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# Money Flows, Water Trickles: Understanding Patterns of Decentralized Water Provision in Tanzania

RUTH D. CARLITZ\*

*University of Gothenburg, Sweden*

**Summary.** — Over the past three decades, an increasing number of low- and middle-income countries have decentralized water provision to the local government level, and have sought to more thoroughly involve users in service delivery. Such reforms reflect the twin goals of encouraging greater responsiveness to local needs and promoting sustainability. This study illustrates how the aims of decentralization can be undermined in the absence of robust democratic competition, and how governments interpret “demand” by voters in such settings. Focusing on the Tanzanian water sector, the paper first traces the distribution of money for water from the central government to the district level. Next, I consider how district governments use these funds to distribute water infrastructure within their jurisdictions, using geo-referenced data on all 75,000 water points serving rural Tanzanians. I find that the central government’s allocation of money to districts is fairly unresponsive to local needs. However, the pattern of distribution cannot primarily be explained by politics, with the exception of consistent favoritism of the Minister for Water’s home district. Political favoritism is more pronounced at the local level. Within districts, the distribution of new water infrastructure is skewed to favor localities with higher demonstrated levels of support for the ruling party. In addition, wealthier and better-connected communities—those with the resources to more effectively express their demands—are significantly more likely to benefit from new construction. This suggests that “demand-responsive” approaches to water provision can entrench regressive patterns of distribution.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, at least 41 countries have decentralized water and sanitation services to subnational governments (Herrera & Post, 2014). Such reforms have typically included provisions requiring water users to demand, own, and maintain their water services and participate in their design (Lockwood & Smits, 2011). Decentralized water provision aims to engender greater responsiveness to local needs. In general, bringing government closer to the governed should facilitate the identification and targeting of needy populations (Crook, 2003; Galasso & Ravallion, 2005), and make it easier for citizens to sanction or reward poor or good behavior on the part of local officials (Faguet, 2012). Moreover, having water users make informed choices about their preferred service level is expected to promote sustainability, by encouraging users to contribute to the upkeep of water infrastructure (Koehler, Thomson, & Hope, 2015).

However, decentralization has frequently failed to live up to its promise (Conyers, 2007; Crook, 2003; Olowu, 2003; Slater, 1989). In particular, decentralization can falter in countries where local democracy does not function properly (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006). Specifically, in dominant party regimes—where multiparty elections are held but usually do not allow for the alternation of political power (Magaloni & Kricheli, 2010)—incumbent politicians have used decentralization reforms to consolidate their power (Green, 2011; Riedl & Dickovick, 2014).

This study provides an empirical illustration of the dynamics of service delivery in the dominant party regime context. I do not aim to distinguish the effect of decentralization *per se*, given a lack of data on relevant outcomes from the pre-reform period. Rather, the paper illustrates how the aims of decentralization can be undermined in a dominant party regime, and how governments interpret “demand” by voters in such settings.

Focusing on the Tanzanian water sector, I first trace the distribution of money for water from the central government to the country’s local government authorities (LGAs). Next, I consider how LGAs use these funds to distribute water infrastructure within their jurisdictions, using detailed, geo-referenced data from a water point<sup>1</sup> mapping exercise conducted during 2011–13. I find that the central government’s allocation of money to LGAs is fairly unresponsive to local needs. However, the pattern of distribution cannot be primarily explained by politics, with the exception of consistent favoritism of the Minister for Water’s home district. Political favoritism is more pronounced at the local level. Within LGAs, the distribution of new water infrastructure is skewed to favor localities with higher demonstrated levels of support for the ruling party. In addition, wealthier and better-connected communities—those with the resources to more effectively express their demands—are significantly more likely to benefit from new construction.

This study’s main contribution is empirical—serving to test theories that have dominated the decentralization and distribution politics literatures with finely grained, geo-referenced data on public goods provision. While the literature on distributive politics in developing countries has been expanding (Golden & Min, 2013; Stokes, Dunning, Nazareno, & Brusco, 2013) studies that incorporate such detailed data are still rare.<sup>2</sup> The granular data I use allow me to consider service delivery at a very localized level. Unlike studies that rely on blunter measures, I am able to distinguish between local capture and politicized misallocation by local governments.

