experiences in various countries indicate similar trends. For instance, in Ghana and Bangladesh, decentralization has been found to be ineffective due to the limited capacity of local officials to manage the responsibilities assigned to them (Adjei et al., 2022). In several African nations, the primary challenges stem from weak fiscal and administrative capacities at the local level, which ultimately prevent decentralization policies from significantly enhancing public service delivery. Additional research underscores the disconnect between regulations established at the central government level and the practical challenges encountered by local governments (Shohet Radom et al., 2025). Local authorities frequently face difficulties in exercising their new powers

due to constraints in human resources, insufficient incentive systems, and inadequate coordination with the central government (Smith, 2023).

Contemporary research highlights the critical role of human resource readiness in ensuring the success of decentralization (Kessy, 2023). In fragile states, Brennan and Abimbola (2023) argue that decentralization within the health sector can enhance service access only when backed by competent personnel and effective personnel management systems. In the absence of such support, decentralization may worsen service disparities across regions (Bojanic & Collins, 2021). This aligns with findings from evaluations conducted in Timor-Leste, which indicate that the success of local development programs is significantly contingent upon the technical readiness of civil servants and the supporting institutional mechanisms (Gomes, 2025).

Bobonaro Municipality, strategically positioned as a border region, exemplifies the complexities associated with the implementation of administrative decentralization (Moreno & Sulasula, 2024). This area confronts the dual challenge of enhancing basic services while ensuring social stability and security (Tolera, 2024). In this context, human resource capacity emerges as a critical factor influencing the effectiveness of decentralization policies (Abbas & Najam, 2025). Challenges such as a limited workforce, inadequate technical competence, and insufficient training and institutional support significantly hinder progress (Jabbouri & Farooq, 2021). Consequently, Bobonaro serves as an ideal case study for examining the relationship between human resource capacity and the efficacy of decentralization implementation in Timor-Leste (Do Rosario & Novaria, 2025).

Previous studies on decentralization have primarily focused on institutional structures and policy frameworks but often overlook the decisive role of human resource capacity in shaping successful implementation outcomes (Saputra et al., 2024). Ahuja and Pandit (2020) emphasized that in many developing countries, decentralization efforts tend to falter due to inadequate staffing and insufficient technical expertise among local officials. Their research, however, was largely descriptive and did not examine how these capacity gaps manifest within specific post-conflict governance systems such as Timor-Leste (Niner et al., 2022). Similarly, Brennan and Abimbola (2023) explored decentralization in fragile states' health sectors and found that the absence of competent personnel and weak managerial systems can exacerbate regional disparities rather than improve service delivery.

This research arises from the necessity to address a significant gap in the existing literature. While the majority of studies on decentralization in Timor-Leste have concentrated on legal, regulatory, and political dimensions, comprehensive analyses of the relationship between human resource capacity and the success of administrative decentralization remain limited. However, human factors play a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of local governance. By focusing on the case study of Bobonaro Municipality, this research aims to offer empirical insights that enhance our understanding of how human resource capacity influences the implementation of administrative decentralization in the context of a post-conflict state.

This study aims to analyze the process of implementing administrative decentralization in Bobonaro Municipality, identify barriers associated with human resources, and develop strategic recommendations to enhance institutional capacity and improve the effectiveness of local governance in Timor-Leste. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to the literature on capacity-building in decentralized governance and practically by offering policy recommendations for strengthening local institutional performance.

Research Method

This research utilized a qualitative approach with a case study methodology, concentrating on the implementation of the administrative decentralization policy in the Municipality of Bobonaro, Timor-Leste. The study was conducted at the Authority Bobonaro Municipality, located in Maliana, and involved 12 key informants selected through purposive sampling. The informants included municipal authority officials, technical staff, and community leaders who were directly engaged in or had expertise regarding the policy implementation. Data sources comprised both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews and direct observations of administrative activities, while secondary data were sourced from official government documents, municipal reports, national legislation, and pertinent academic literature.

The data collection process integrated observation, interviews, and document analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the case under study. Data analysis adhered to the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, encompassing data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Sugiyono, 2017). To ensure the reliability and credibility of the findings, triangulation of sources and methods was implemented by comparing interviews, observations, and documentation. Additionally, validity was enhanced through member checks with key informants and peer debriefing with academic supervisors, ensuring that interpretations remained consistent across various sources of evidence.

