# Primary School Autonomy and Collective Action in School Committees in Arusha City and Iringa District

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**Abstract**

*This paper examines the relationship between school autonomy (SA) and collective action in primary school committees (CASC) in Arusha City and Iringa District.. The study employed a mixed-methods research approach with a combination of cross-sectional and case study research designs. Results in simple linear regression model supported the assumption that SA is related to CASC in Arusha City (0.306, $p<0.01$) and Iringa district (0.292, $p<0.01$). SA was also important in the multiple regression model in both Arusha city (0.226, $p<0.01$) and Iringa district (0.232, $p<0.01$) together with membership experience as a control variable in Arusha (0.226, $p<0.01$) and Iringa (0.232, $p<0.01$). Therefore, the study has implication for school autonomy reforms, particularly the criteria for school committee membership.*

***Keywords****: collaboration, parents, public goods, school committee membership,*

## Introduction

Many devolution policies are premised upon collective action (Pandolfelli, Dohrn & Meinzen-Dick, 2007). These include school autonomy reforms that foster parent and teacher collaboration through school management committees (SMCs) (Barrera-Osorio, Gertler, Nakajima, Patrinos, 2020; Bruns, Filmer & Patrinos, 2011; Gertler, Patrinos & Rubio-Codina, 2012). In Tanzania, school committees (SCs) are currently mandated by the Education Act, 1995 and they were created through the first Primary Education Development Program 2002 – 2006 (PEDP I) to democratise school level decision making processes by promoting collective action from parents and teachers (United Republic of Tanzania, 2001). Through joint school management, parents and teachers are expected to increase their collective

political clout to ensure comprehensive education delivery (Bodilly, Karam & Nate, 2011). Specifically, greater school autonomy is expected to mobilise collective action to address problems faced by schools (Beasley & Huilleryy, 2011). In Tanzania, however, there seems to have been collective action problems in school committees, for instance, attendance in meetings is low (Mzee, Nzalayaimisi & Gabagambi, 2018), consensus in deliberations on the procurement of teaching and learning materials (TLM) is often not reached (Geofrey, 2015), most head teachers tend to dominate decision-making processes (Sezary, 2013), and participatory Whole School Development Plans (WSDPs) are rarely developed (Pettersson, Rawle, Outhred, Brockerhoff, Wills, Nugroho, Jasper, Kveder & Beavis, 2015).

As Poteete and Ostrom (2004) demonstrated in the context of common pool resource (CPR), it is simple to say that parents and teachers share some interests in school management but, in practice, their representatives in school committees may have a number of self-interests. In this view, parents and teachers may also organise to pursue particularistic interests and hence they may fail to act collectively. Yet, little is known about how school autonomy is related to collective action in school committees (CASC). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between SA and CASC by comparing rural and urban contexts in Tanzania by addressing two research questions:

i. Does degree of collective action in school committees differ in rural and urban contexts in Tanzania?
ii. Does school autonomy relate with collective action in school committees across rural and urban settings in Tanzania?

The present study assumed linear regression models that produced key evidence for the relationship between SA and CASC in Arusha City and Iringa District (urban and rural setting respectively) controlling for age, sex, education attainment, distance from school, occupation status and membership experience. Simple linear regression results demonstrated that SA is statistically significant in both Arusha City (0.306, $p<0.01$) and Iringa District (0.292, $p<0.01$). The importance of SA remained the same after adding control variables in both Arusha City (0.226, $p<0.01$) and Iringa District (0.232, $p<0.01$). Therefore, this study challenges the neoliberal assumption that the school-based management (SBM) programme is a recipe for collaborative provision of public good at the school site.

The unique contribution of this study is twofold. Methodically, it successfully applies the CASC-scale, a 10 item measure of collective action in school committees based on collaborative responsibilities of school committee members mandated

by the Education (Amendment) Act 1995 and the Education Circular No. 1 of 2018. Empirically, this study reaffirms the importance of school autonomy reforms across rural–urban contexts. This is particularly important for education-related sustainable development goals (SDGs) because school committees are a vehicle through which the governments of low and middle-income countries (LMICs) ensure that the education provided is of higher quality.

## Literature Review

SBM programmes that include the representation of parents are informed by the Decentralisation Theorem (Barrera-Osorio, Fasih & Patrinos, 2009; Beasley & Huilleryy, 2011; Bruns et al., 2011) to give teachers and parents more power over the provision of public goods in school management (Gertler et al., 2012). However, evidence from South Africa paints a different picture in which involvement in school governing bodies (SGBs) is individualistic and sporadic, depending almost entirely on the good graces of head teachers or the initiative of individual members, who may or may not have the power to challenge existing patterns of collaboration (Grant-Lewis & Naidoo, 2006). In some Nigerian states, attendance in school-based management committee (SBMC) meetings is low, and members who are more economically active, feel that they are wasting their valuable time by working for the SBMC (Little & Pinnock, 2014).

