

# Local Governance and Decentralisation in Sierra Leone: Examining Administrative Linkages among Local and Chiefdom Councils in Bo District

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**Abstract:** Local government institutions serve as the primary conduit through which public services are delivered to people in local communities. In the decentralisation programme in Sierra Leone, local government institutions operate at the district, chiefdom, and city levels. At district and city levels, local governments are managed by elected council members who are referred to as local councils. The three main local government units in the country are the District, City and Chiefdom Councils.

An examination of the relationship that exists among them reveals an interesting understanding of how decentralisation works in Sierra Leone. Decentralisation as a governance approach and a public administration mechanism to bring services to the doorstep of local communities is a relational process, which ensures healthy communication exists among the local institutions that are involved in service delivery for sustainable service delivery. This paper examines how the District Council, City Council and Chiefdom Council officially interact among themselves in the decentralisation programme in Sierra Leone.

**Keywords:** District Council, District Office, City Council, Chiefdom Council, Local Council, Local Government Art.

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## Introduction

The Republic of Sierra Leone has been a unitary state since the time of independence in 1961, and got its name from a Portuguese explorer, Pedro Da Cintra. He visited the coastal area of present-day Freetown around 1462, and the thick forest and mountainous terrain background of the coastal area gave him the impression of lions living in the vicinity. It is for this reason he referred to the area as "Serra Lyoa", which literally means in his native Portuguese language "Lion Mountains." Subsequent European sailors and traders who visited this coastal area for its natural harbour still referred to it as Serra Lyoa until it finally got its modern anglicised version, "Sierra Leone" (Alie, 1990 p4).

Sierra Leone is situated on the south-western coast of West Africa, between two neighbouring countries: Guinea, which almost surrounds Sierra Leone from the north-west to the East and Liberia, which lies southeast of the country. Sierra Leone is a relatively round country with a spherical shape of about 73,326 Kms or 27,925 Sq. miles. It has a population of about 7.5 million as of the mid-term 2021 census report. By the end of the Atlantic slave trade, this coastal region was chosen as a settlement area for the repatriation of Africans who were freed from the slave trade in the Americas, the United Kingdom and those who would be captured on the high seas of the Atlantic Ocean. Subsequently, this safe haven for the freed black people was named Freetown, indicating freedom for the black African slaves (Alie, 1990 pp48-51). In 1808, the British government took over the administration of the settlement community and became a British crown colony. In order to safeguard the settlement, the adjacent territory of the

hinterland was declared a protectorate in 1896 (Bangura, 2009.p587). In 1961, the two territories, the Freetown colony and the protectorate area, were merged to become the independent Sierra Leone, retaining most of the vestiges of the colonial system (Ochiai, 2017.p 19).

Sierra Leone has a long history of decentralized system of governance. The repatriated Africans who were brought to Freetown were settled according to their socio-cultural realities. The original black poor who came in 1787 had a terrible experience with the harsh weather conditions and hostile tribes in the vicinity. The second batch, the Nova Scotians who arrived five years later in 1792, implemented an impressive representative governance system of tithing-men representing ten families and a hundredor representing a hundred families. This system continued even with the arrival of the Jamaican Maroons in 1800 and the recaptives who were intermittently captured from the high seas and brought to Freetown. This was how local problems were handled and managed by the colonial administration in the Freetown colony area (Bangura, 2009. p584-5.).

In the protectorate where traditional political institutions had been in existence way back before the advent of European colonial ambitions, friendship and standard treaties were signed with local political leaders in exchange for military protection, trade and social development, but the sovereign right of the local people in principle remained with the traditional leaders (Alie, 1990 p113). These traditional political principalities were later labeled as chiefdoms by the colonial authorities. The chiefdoms

retained the power over the mobilisation of communal labour for road construction and other socio-economic development throughout the colonial era. Since its independence in 1961, Sierra Leone has had 149 chiefdoms. However, in 2017, President Ernest Bai Koroma (2007-2018) approved the creation of 41 additional chiefdoms, bringing the total number to 190. The expansion was done by de-amalgamating most of those chiefdoms that were amalgamated during the colonial period due to their small populations. The 41 new chiefdoms and the reintroduction of two more former colonial districts of Karene and Falaba brought the total number of districts in the country to 15. This increase in the number of chiefdoms and districts was justified by the president as a way of deepening the decentralisation process as the population of the country increases.

