

The Impact of Decentralization on Public Service Provision

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Keywords

Impact; Decentralization;
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Abstract

This study aimed to determine and explain the impact of decentralization on improving the quality of public services, particularly in terms of accessibility, responsiveness, and transparency. It also aimed to compare the impact of decentralization in Timor-Leste with that of other countries implementing decentralization in public service provision. This research employed a normative juridical approach. Data were collected through a literature review involving primary legal materials, secondary legal materials, and relevant non-legal materials. The data were analyzed using descriptive-analytical legal research methods. The findings indicate that decentralization in Timor-Leste, by granting greater authority to local governments, has the potential to improve public service quality in several aspects, including accessibility, responsiveness, and transparency. By understanding local needs more effectively, local governments are expected to deliver more appropriate and efficient services. However, the success of decentralization in improving public services is also influenced by various factors, including resource availability, institutional capacity, the competence of public officials, and the effectiveness of oversight mechanisms. A comparison between Timor-Leste and Vietnam shows that, although both countries have implemented decentralization in public service provision, their outcomes differ due to distinct political, historical, and institutional contexts. Timor-Leste, with its post-independence state-building experience, faces challenges in implementing decentralization due to limited resources and relatively developing institutional capacity. In contrast, Vietnam has implemented decentralization within the framework of a centralized one-party political system, which influences the implementation of regional autonomy and its implications for public service delivery.

INTRODUCTION

Decentralization is a key policy adopted by many countries to transfer authority and responsibility from central governments to regional governments. In Indonesia, the decentralization process has become an integral part of political and administrative reform since the early 2000s (Pribadi & Ghufon, 2019).

In Indonesia, decentralization was officially implemented through the enactment of Law Number 22 of 1999 concerning Regional Government, which was subsequently replaced by Law Number 32 of 2004 and later Law Number 23 of 2014. The primary objectives of this policy are to improve government efficiency, accelerate public service delivery, and bring decision-making processes closer to communities. Public expectations regarding government-

provided services are no longer measured only by quantity but also by service quality (Fanggidae & Nyong, 2016). Service quality has become a central issue receiving considerable attention across various regions (Sari & Radjikan, 2015). Quality public services are closely associated with systematic and comprehensive service management, commonly referred to as the concept of excellent service (*pelayanan prima*) (Nurlia, 2019).

Centralization and decentralization, as systems of government administration, are often closely related to the development process of a country. Historically, decentralization in Timor-Leste has experienced various developments alongside changes in the country's political landscape. The decentralization approach adopted by the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste aims to improve public welfare through more effective and efficient public service delivery, while accelerating regional development and achieving fairer and more equitable development outcomes (Ayalew, 2024; Nosheen et al., 2024).

Decentralization refers to the transfer of authority from central government institutions to regional governments, allowing regions to manage their own affairs in accordance with applicable laws and regulations (Rondinelli, 2017; Sabir et al., 2021). Within the governmental structure of Timor-Leste, certain authorities previously exercised by the central government have been delegated to district administrators, which subsequently enables districts to distribute certain responsibilities to sub-district administrations. The implementation of decentralization has strengthened regional autonomy, defined as the right, authority, and responsibility of local governments to regulate and manage their own administrative affairs without direct interference from the central government, within the framework of national legislation (Berman, 2019). Through this arrangement, the central government transfers specific responsibilities to regional governments to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of governance, particularly in delivering public services to communities (Allain-Dupré, 2018; Azfar et al., 2018).

Article 5 paragraph (1) of the Decentralization Law of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste states that, “O Estado respeita, na sua organização territorial, o princípio da descentralização da administração pública” (the state respects the principle of decentralization of public administration in its territorial organization). This provision establishes the basis for the formation of local governments, as stated in Article 72 paragraph (1) of the Decentralization Law of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste:

“O poder local é constituído por pessoas coletivas de território dotadas de órgãos representativos, com o objetivo de organizar a participação dos cidadãos na solução dos problemas próprios da sua comunidade e promover o desenvolvimento local, sem prejuízo da participação do Estado.”

This provision indicates that local governments are territorial legal entities equipped with representative institutions, established to facilitate citizen participation in addressing community problems and promoting local development while maintaining state involvement. Therefore, based on Article 5 paragraph (1) of the Decentralization Law, regional governments possess the authority and responsibility to implement development programs within their respective areas. One of the authorities delegated to regional governments is the management of education affairs.