Results and Discussion

The research identified several significant scientific findings pertaining to the implementation of administrative decentralization in Bobonaro Municipality, Timor-Leste. These findings highlight structural, institutional, and resource-based challenges that impact the effectiveness of local governance.

Unequal Population Distribution and Service Delivery

The findings indicate that the population of Bobonaro Municipality is disproportionately distributed. Nearly half of the population resides in Maliana and Bobonaro, collectively representing 54.56% of the total population. In contrast, Lolotoe and Cailaco exhibit significantly smaller populations, as demonstrated in the table below.

Table 1. Population by Tribe in Bobonaro Municipality

No	Tribe Area Administrative	Population
1	Atabae	15,967
2	Balibo	20,722
3	Bobonaro	33,614
4	Cailaco	14,745
5	Lolotoe	9,053
6	Maliana	38,999
	Total	133,100

Source: Annual report of the Municipality of Bobonaro (2025).

The imbalance in population distribution has significant implications for public service delivery, creating a gap between demand and availability. In densely populated areas like Maliana and Bobonaro, public services face immense pressure as demand exceeds facility capacity. This results in long queues, increased waiting times, and a decline in service quality. In contrast, areas with smaller populations often have underutilized facilities, which can lead to higher costs per user. This situation highlights a mismatch between resource allocation and the actual needs of the community, exposing weaknesses in decentralized planning that does not consider demographic distribution. As (Smoke, 2015) points out, decentralization without needs-based planning can exacerbate regional inequality. Additionally, the current budget allocation system, which relies on traditional formulas, fails to account for demographic indicators or sectoral needs. Consequently, high-population areas do not receive an adequate share of the budget, while local governments struggle to manage surges in demand.

To address this issue, it is essential to adjust allocations based on population and needs, supported by spatial analysis techniques such as GIS mapping to identify underserved areas. Strengthening managerial capacity and implementing service innovations like mobile service units and e-services can serve as medium and long-term strategies to reduce access disparities and enhance the effectiveness of decentralization in Bobonaro. Therefore, population distribution emerges as a critical factor influencing public service outcomes within a decentralized framework.

Organizational Structure and Capacity Gaps

The municipal government has officially established 19 directorates and 31 departments; however, the available personnel are insufficient to support the operation of all units. This situation highlights a structural-capacity gap, where the complexity of the organization is not matched by adequate human resources. According to institutional isomorphism theory (DiMaggio & Powell), organizations in developing contexts often adopt formal structures to gain legitimacy, but they lack the internal capacity to carry out their intended functions. Recent studies in Indonesia (Salomo & Rahmayanti, 2023; Setiawan et al., 2022) confirm that local governments frequently replicate complex bureaucratic and accountability frameworks without the necessary staffing or operational capacity, which undermines their administrative performance. Similar issues have been observed in disadvantaged regions of Eastern Indonesia (Shoesmith et

al., 2020), where fiscal dependence and infrastructure limitations further constrain organizational effectiveness.

Human Resource Readiness and Placement Issues

The findings show that human resource readiness in Bobonaro Municipality is strong, especially regarding academic qualifications. A large majority of municipal officials hold at least a bachelor's degree (Lisensiatura), while a smaller number have obtained master's or doctoral degrees. This indicates that the availability of academically qualified personnel is not a major constraint for local administration (see Table 2).

Table 2. Educational Background of Municipal Officials in Bobonaro Municipality

Education Level	Number of Officials
Secondary	3
Diploma (DIII)	2
Bachelor	38
Master	1
Doctorate	1

Source: Annual report of the Municipality of Bobonaro (2025).

Despite a relatively high level of educational readiness, significant placement issues persist. Many strategic positions are still held by staff with only a secondary-level education, potentially undermining decision-making quality. Additionally, technical roles are often filled by graduates with general academic backgrounds rather than specialized training in public administration, finance, or information technology, which could hinder service delivery efficiency.

The findings also reveal a gender imbalance, with women comprising less than one-third of the workforce and primarily occupying mid-level administrative positions. Their representation in senior leadership roles remains limited. Furthermore, the prevalence of senior officials most of whom are aged 50 and above in leadership raises concerns about succession planning, as institutional continuity may be jeopardized when these officials retire. Another important observation is that several officials come from outside Bobonaro, which could pose challenges in aligning administrative decisions with local socio-cultural contexts. Together, these results support (Grindle) argument that bureaucratic weaknesses in developing countries stem more from institutional deficiencies in recruitment, placement, and merit-based governance than from a lack of qualified personnel.