The protectorate area was initially divided into five districts: Karene, Ronietta, Bandajuma, Panguma and Koinadugu, each under the charge of a District Commissioner. The number of these colonial districts keeps increasing from 5 in 1896 to 13 including the Freetown colony area in 1945 to 16 district in 2017. The districts are composed of chiefdoms headed by local kings and queens who were labeled by the colonial authorities as Paramount Chiefs. The chiefdoms were established on three principles, which were to have a chiefdom treasury, taxation authority and the authorisation of chiefdoms to enact customary laws to solve local problems. For the effective running of chiefdom administration, the following financial system was introduced so that, each chiefdom receives in return a 20% grant from the central government on its total local and house tax for road maintenance, building of schools, and lastly fines from the local court proceeds (Ochiai, 2017. p 4-6).

According to Alie (1990, pp. 151-162), the multiple functions of the chiefdom administrations were arranged in the following manner;

- maintenance of law,
- public order and dispensation of justice,
- control of chiefdom land,
- assessment and collection of house tax,
- provision of social services such as primary education, sanitation, construction of feeder roads,
- maternity and midwifery services,
- Protection of forests and biodiversity conservation.

In 1945, the protectorate ordinance was passed that introduced District Councils and the Protectorate Assembly ( Ochiai 2017, p 12). The District Council was charged with the following functions:

- to advise and recommend actions to the central government on native matters,
- make policy guidelines on customary law enactment,
- commission of enquiry
- and appellate for chieftaincy and local conflicts.

However, the local government system of the colony area was different from that of the protectorate. The colony area consisted of the Sierra Leone peninsula, Sherbro Island, Tasso, Banana, Turtle, Plantain and York Islands; and other territories and

inland islets. The colony was administered by three councils, which were: Freetown City Council, Rural Area Council and Sherbro Urban District Council (Alie, 1990)

Currently, in many African countries, democratic governance is the basis for an effective and stable foundation of statehood; therefore, local institutions of governance are there to provide not only social services to citizens but also represent the cultural will of the people. Governance was originally centred on chieftaincies and extended settlements in native Africa. These settlements were usually founded by individuals and their immediate family members, other close relatives and adherents who would live in the surrounding areas of the head village that was established earlier on by the founding patriarch. With the passage of time, security became a major concern for these locals who had come together under one recognised person with charisma and bestowed authority to defend them in the event of an attack by invaders (JM 2011,p 7). This was the case mostly among the “Mende” people who had the “Mahei” as the headman in the southeastern parts of the colonial sphere of influence that became a protectorate in 1896. Among the Temne, similar charismatic authorities emerged as head chiefs in the northwestern and central parts of the protectorate. Both the “Mende” and “Temne” chieftaincies required ceremonial rituals which are related to male secret societies of Poro and Soko, respectively. Although there are sections of the Temne land that had been converted to Islam and had incorporated the title of “Alimamy”, a derivation from the Muslim background for a religious leader. These charismatic warrior leaders mostly became diplomats on behalf of their people to the British colonial officials intruding into the African interior (Hailey 1951, pp. 295-297).

It was on these foundations that the main thrust of local government structure in the protectorate was laid. Although Nickson & Cutting (2020 p801) clearly expressed optimism about the potential of Decentralization to stimulate and support more local development, we are, however, left with three main questions concerning the relationship between local entities and central government.

- First, the relationship between the decentralised units and central governments needs to be clearly defined in terms of which decisions are to be made, at what level and who does what?
- Second, is how to finance the local government to carry out adequate service delivery and supervise those functions?
- Third, is how to build the capacity of local government units to carry out their new functions, particularly in countries where decentralisation is still a relatively new phenomenon and has faced resistance in the past?

This paper is intended to investigate these areas of concern as they apply to the Sierra Leone context between Chiefdom Councils and District Councils, using Bo District as a case study.