Decentralization has become an important option in the governance system of Timor-Leste. Since the establishment of the state framework by the founding leaders, the concept of

decentralization has been accommodated through the Constituição da República Democrática de Timor-Leste (Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste), particularly Articles 5, 63, and 72. This approach aligns with global development trends. Globalization, characterized by rapid technological advancement, significant social change, and increasing pluralism, has challenged traditional centralized government models in addressing complex public demands. Consequently, collaboration among government institutions, communities, and private sector actors has become increasingly necessary in public administration. This transformation from government-centered administration toward governance emphasizes broader public participation in decision-making processes. Therefore, responsive, adaptive, and participatory governance approaches are increasingly required. Centralized governance is considered insufficient to fully address evolving public expectations, contributing to the emergence of decentralization as an approach intended to improve government responsiveness. However, implementing decentralization requires comprehensive public policies and institutional arrangements because public administration cannot operate effectively without clear policy frameworks.

Despite the growing body of literature on decentralization and public service delivery, several research gaps remain. First, most studies on decentralization have focused on countries with established administrative systems, whereas research on post-conflict and newly independent states, such as Timor-Leste, remains limited. Second, comparative studies examining decentralization implementation between Timor-Leste and other Southeast Asian countries, particularly Vietnam, remain scarce. Third, existing studies have not sufficiently examined how historical backgrounds, political systems, and institutional capacity interact in shaping decentralization outcomes across different contexts. Fourth, empirical studies systematically comparing the effects of decentralization on public service quality dimensions, including accessibility, responsiveness, and transparency, across different national contexts remain limited.

The novelty of this research lies in its comparative analysis of decentralization implementation between Timor-Leste and Vietnam, two countries with distinct historical experiences and political systems. Unlike previous studies that primarily examine decentralization within individual countries, this research provides a comparative perspective on how decentralization influences public service provision in different institutional contexts. By analyzing the interaction between historical factors, political systems, institutional capacity, and decentralization outcomes, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions necessary for decentralization to effectively improve public services. Furthermore, this research contributes to the limited literature on public service delivery in post-conflict states and provides relevant insights for policymakers in both countries.

Based on this background, this research aims to determine and explain the impact of decentralization on improving public service quality, particularly in terms of accessibility, responsiveness, and transparency, as well as to compare the implementation and outcomes of decentralization in Timor-Leste with other countries that have adopted decentralization in public service provision. This research is expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, this study contributes to public administration and decentralization studies by enhancing understanding of how historical factors, political

systems, and institutional capacity influence decentralization outcomes across different national contexts, while expanding the limited literature on public service delivery in post-conflict states. Practically, this research provides insights for policymakers in Timor-Leste and Vietnam in developing more effective decentralization policies, serves as a reference for practitioners and academics in comparative public administration, and provides direction for future researchers investigating similar topics with broader contexts and variables.

METHOD

This research employed a normative juridical approach. Data were collected through a literature review of primary legal materials, secondary legal materials, and relevant non-legal materials. The collected data were analyzed using a descriptive-analytical legal research method.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Decentralization Impacts the Improvement of Public Service Quality, Such as Accessibility, Responsiveness, and Transparency

The birth of the concept of decentralization is an effort to create a democratic government and end centralized government. Centralized government has become unpopular because it has been deemed incapable of understanding and providing accurate assessments of the values that live and develop in the regions. Decentralization is the formation of autonomous regions with certain powers and certain fields of activity which are organized based on their own considerations, initiatives and administration, so that a process of forming regions will be found which have the right to regulate their regional interests.

The concept of decentralization has been associated with municipal administration, particularly in the French context after the Revolution of 1789, which translated into the recognition of local communities and their own set of responsibilities to be carried out through their own bodies, elected by the members of those communities who were subject to and limited to the control of the central government.

Decentralization is a term that is etymologically in Latin and consists of the word *de* meaning free, and *centrum* meaning center, so that when translated, decentralization means breaking away from the center (Koesoemahatmadja, 1979). The meaning of this definition does not mean that regions can stand alone and free themselves from the bonds of the state, but from a constitutional perspective, decentralization means the delegation of governmental power from the central government to the regions to manage their own affairs (Situmorang, 1994).

Decentralization requires the transfer of political, fiscal, and governmental power to local governments. A government is not decentralized unless it contains autonomously elected local governments capable of making binding decisions in at least some policy areas. Decentralization can also give rise to such governments or it can involve expanding the resources and responsibilities of existing local governments. This definition includes many variations and one of them is that the central government can divide its powers in other ways. Other ways are deconcentration and privatization. Deconcentration increases the autonomy of staff in regional government offices, while privatization shifts public sector responsibilities

altogether. The implications of these policies are also different. Deconcentration maintains the hierarchical relationship between regional and central governments. Privatization, on the other hand, eliminates it altogether, introducing profit motives in its place. Decentralization shifts the focus of accountability from the central government to its constituents, typically through regional head elections (Word Bank, 1999).