Fiscal Dependence and Infrastructure Constraints

Another critical finding is that fiscal dependence on central government transfers severely limits municipal autonomy. Insufficient local revenue, coupled with inadequate infrastructure, constrains the ability of the municipality to independently respond to community needs. This phenomenon reflects the "decentralization paradox," where authority is legally devolved but fiscal capacity remains centralized. (Francis & James)

documented a similar challenge in Uganda, where decentralization failed to improve service delivery due to continued financial dependence. This condition demonstrates that administrative decentralization requires not only regulatory reform but also fiscal empowerment.

Community Participation and Accountability

The findings reveal that administrative decentralization in Bobonaro has not yet led to meaningful community participation. While the national legal framework requires citizen involvement, actual practices in planning and monitoring are limited. Participation is often controlled by tribal elites and local bureaucrats, leaving ordinary citizens, particularly women and youth, as passive participants rather than active contributors.

Field evidence highlights this disparity. For instance, during consultations on the National Program for Suco Development (PNDS), most citizens were primarily engaged in the physical implementation phase, such as repairing rural roads or constructing schools and health facilities. Their involvement in identifying priorities or monitoring financial management was minimal. Consequently, participation tends to be procedural rather than substantive, undermining the democratic goals of decentralization. These findings resonate with a study in Ghana (Be-Ere, 2023), which found that participation by marginalized citizens within a decentralized system is often merely symbolic. Structural barriers, including elite dominance and limited access to information, hinder meaningful citizen engagement in shaping development policy. Similarly, research in Kenya, (Onyalo, 2024) indicates that while decentralization creates formal opportunities for community participation, the existing mechanisms lack the strength to empower citizens to influence policy effectively. A comparable situation exists in Bangladesh, where (Ahmed et al., 2022) assert that community participation in village deliberation forums is largely a formality, with no substantial contribution to development planning and budgeting.

Thus, the situation in Bobonaro reflects broader trends in other developing countries, showing that decentralization often results in only formal participation. This underscores the notion that public accountability in decentralized systems cannot be achieved solely through regulatory frameworks. True accountability requires effective institutional mechanisms, transparent access to information, and enhanced political capacity within communities to engage meaningfully in decision-making.

Synthesis of Findings

The scientific findings indicate that the implementation of decentralization in Bobonaro is prevented by discrepancies between regulatory frameworks and the actual administrative capacity. The uneven distribution of the population leads to unequal service delivery outcomes, while weaknesses in organizational structure and human resources undermine institutional effectiveness. Additionally, fiscal dependence on the central government limits local autonomy, and insufficient community participation

diminishes accountability. These results highlight that successful decentralization involves more than merely adopting formal policies; it necessitates systematic investments in human resources, fiscal capacity, and participatory governance mechanisms.

Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that the implementation of administrative decentralization in Bobonaro Municipality remains constrained by institutional, fiscal, and human resource limitations. Although the legal and policy frameworks of Timor-Leste provide a strong basis for decentralization, the gap between regulatory design and administrative capacity prevents local governments from effectively exercising devolved authority. These constraints highlight that decentralization is not merely a legal or structural reform but a complex governance process that depends on functional institutions, competent personnel, and adequate fiscal autonomy. From a scientific perspective, the research demonstrates that human resource readiness in terms of educational qualifications does not necessarily ensure administrative effectiveness. The key challenge lies in non-meritocratic recruitment, weak technical specialization, and limited managerial coordination. Fiscal dependency on the central government and procedural forms of citizen participation further weakens local accountability. These interrelated factors collectively indicate that decentralization success is determined by the interaction between human capability, institutional strength, and participatory governance mechanisms. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on decentralization in post-conflict contexts by emphasizing the need for integrated reforms. Strengthening merit-based placement systems, investing in continuous training, and introducing performance-based fiscal transfers are essential to improve governance outcomes. Future research could adopt a comparative or longitudinal approach to evaluate how institutional learning, fiscal reforms, and technological innovations shape the sustainability and inclusiveness of decentralized governance in Timor-Leste.

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