## Literature Review

Decentralisation as a trending governance approach and popular contemporary policy directives in development started to emerge in the 1960s when the wind of independence was blowing across most of what came to be known as the third world or euphemistically developing countries, and subsequently in recent times referred to as countries of the global south. Decentralisation

first captured the imagination of policy makers, political and development scientists and practitioners, among others, in the 1960s, through to the 1990s (Faguet 2021, p. 1;) as part of the modernization drive in governance (Mbah & Ojukwu, 2019, p17). Currently, the wave of decentralisation as a governmental approach does not seem to be abating or rescinding. The world over, policy analysts have been attempting to understand and explain the effects of decentralisation on the political and socio-economic development of small, least developed countries with weak state capacity. Small states like Sierra Leone have taken giant steps towards decentralisation after major national upheavals, in the bid to improve public sector effectiveness and the provision of local goods and services (Sawyer 2008, p.401-02). However, the role of decentralisation in small, poor and weak state capacity countries like Sierra Leone has attracted the attention of development and political pundits, and other social scientists, simply because most of the renowned literature on decentralization are designed for medium-income and high-income countries. Faguet further (2021, p. 5) observes that middle and higher-income countries tend to have a stronger tax revenue base and higher levels of human capital. These two advantages help governments to become more capable, with greater policy flexibility, compared to poor, weak state capacity countries. Nevertheless, Faguet (2021, p 3) opines that poor and weak states somehow possess strong traditions of local self-government that most high-income countries do not seem to have. These local self-government institutions otherwise known as chiefdoms in Sierra Leone are advantageous to decentralisation programmes. Programmes of government are decentralised with the expectation that delays will be reduced and administrative inertia to satisfying the needs of their people at local level will be overcome. It is also the thinking that decentralisation will improve the government's response system to the public and increase the quantity and quality of services it provides. In light of these analyses, Asaduzzaman (2008, p. 40) clarifies the process of rolling out decentralisation as a means and as a philosophy. As a means, it is a transfer of functions and powers to subnational government bodies according to their local realities. And as a philosophy, it is the spirit of power sharing and democratic good governance among the various cadres of government and non-governmental institutions. In many countries decentralization has been undertaken as a result of technical failures of national development plans (Sawyer 2008, p.401-2), as is the case of Sierra Leone's decentralisation process in the aftermath of the civil war (1991-2002).

Tracing the historical evolution of politics and constitutional reforms in Sierra Leone from the early colonial period to the outbreak of the civil war in 1991 reveals a complex pattern of governance changes. According to Bangura (2009), several constitutional tensions existed among colonial authorities, the protectorate administration, traditional leaders, and the Creole population of the colony. His historical analysis provides a foundation for understanding the current structure of public administration in Sierra Leone.

The relationship between governance and socio-economic development is also examined in this review. Tarawalie and Bangura (2025, p. 252) highlight that although governance is closely linked to socio-economic development, local government operations continue to face significant challenges. These include corruption, limited financial and human resources, weak institutional capacity, and arbitrary political interference. The authors further discuss the varying dynamics of decentralization across different countries around the world.

The local government system in Sierra Leone originated from the colonial administration in the Freetown Colony, which led to the establishment of the Freetown Municipality, Rural District Councils, and the Sherbro District Council. This arrangement mainly governed the colony area and operated largely through an indirect rule system. Under this system, traditional leaders were responsible for mobilizing manual labour for social development projects within their communities. By the early 1920s and 1930s, these local administrative units evolved into chiefdoms headed by Paramount Chiefs (Ochiai, 2017). Paramount Chiefs serve as heads of Chiefdom Councils and represent the different sections and family clusters within the chiefdom structure.

In the 1940s, district councils were introduced in five colonial districts: Panguma, Bandajuma, Karene, Ronietta, and Koinadugu. To strengthen this administrative structure, a Protectorate Assembly was established in Bo, which subsequently became the capital of the Protectorate. This system of local governance remained in place until independence in 1961. In the immediate post-independence period, twelve district councils that had been created earlier in the 1950s continued to operate. However, in 1972, the entire local government system was suspended and replaced with a DE concentrated system consisting of town and city management councils across the country.

Following the end of the decade-long civil war, the government reintroduced the decentralization system in 2004, based on the principles of devolution and subsidiarity (Decentralisation policy 2021,p6-7). With support from the World Bank and other bilateral development partners, local councils were established in all districts. In addition, Koidu, Bo, Kenema, Makeni, and Port Loko were granted city status, while Bonthe became a municipality. Waterloo was also designated as part of the Western Area Rural District, bringing the number of district councils to thirteen at the time. Currently, Sierra Leone has twenty-two local councils, comprising fifteen district councils—including the newly created Karene and Falaba districts in 2017—six city councils, and one municipal council in Bonthe (Tarawalie & Bangura, 2025, p. 252).