According to UNDP, decentralization stimulates the search for program and policy innovation, because firstly, decentralization is an innovative governance practice. Secondly, because through its implementation, local governments need new assumptions and broader responsibilities in order to provide services to all members of society. Assuming new responsibilities through decentralization often requires improvements in planning, budgeting, and management techniques and practices. It also requires the adoption of new tools and the development of human resources for implementing decentralization programs (United Nations (DDSMS and UNDP), 1996).

In accordance with the mandate of the RDTL constitution, as stated in Article 5, the state will respect the principle of general government decentralization in its territorial planning. Article 71, paragraph 1, states that: “O governo central deve estar representado a nível dos diversos escalões administrativos do território” (The central government must have representation at each level of state government).

In national development strategy planning (Planu Estrategico Desenvolvimento Nacional/PEDN) 2011-2030 states that there are four strategic objectives to be achieved through decentralization, namely: a) building the private sector (private sector) in rural areas; b) provide new opportunities for democratic participation; c) promoting the stability of strong state institutions; and d) improve the performance of public services that are efficient, effective and equitable.

The deconcentration strategy is a stage in which municipal (city) governments are designated as government organs that carry out administrative functions. In this case, municipal governments are designated as local state administrations, which act as agents of the central government in the regions (field administration).

Improved public service performance is expected to rebuild the government's image in the eyes of the public, because through better quality public services can be built public satisfaction and trust so that the government's legitimacy will be stronger. Quality public services are not only capitalized by good and clean governance but also must be responsive to problems that occur in society, therefore the efforts that the government must make are to continuously improve service performance in addition to empowering community participation in public services.

Public service is essentially the provision of services to the community, which is the obligation of state officials as public servants, as explained previously. It is hoped that the quality of public service provided will increase day by day. Determining service quality is elaborated from three perspectives. First, the influence of government policies that implement the public mandate to serve (Amanah). Second, the quality of the service itself. Third, an assessment of the bureaucracy that provides the service (Mulyadi, 2016).

In improving the quality of public services, it is necessary to pay attention to the service components, which include the following:

1. Service Procedures. Service Procedures are standardized for service providers and recipients, including complaints
2. Completion Time. Determined from the time of application submission until completion of service including complaints.
3. Service Fees. In this case, service fees/rates include details stipulated in the service provision process.
4. Service Products. The service results that will be received are in accordance with the established provisions.
5. Facilities and Infrastructure. Must be provided adequately by public service providers.
6. Competence of Service Providers. Must be determined appropriately based on the required knowledge, expertise, skills, attitudes, and behavior.

According to Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (1994), in improving the quality of public services, it is necessary to pay attention to the following aspects:

1. Supporting Facilities. These supporting facilities are various physical infrastructures and facilities that must be available before certain public services can be provided or offered to the public.
2. Goods/Services (Complimentary Products/Services). The complementary goods/services referred to are goods or materials or documents, or other services that must be provided, purchased, or used by the public as potential users of public services as a complement or completeness before or after receiving certain public services.
3. Explicit Services. Explicit services are the tangible form of the substance or core benefits of public services received or felt by the public.
4. Implicit Benefits (Implicit Services). Implicit benefits from public services are benefits that can be psychologically felt by the community extrinsically from a public service provided by the local government.

Meanwhile, according to the Innovative and Quality Services Group-Financial and Information Management Branch, Treasury Board Secretariat - Canada, as follows:

1. Each member/employee understands the organization's goals and understands their respective roles in the organization's operational processes;
2. Respecting the existence of each person in the organization and providing opportunities and encouragement to develop each person's potential;
3. The main focus is to serve clients/community; d. Cooperation and teamwork are part of the daily work culture;
4. Leaders/officials are fully involved in service quality improvement programs and initiatives;
5. Everyone in the organization concentrates on achieving performance and quality of service;
6. Oriented towards continuous improvement;
7. The organization and all members/employees really appreciate and are able to understand the expectations of stakeholders and know how to provide satisfaction to them; And
8. Quality and Innovation driven.

Decentralization does have the potential to improve the quality of public services, including accessibility, responsiveness, and transparency, in Timor Leste, but its

implementation needs to be accompanied by increased regional capacity and good coordination.