Furthermore, this study considers the allocation of resources both *to* and *within* districts, allowing one to compare the logic of distribution by Tanzania’s central and local governments. Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006) note that there is

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fairly little evidence concerning the relative accountability of local and national governments. The finding that targeting tends to be regressive at lower levels of government contrasts with much of the extant research on pro-poor targeting in low-income countries. Table 1 shows that most recent studies have found more pro-poor targeting at the local level than by central governments. The extent to which differences in the quality of targeting reflect differences in regime type represents a fruitful path of future inquiry.

This paper's focus on rural areas also represents an important contribution to the literature on strategies for promoting sustainable water provision. Recent studies have focused on the urban water sector (Herrera & Post, 2014; Marson & Savin, 2015). However, the vast majority of people who do not have access to improved drinking water sources live in rural areas. As of 2015, 79% of the people using unimproved sources and 93% of people using surface water were rural residents (UNICEF & World Health Organization, 2015). In addition, despite rapid urbanization over the past half century, most countries in Africa remain predominantly rural. This enhances the generalizability of my findings.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the focus on water provision makes the analysis relevant to the literature on political ecology, in seeking to politicize our understanding of the distribution of water (Loftus, 2009).

This study also sheds light on the broader question of how dominant party regimes stay in power. This is an important contribution given that such polities represent the most common type of authoritarian rule in the post-World War II period.<sup>4</sup> Empirical work on this topic has primarily focused on how national-level elections and legislatures serve to bolster dominant party regimes. Less well understood is how the dynamics of dominant party rule play out at the local level.

This paper proceeds as follows. The next section provides relevant background information on decentralization as a strategy for improving rural water provision. Section 3 highlights relevant features of the Tanzanian context. Section 4 presents empirical analysis of central government allocations, while Section 5 analyzes infrastructure distribution by local governments. Section 6 discusses the results in light of the extant literature, and Section 7 concludes.

## 2. DECENTRALIZATION OF WATER PROVISION: PROMISE AND REALITY

Improved access to clean water benefits not only those who drink, bathe, and wash their dishes in it; clean water can also help to limit the spread of disease and contribute to environmental protection. Positive externalities such as these have motivated government intervention in the water sector so that the benefits of improved access may be more widely enjoyed. Furthermore, water distribution represents a natural monopoly, limiting the scope for competitive pressures. The sector is also characterized by a high degree of sunk costs (van Ginneken, Netterstrom, & Bennett, 2011). These factors and others encouraged the centralized, supply-driven approach that characterized the water sector for decades in many low- and middle-income countries in the post-World War II era.

By the late 1980s, however, financial crises and rapid population growth meant that many governments lacked the resources to provide and maintain sufficient infrastructure for water provision. Fragmented planning, inefficiency, and lack of cost recovery further exacerbated the situation (Prasad, 2007; World Bank, 1994). Awareness of these

Table 1. *Studies of central vs. local targeting of the poor*

Author(s)	Focus of Study	Findings	More pro-poor targeting at lower levels?
Alderman (2002, 2002)	Social assistance program in Albania	Local authorities better allocate social assistance among households than does central government among local authorities.	Yes
Baird <i>et al.</i> (2013)	Community-driven development program in Tanzania	Strongly regressive pattern of demand across districts. However, progressive funding formula, eligibility rule, and decentralized beneficiary selection combine to result in mildly pro-poor targeting within districts.	Yes
Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006)	Local government development programs in West Bengal	Inter-village allocations exhibit anti-poor bias while intra-village targeting favors the poor.	Yes
Chase (2002)	Social fund in Armenia	Social fund was successful in targeting communities with poorest infrastructure, but these communities were not always among the poorest and fund was slightly regressive in targeting households in rural areas.	No
Galasso and Ravallion (2005)	Food-for-education program in Bangladesh	Capture within community less severe than distorted inter-community allocations decided by higher-level governments.	Yes
Paxson and Schady (2002)	Social fund in Peru	The social fund, which emphasized geographic targeting, reached poorest districts but not poorest households in those districts.	No

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