Decentralization plays an important role in promoting national development. Nickson and Cutting (2020, pp. 806–811) examined the impact of decentralization on improving the living standards of citizens. Their assessment, based on minimum conditions and performance measures related to compliance and service delivery outputs, concluded that the overall impact of decentralization remains debatable. Nevertheless, role conflict between different levels of government emerged as a major challenge within the system. Indeed, local councils occupy a central position in public administration and national development. Gbla et al. (2024, pp. 240–245) identified numerous functions that district councils are expected to perform within their jurisdictions. However, they also highlighted several challenges affecting council performance, including heavy financial dependence on central government transfers, political interference, rapid population growth, and weak institutional capacity to effectively fulfil their mandates.

## Study Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative data collection method with a phenomenological case study of Bo district. It is phenomenological in the sense that people were interviewed on their practical personal experiences they have had with

decentralisation programs and outcomes. Subsequently the following three interview methods were utilized;

1. in-depth personal interviews,
2. focus group discussions,
3. Observation.

In this study, the researcher focused on key informant interviews such as interviews with Paramount Chiefs, Ward Councilors, administrative staff and community service providers on the linkages in the relationship between chiefdom councils and local councils in the decentralisation process. All ethical considerations were observed in the process in order to conceal the personal identities of respondents and have informed consent for interviews without jeopardizing the official status of individuals. Data analysis of this study was done by using the constant comparative analysis technique suitable for qualitative data analysis methodology.

The choice of Bo District for this study is because of its intrinsic geo-political value and of its administrative and historical relevance to the decentralisation programme in Sierra Leone. Bo District is a principal administrative district in the southern province, where the district council system was experimented in the 1940s, which hosted the protectorate assembly. Currently, the district is the home of the second largest city in the country, which was designed purposely in the 1930s-40s as the capital of the protectorate, whereas Freetown was the capital of the colony.

#### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

Since 2004, Sierra Leone has carried on with its second experimentation of the decentralisation process pretty unhindered amidst logistical and institutional challenges (Gbla et al, 2024.p 244). The following are the results of the findings:

#### **Linkages between District Council and City Council:**

The district council and the city council are two sister councils that exist in Bo city, parallel to each other without any clear line of administrative communication. Besides, co-existing peacefully in the same city, the relationship is strained over the demarcation lines which separate the urban centre of the city, which is under the control of the city council, from the peripheral areas of the city that fall under the district council jurisdiction. The disjunction is the city space that seems to be getting smaller, as opposed to the rapidly expanding peripheral territories of the city, which fall under the district council jurisdiction for tax collection and waste management functions. In this situation, the workers are confused as to where to collect taxes, and residents also are confused as to whom to hold responsible for services between the city and district councils.

A Chief Administrator of one of the two councils summed up the relationship between the two councils as thus;

*“In terms of the relationship between District Council and City Council, we are two sister councils that peacefully co-exist in the city, meet in workshops inside and outside of Bo, but do not have any official line of communication on how to solve the common problems of waste management, house rates, market dues collection and maintenance of feeder roads.”*

There is no formal relationship between the two councils, and there is no joint project. Even in terms of waste management and market due collection in the city of Bo, there are usually

clashes between collectors from either the district or the city council. In the area of waste disposal, the two local councils are using the same dumping site along the Bo –Yileh highway, some 10 kilometers away from the central business district of Bo city. Yet the city and district councils have not been able to work together amicably on the proper management of the site. Currently, the site is lying in ruins with no one caring about it. The community people are affected by numerous health risks, and they have complained several times to stakeholders, but there has been no sustained concerted effort by the councils. There are five settlements that are living in close proximity to the dumping site: Pindegumahun, Manjama, Kpetema, Baoma, and Fulawahun. All of the five communities reported to be suffering from various infestations such as diarrhoea, malaria and typhoid, among others, caused by uncontrollable multiplication of vectors such as cockroaches, rats, mosquitoes, snakes, and flies, to name a few, as a result of reckless disposal of rubbish.

The field data revealed that the district council now has a vast portion of the city of Bo, such as Sami, New London extension, Mendewa section, Nduvubu section, Bo No. 2 extension, and Gbetima, to name a few examples, for waste management responsibility, but the residents in those areas are underserved. Officials of the two councils confirmed that they have held meetings in the past on how to handle those areas, but have proved difficult to solve, and the stalemate is extending to collisions and clashes between the staff of city and district councils over the collection of market dues and house rates in those areas at the expense of service delivery. Sami, New London extension and Mendewa sections are more frequent for such clashes because they are cutting across two jurisdictions; those are the chiefdoms of Kakua and Tikonko on the one hand, and the City and district councils on the other. Therefore, this geopolitical ambiguity is making the position of those sections more complicated for service delivery.