Decentralization, the transfer of authority from the central government to regional governments, can have a positive impact on the quality of public services. Here's an explanation:

1. **Accessibility:** With decentralization, local governments, closer to the community, can better understand their specific needs. This allows for the provision of more affordable and accessible services to local residents.
2. **Responsiveness:** Local governments with greater authority tend to be more responsive to public complaints and aspirations. They can make decisions more quickly and adapt policies to local needs.
3. **Transparency:** Decentralization can promote transparency because the public has closer access to monitor and oversee local government performance. This can strengthen accountability and prevent abuse of power.

However, there are some challenges that need to be considered:

1. **Regional Capacity:** Not all regions have sufficient human and institutional resources to implement decentralization effectively. Capacity gaps between regions can be a barrier.
2. **Coordination:** Poorly managed decentralization can lead to policy fragmentation and difficulties in coordination between central and regional governments. This can hamper the effectiveness of development programs.

The Importance of Well-Managed Decentralization:

To ensure that decentralization has a positive impact on public services, several things are needed:

1. **Capacity Building:** The central government needs to provide support and training to local governments to increase their capacity in managing public services.
2. **Effective Coordination:** A clear coordination system is needed between central and regional governments, as well as between regions, to ensure aligned policies and integrated development programs.
3. **Community Participation:** Communities need to be involved in the decision-making process and monitoring of local government performance so that public services truly meet their needs.

By addressing the challenges and ensuring sound implementation, decentralization can be a catalyst for improving the quality of public services in Timor-Leste, as well as encouraging more inclusive and sustainable regional development.

The Impact of Decentralization in Timor Leste Compared with Other Countries That Also Implement Decentralization in the Provision of Public Services

Timor Timur (its name before separation from Indonesia) changed its name to Timor-Leste on May 20, 2002. Dili is the nation's capital with a Distrito or District Administration (equivalent to a regency) that encompasses several Sub-Distrito (equivalent to a sub-district) as well as Suco (villages) and Aldeia (hamlets).

According to Article 6 of the Decree, some of the delegated matters are: a) basic education; b) health; c) agriculture; d) food security; e) clean water and sanitation and the environment; f) basic infrastructure and transportation; g) social work; h) market and tourism

management; i) civil defense; j) natural disaster management; and k) support for NGOs and village organizations.

Decentralization refers to the global trend of transferring central government responsibilities to regional or local governments. Definitions and interpretations of decentralization vary widely across countries, among scholars, and among government practitioners. The term decentralization means different things to different people, and approaches to it vary widely from country to country. However, the general understanding of the definition and scope of decentralization refers largely to the opinion of Rondinelli and the World Bank (1999), *desentralisasi* adalah transfer kewenangan dan tanggungjawab fungsi-fungsi pemerintahan dari pemerintah pusat kepada pemerintah daerah, lembaga semi-pemerintah, maupun kepada swasta (decentralization is the transfer of authority and responsibility for public functions from the central government to subordinate or quasi-independent government organizations and/or private sector). Rondinelli (1989) Classifies decentralization based on its objectives into four components, namely political decentralization, administrative decentralization, fiscal decentralization, and market decentralization. The World Bank also classifies a similar definition that types of decentralization include political, administrative, fiscal, and market decentralization.

The government, as a public servant, must provide good service under its own authority and powers, supported by legal aspects, implemented for the benefit of the community (Acharya & Scott, 2022; Rochmansjah, 2019). Bureaucracy is a government service that has an impact on "*social cost*".

Meanwhile, reinventing government in a pragmatic and applicable manner will condition the following conditions:

1. More concerned with government;
2. Public trust in the dynamics of a civilized society;
3. The fundamental problem with the quality of government services does not lie in human resources, it lies in the system that works.

The problems faced by bureaucrats in facing demands for reinventing government include, among others:

1. Prepare government officials to be able to position themselves as public servants;
2. Improving the ability of government officials to serve the public;
3. Prepare personnel to provide public services;
4. Prepare creative and innovative personnel;
5. Investing in facilities and infrastructure;
6. Prepare personnel who are able to master information systems.

According to David Osborne, efforts to build public trust in public services include:

1. The public needs to be convinced that bureaucracy is not a picture of "corruption" and the government must be seen as a management mechanism that is capable of realizing the aspirations of the public.
2. The public needs to be convinced that to improve the quality of a comprehensive culture requires an effective, productive and efficient government, increasingly healthy economic conditions and expanding government functions.