#### **Linkages between Chiefdom Councils and, City and District Councils**

The longest serving councillor in the District Council had this to say about the relationship between the district council and the chiefdom councils.

*“Ever since my stay in the council as a councillor, the relationship between the district council and the chiefdom councils is a delicate one and depends on the personality of the chairman. The PCs are not obligated to us because they are the traditional heads of their chiefdoms. Sometimes when we come hard on them, they, too, will come hard on the central government, which is always on their side. For some years now, they had not been paying their precept to us, and when we took the matter to the central government, they pleaded with us to pay, instead of any form of punitive action. Since then, some paid, some did not.”*

In this piece, the reference to PCs actually connotes chiefdom councils, as chiefdoms are the municipality of paramount chiefs whose personalities have overshadowed the chiefdom operations in such a way that they personify chiefdom councils. The LGA of 2021 does not pay any serious attention to the relationship between the district council and the chiefdom councils. The act only reiterates the colonial-type containment policy functions of the chiefdom councils in ensuring the prevention of offences in their areas, prohibiting illegal gambling, making and enforcing chiefdom bye-laws, being the custodian of land on behalf of their people and representing the culture and identity of people.

However, there are hardly any mechanism on how to supervise the chiefdoms on these functions and the chiefdoms do not seem to be aware of these functions set out for them in the act. On this note, the questions one would ask are whether the chiefdoms are equipped for these functions, given their current administrative strength. Between the district /city councils and chiefdom councils, which council is more appropriately a local council than the other? In a focus group discussion with the officials of the district office, an official said that.

*“I am not a local government staff even though I am working in the Ministry of Local Government. I was transferred from another central government ministry and may be transferred to another at any time. Therefore, the district council is answerable to us.”*

Another official of the District Office said that, *“the chiefdoms are autonomous entities in the country, and are not under the District Council....”*

The creation of parallel institutions in the district to look after the affairs of the chiefdoms, other than an integrated district council, has the tendency to erode the spirit of decentralization which would be inimical to a sound public administration system.

**The place of the District Office in the relationship between the District and City Councils, and Chiefdom Councils**

Even though there is hardly any up-to-date statutory act of parliament to the effect, the district office claims to be the principal administrative office of the central government in the district and reports directly to the Ministry of Local Government through the provincial administration emanating from the colonial arrangement. The staff claimed that the district office coordinated and supervised the activities of MDAs in the district, a function the district council also claimed to be performing. Among other principal functions are the following:

- i. Interpret government policies to district stakeholders, such as chiefs.
- ii. Ensures and coordinates the implementation of government policies
- iii. Chairs the district security committee meetings
- iv. Receives, arbitrates and mediates complaints from the chiefdoms about the conduct of PCs
- v. Mediates land and border disputes between and within chiefdoms,
- vi. Responsible for the election of sub-chiefs
- vii. Starts preliminary arrangements, such as registration and preparation of the voters’ list for the election of PCs
- viii. Coordinates revenue mobilisation at the chiefdom levels, for instance, printing and distributing local tax receipts to chiefdoms and other administrative units.
- ix. Also, coordinates the precept payment to the local councils.
- x. The District Office is the liaison between the central government and district stakeholders; those are the PCs and sub-chiefs, DE concentrated central government district agencies’ staff.

- xi. Claimed to be reporting on the activities of the local councils
- xii. Serves as a link between the district council and the chiefdom councils,
- xiii. Serves as the principal signatory to all chiefdom accounts in the districts.

**Perception of the Paramount Chiefs**

In the relationship between the district council and the chiefdoms, there is no clearly demarcated office or official in charge of the responsibility of coordinating the affairs of that relationship. The DPOs of both the city and district councils claimed to be brokering communication with the chiefdoms, among other functions which their offices performed. The PCs of both the Kakua and Tikonko chiefdoms confirmed that the councils always invite them to their monthly extraordinary council meetings by virtue of being host PCs of both or either council. There are 4 PCs in the Bo district council; one of them describes the relationship between the local council and chiefdoms as thus;

*“Like the one that existed between sovereign states and some international or multi-national organisations, wherein the political heads who represent their people decide on what resolution to domesticate or not to domesticate back home”.*

The 4 PCs in the DC are: the chairman of the council of paramount chiefs in Bo district, and any 2 other PCs appointed by the same council of PCs in Bo district, and the current Honourable PC of the district to the national parliament. All of these PCs are ex officio members with no voting rights and, on the same token, are under no obligation to take resolutions from the district council as mandatory on their chiefdoms.

**The question of supervision**

Chiefdoms in Sierra Leone boast of being the real autonomous decentralised local government units for not being dependent on the central government for the longest while since the end of the civil war in 2002 and prior, but also for using their own traditional regulations to govern within their own borders. Most of the chiefs interviewed claimed that, the central governments in the last 30 years had not sent any financial grant for administrative purpose to the chiefdom councils except for the Department for International Development (Dfid) [1] project for the erection of paramount chiefs’ houses, court buildings and the government monthly salary payment for selected administrative personnel like the Paramount Chief, Chiefdom Administrative Clerk and chiefdom police sergeant at the displeasure of other administrative functionaries.

Unlike the district councils, the chiefdom councils in the district relied on own taxes from the following sources: Native Administration court fines, bush begging fees, local tax payable by every adult residents in the chiefdoms, to do their subsidiary administrative functions which among others are to mobilize their people for communal work, pay for the travel expenses of the chiefdom functionaries, receiving and hosting guests from the central government, dispute settlement and arbitration, provision of land space for development to any meaningful development agency such as the district council, and provision of manual labour.

On the question of whether the District Council directs any delegated functions to the chiefdoms, all chiefdom authorities interviewed across the district denied any delegated function from the district council. According to field data, the main linkage

between the District Council and Chiefdom Council is through the District Office and Paramount Chief councillors who sit in the District Council meetings as ex officio members without any voting rights. The ward councillors, on the other hand, are not linked to the chiefdom council administration because they are not under any law to be answerable to the chiefdom council but to the ward that voted them. In an in-depth personal interview with the District Council chairman, he had this to say about the relationship with the chiefdoms.

*“The Local Government Act of 2021 gave us the mandate to supervise the chiefdom councils, but it is not operational. There is already another body supervising the chiefdoms, and the chiefs seem to be comfortable with it”.*

He emphasised that the government needed to review the relationship in an appropriate manner, underscoring that the good thing about the district council and the district office is that both are under the same supervisory ministry of local government. The chairman further asserted that the District Council and District Office were created as parallel institutions over the chiefdom councils and no one is answerable to the other. This state of affairs, he opined, was creating confusion and stalemate at the very crucial level of decentralisation and public service delivery functions to the chiefdoms. The chairman, moreover, reiterated that their work was not improving at all, due to the lack of synergy among the institutions. He said that a direct official line of administrative relationship did not exist between the District Council and Chiefdom Council, and that the chiefdoms did not know the District Council as a referent and supervising body. Stating that, they were only using good human relationships to move on because they needed each other. The chairman similarly said, even though the District Council was labelled as the highest political and development authority in the locality, there exists a powerful District Office in the locality to which all Paramount Chiefs are answerable. So they are politicians in the District Council and District Office staff is the administrative staff of the central government, in the case of any conflict they District Council would stand to lose, why? Simply because *“we campaigned to bring development to our people and we were voted for a limited period of time, he says.”*

A staff member of the District Office opined that, in terms of supervision over the chiefdoms, it is contested between the District Office and the District Council. In principle, the District Office supervises the District Council and serves as signatory to their account, but that is not the case [2]. However, the District Council chairman said, the Local Government Act of 2021 gave them the authority to supervise the activities of all the chiefdoms in the district, although the chiefdoms are not answerable to the District Council but to the District Office. The question is how can the District Council be supervising the chiefdoms when they are not answerable to it? Even though the Local Government Act 2004 and 2021 are completely silent about the District Office, the staff of the District Office was affirmative in their answer that they have a supervisory role over the District Council. They justified their claim using the reference of precept payment to the District Council, and their complete control over the District Office has over the chiefdom administrations, which are the component units of the district. They argued that it is the District Office that is doing the backstopping for the District Council in terms of payment of precepts on local tax, and other locally raised revenues such as mining fees for sand and stones, and also surface rent for other precious minerals that are paid directly to the chiefdoms. In the

interview with the staff of the District Office, it was revealed that the District Council and the chiefdom council would have had a poor relationship if the District Office had not been brokering relationships and coordinating the sharing of tax revenue.