3. The public needs to be convinced that the condition of human resources (government apparatus) is not the central problem in public services, but rather the central problem lies in the system.
4. The public must be convinced that liberalism is traditional or conservative, and that liberalism's script deserves greater prominence and public service performance. Therefore, considerations that are acceptable to society as a whole are necessary.
5. The public needs to be assured that every member has the same opportunity to obtain public services in various public areas.

Decentralization in Timor-Leste, as in other countries, has had both positive and negative impacts on the delivery of public services. These impacts include improved service quality, community empowerment, and local economic development, but also challenges related to regional capacity and coordination with the central government.

Decentralization in Vietnam, which also implements decentralization in public service delivery, has had both positive and negative impacts. Positive impacts include improved quality of public services due to local governments' better understanding of local needs, community empowerment through increased participation in decision-making, and local economic development due to greater flexibility in policymaking.

However, decentralization also brings challenges, such as the potential for inequality between regions, problems with regional competence and performance in managing budgets, and suboptimal coordination between the central and regional governments.

Decentralization in Timor-Leste and Vietnam, while both implementing this system for public services, has had different impacts. Timor-Leste, with its unique post-independence state-formation history, faces challenges in implementing decentralization due to limited resources and immature institutional capacity. Vietnam, on the other hand, has implemented decentralization within the context of a centralized, one-party political system, which influences how regional autonomy is implemented and its impact on public services.

Table 1. Decentralization in Timor Leste and Vietnam

No	Description	Timor Leste	Vietnam
1	Tantangan	Decentralization in Timor Leste faces challenges such as lack of capacity of local government apparatus, limited resources, and poor coordination between central and local governments.	Despite having a centralized political system, Vietnam has implemented decentralization to improve the efficiency of public services. However, potential conflicts of interest between the central and local governments, as well as inequities in resource distribution, remain challenges.
2	Impact	Although decentralization aims to improve public services and regional development, its less than optimal implementation has led to inequality between regions, and public services have not been evenly distributed.	Decentralization in Vietnam, while granting greater autonomy to local governments, remains within the framework of a one-party system. This can limit public participation in decision-making and potentially create inequities in public services.
3	Historical Factors/Political System Factors	Timor-Leste's experience after independence, including conflict and lack of infrastructure, is an important factor in understanding the impact of decentralization..	Vietnam's centralized political system influences how decentralization is implemented, with the central government retaining control over policy and resource allocation.
4	Scale of	Timor Leste may have a greater	Vietnam, despite implementing

No	Description	Timor Leste	Vietnam
	Decentralization	degree of decentralization in terms of the transfer of power and responsibilities, but with significant implementation challenges.	decentralization, still maintains strong central control.
5.	Institutional Capacity	Timor Leste has weaker institutional capacity than Vietnam, which affects the effectiveness of decentralization.	Vietnam, with a more established bureaucratic system, may be better able to manage decentralization, although it still faces challenges in terms of efficiency and fairness.
6	Community Participation	Decentralization in Timor-Leste, in theory, should encourage greater public participation in decision-making. However, its implementation may be hampered by a lack of capacity and experience.	In Vietnam, public participation may be more limited due to the centralized political system.

Source: Researcher's Data Processing Based on Literature Review, 2026

Decentralization in Timor Leste and Vietnam had different impacts due to differences in historical context, political systems, and institutional capacity. Timor Leste faces challenges in implementing decentralization due to the history of state formation and limited resources. Vietnam, despite implementing decentralization, faces challenges in maintaining a balance between central control and local autonomy (Malesky, 2022; Pham, 2023). Both have the potential to improve public services through decentralization, but implementation must take into account the challenges and context of each country (Smoke, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Decentralization in Timor-Leste, through the transfer of greater authority to local governments, has the potential to improve public service quality in several aspects, including accessibility, responsiveness, and transparency. By gaining a better understanding of local needs, local governments are expected to provide more appropriate and effective services. However, the success of decentralization in improving public services is also influenced by various factors, including resource availability, institutional capacity, the competence of public officials, and the effectiveness of oversight mechanisms.

Although Timor-Leste and Vietnam have both implemented decentralization in public service provision, the impacts have differed due to their distinct historical, political, and institutional contexts. Timor-Leste, with its unique post-independence history, has faced challenges in implementing decentralization due to limited resources and developing institutional capacity. Vietnam, in contrast, has implemented decentralization within the framework of a centralized one-party political system, which has influenced the implementation of regional autonomy and its implications for public service delivery.

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