The Paramount Chief of Kakua, Prince Lappia Boima (who passed away shortly after the interview), remarked that, *“The District Council wants to collect every tax from the chiefdom and leaves the chiefdoms with nothing [3].”* The point was further reiterated by an Assistant District Officer asserting that *“if the District Office had not existed, the District Council would have swallowed up all functions of the chiefdoms.[4]”* the real problem was laid bare when the Paramount Chief of Kakua chiefdom referred to chiefdoms as the real *“Local Councils”* and the District as *“District Council”*. To him, the local council is the local government unit that looks after the immediate problems of the community that affect the personal, social, cultural and economic well-being of the people. That is what the chiefdoms are doing, but the Local Government Acts 2004 and 2021 did not recognise it, instead referring to district councils as local councils, leaving out the invaluable work of the chiefdoms in the daily lives of the people.

At the time the District Offices were re-established in 2011, there was no law to the effect and to date. It was a presidential directive occasioned by the popular request of paramount chiefs during a courtesy call to the president.[5] This was as a result of several complaints from the Paramount Chiefs that the District Council was not up to the task of coordinating traditional administrative functions of the chiefdoms, which the colonial district office machinery was doing.

The former Honourable Paramount Chief of Bo district in parliament justified his point by stating that it is DO that recruits staff for the chiefdoms. For instance, personnel of the chiefdom police force, chiefdom administrative clerks, chiefdom court clerks, chiefdom health overseers, chiefdom sanitary labourers and Native Administration court chairmen, all of whom form part of the chiefdom council. All confirmations of chiefdom authorities, such as town chiefs, mammy queens/women leaders, are done by the DO. The office of the Senior District Officer confirms that the District Office was revived because the District Council was not equipped to address the chieftaincy and native administration matters of the chiefdoms. Currently, the District Office is the link which brokers communication between the chiefdom council administration and the District Council administration. However, there is a huge gap in functions between the chiefdoms and the District Council.

### Summary of Key Findings

The study reveals that the line of communication and coordination between the District and Chiefdom Councils runs through the District Office, which suggests that no direct line of communication exists. The relationship between the district and chiefdom councils was succinctly put by a paramount chief in the District Council as thus: *“the one that exists between sovereign states and international organisations where self-interest is paramount”*. The Paramount Chiefs in the councils do not have voting rights, and they, too, are not under any obligation to abide by the resolutions of the council in their chiefdoms.

Another discovery of the study is that the District Council and City Council are two sister councils in the same district that co-exist peacefully on the surface, but underneath, there is a real strained relationship over the demarcation of the city territory

between the district council and the city council. The real point of tension is the city space that seems to be getting smaller by the passing of time, against the ever-expanding peripheral areas under the control of the district council. The problem is directly seen in the latent conflict between the city council and the district council over revenue mobilisation, naming streets and waste management in those areas. In fact, what is more saddened about these problems is the confusion of local residents who do not seem to know where exactly to contact for the redress of their grievances in terms of tax collection, waste management, house rate fees collection, and naming streets. The study further shows that although both headquarters of the two local councils are located in Bo city, there is no joint project between the district and the city council. A case in point is the waste disposal dumping site located along the Bo – Yileh highway, some 10 kilometers away from the city centre of Bo. This site lies in ruins at the expense of the local residents, who claimed that they are infested by rodents and a swarm of flies in the community, with its attendant air pollution. Essentially, the relationship between the district council and the chiefdom councils is not a direct one; it is being brokered by the District Office. This indirect relationship is not a helpful factor in service delivery to the grassroots communities. Moreover, the study finds that the District Office plays an intermediary role between the District Council and the Chiefdom Councils in the district. In the process, there is mistrust and tension of rivalry between the two entities as to who actually has control over the chiefdom council administrations. The District Office claimed to be compiling tax precepts from the chiefdoms for onward transmission to the District Council and that the Paramount Chiefs are answerable to them for all administrative actions; a mandate they acquired way back in colonial times. Although there are hardly any statutory documents to substantiate, the District office boasted of colonial ordinances such as the chiefdom act of 1932, but not readily available either in the District Office or in the customary law office department in Bo. However, the District Officers enjoy considerable legitimacy from the Paramount Chiefs who see the District Office as the linchpin in the relationship between their chiefdoms and the central government, not necessarily the District Council. Also while another tensed situation exists between the District Office and the District Council, the district Council refers to itself as the highest elected representative council of the district according to the local government act of 2021; charged with the responsibility to bring development, the District Office on the other hand sees itself as the principal central government administrative agency in the district in charge of coordinating the activities of all government agencies including the District Council. This superiority contest portends an administrative and political stalemate in development decision-making in the chiefdoms.

In this situation, the study shows that even though the Chiefdom Councils argued that they are the real local councils in the country because it is they that deal with the immediate needs of the local people at the very subsidiary level of decentralisation, yet they are faced with a real dilemma in serving two masters: the District Office and the District Council. Furthermore, the chiefdom authorities argued that they are more autonomous of the central government than the District and city Councils because the central government does not grant them subsidies to run their administrations except for the payment of salaries of the Paramount chiefs.

Subsequently, the study shows that the linkages between the District Council and the Chiefdoms are indirect, running through the District Office and the Paramount Chief Councillors in

the District Council, who do not have any franchise in the District Council and at the same time are not under any obligation to implement District Council resolutions in their chiefdoms.

Another controversy captured by the study is the supervision of the chiefdoms. Both the District Council and the District Office contested over supervision. The District Office claims to be supervising all government agencies in the district, including the District Council. They print the local tax receipt books for the chiefdoms and also coordinate the sharing of local tax revenue percentage (precept) between the chiefdoms and the District Council. The District Office recruits staff for the chiefdom councils and also supervises the election of all chiefdom authorities. The District Council, on the other hand, is the highest political and development agency in the district under the 2021 Local Government Act. However, the rate of the local tax is determined by the central government in consultation with the District Council, through the Ministry of Local Government.

## Conclusion

The study outlines the historical sketch of local government and decentralisation systems in Sierra Leone from the colonial era to the present time. Doing so brings out some of the grey areas inhibiting effective public service provision to the local population of the country. The relationship between the District Councils and Chiefdom Councils in the country leads to an understanding of the mechanical operations of decentralisation.

In terms of relationship and coordination between the district council and the chiefdoms, the District Office plays a crucial role, which suggests that no direct relationship exists. Also, even though the District Council actually hosts the City Council, the City Council has no joint project with the District Council.

The gaps between the District Council and Chiefdom Councils are scarier for the future of decentralisation. Among them are: the sharing process of local and trade taxes obtained from the chiefdoms, the status of Paramount Chiefs in both City and District Councils, the misunderstanding over demarcation lines between urban and rural Bo city, which confuses residents over who provides services to their localities. Further, the political party-based direct citizenry election of ward councillors to both the City and District Councils does not make the councillors chiefdom representatives but political party representatives in the local councils. All of these factors point to a dire situation of the decentralisation programme in Sierra Leone if not attended to have the tendency of breaking the process.

## Recommendation

Local government institutions are the mechanisms through which decentralization programs are implemented. Below are the study's recommendations.

### Overhaul the local government system:

It is the fervent recommendation of this study that the local government system should be overhauled, in which case, chiefdom councils should be aligned with and answerable directly to the District Councils. Also, the city council should be made an integral part of the district council administration rather than a separate operating council in the same district. By doing so, it is the hope of this study that development projects will be managed more judiciously.

**Dissolve the District Office**

The study reveals a serious cleavage between the District Council and the District Office. This is resulting in redundancy of personnel and duplication of functions. It is therefore the recommendation of this study that the District Office should be dissolved and incorporated into the District Council system.

**Strengthening the provincial administration:**

It is imperative to strengthen the provincial administrative system so that the District Council administrations are answerable to it and subsequently to the relevant central government ministry. This scheme will make the administration of the public service system straightforward, which makes communication easy.

**Build the capacity of chiefdom councils:**

There is a need to build the administrative capacity of chiefdom councils in order to be able to carry out the subsidiary functions more effectively. In like manner, the Chiefdom Councils should be arranged to have a similar administrative system as the District Council for ease of accountability. Similarly, due to the fact that elected ward councilors to the District Council are not part of their respective chiefdom council administrations, it is the recommendation of this study that representation in the District Council should be based on chiefdom council appointment rather than ward elections.

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**Appendix:**

DC	District Council
DO	District Officer
DPO	Development and Project Officer
LGA	Local Government Act
MDA	Ministry Department and Agencies
PC	Paramount Chief

[1] A former British government department responsible for foreign assistance from 1997 to 2020.

[2] Pers. Comm. with a staff in the office of the Senior District Officer in Bo in 2024

[3] PC of Kakua on the 22/1/2025

[4] ADO of Bo District on the 8/9/2024

[5] Honourable PC of Bo District to the parliament