In addition, decision making in most Nigerian SBMCs tends not to be collaborative and power is still held in the hands of a few members, especially head teachers and chairpersons (Poulsen, 2009). In South Africa, for example, SGB members in some schools are reported to have been excluded from financial decisions by their own chairpersons and head teachers (Mestry, 2006). In such situations, parent representatives and teacher representatives are expected to gang-up against their leaders. In the absence of mutual commitment among parents sitting in SCs, Putnam (1993) argues that each of them will have an incentive to become a free rider. Therefore, collective action challenge in SCs can also arise from an increase in autonomy in decision-making (UNESCO, 2017).

In free rider problem groups of individuals with common interests are expected to act on behalf of their common interests much as single individuals are often expected to act on behalf of their personal interests. However, Olson (1965, p.2) warns that "unless the number of individuals in a group is quite small, or unless there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest, rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests." Thus, smaller groups encourage members' collaboration more

than larger groups, that is a conventional logic of collective action (Olson, 1965). In the recent decades, this logic has been informing the formation of user groups as forums for collective action in the management of public service delivery (Manor, 2004).

School autonomy advocates tend to refer to decentralisation to argue for potential collective action in school committees. The key argument is that as governments shed some service delivery management responsibilities to parents and teachers, collective action should take place because all these actors are interested in ensuring delivery of quality education for their children and all pupils in their schools. This shared decision making among key stakeholders at the local level is the defining characteristic of school autonomy reforms. However, SC members tend to effectively behave as altruists, meaning that norms of reciprocity play a vital role in the collective action process through which social capital influences individual participation (Jicha, Thompson, Fulkerson & May, 2011). As Kahan (2002) suggests, reciprocity logic of collective action is equally important in explaining collective action in school committees.

Reciprocity is one of the most prominent social capital mechanisms proposed to explain the emergence of collective action in participation dilemmas (Grujić, Eke, Cabrales, Cuesta & Sánchez, 2012). In Bolivia, for example, the reciprocity logic and its perceived advantages such as collaboration indirectly influence the decisions made by peasants to participate – or not – in the payments of ecosystem services (Bétrisey & Mager, 2014). In Cambodia, norms of reciprocity helped community members in attending community forestry (CF) meetings (Ido, 2019). From this evidence, it seems that collective action may decrease with group size as predicted by conventional logic but increases with heterogeneity (Gavrilets, 2015) for which norms of reciprocity are often needed to overcome the collaboration dilemma (Kahan, 2002).

The theoretical perspectives reviewed thus far indicate the existence of school autonomy policy-practice gap. The design of SC is premised upon conventional logic of collective action: giving power to the parent' and teachers' representatives are enough to increase their collective action. This neoliberal perspective seems to ignore the fact as the case of the state failure and the market failure, there is also community failure (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Therefore, the linkages between SA and CASC warrant an inquiry.

## Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods research approach that involved the combination of cross-sectional and case study research designs. These techniques were adopted because qualitative and quantitative approaches are complementary, particularly in the study of collective action (Meinzen-Dick, Di Gregorio & McCarthy, 2004

The target population was 145 primary school SCs in Iringa District and all 48 primary school SCs in Arusha City. In each SC, four parents' representatives excluding the SC chairperson and two teachers' representatives participated in the survey. Thus, in each SC, six members filled in the questionnaire (four parents and two teachers), making a total of 156 respondents in Iringa District and 156 respondents in Arusha City. Further, 10 SC chairpersons and 10 women members participated in different FGDs in each study site. All the participants were recruited through snowball sampling technique. In addition, semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted with 10 head teachers in each site.

Five proxies of CASC were developed as sub-scales, namely (i) collaboration on supervision of school operations (CSO), (ii) collaboration on school planning/ budgeting (CSP), (iii) collaboration on school financial management (CSF), (iv) collaboration on information sharing (CIS), and (v) collaboration on ensuring school attendance (CSA). Each sub-scale yielded two items, making a combined total of 10 items rated on a 5-point Likert Scale: 1 = *not at all*, 2 = *very few times*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *most of the time*, and 5 = *all the time*.

Table 1: *Items of the CASC Scale*

| **Proxies** | **Items** |
|---|---|
| Collaboration on supervision of school operations | How often have you visited the school to monitor teaching in the last two years? |
| | How often have you attended meetings per year since you joined the committee? |
| Collaboration on school planning and budgeting | How often have you spoken at the school planning/ budgeting sessions? |
| | How often have you understood plans/budgets in your committee meetings? |

| | |
|---|---|
| Collaboration on school financial management | How often have you participated in approving school procurements? |
| | How often have you participated in approving school financial reports? |
| Collaboration on school information sharing | How often have you reached consensus on information dissemination format? |
| | How often have you reached consensus on the contents of information disseminated to public? |
| Collaboration on school Enrolments/attendance | How often have you combined efforts to increase pupils' enrolment? |
| | How often have you taken joint measures to combat truancy in your school? |

In this study, CASC was treated as a continuous variable because the scale has met the standard psychometric rule of thumb criterion of comprising at least eight reasonably related items (Carifio & Perla, 2008). Nevertheless, the continuous scale is reliable when the items have relatively high internal consistency (Vaske, Beaman & Sponarski, 2017). Thus, the study applied the Cronbach's alpha estimation to test whether the components of the scale were sufficiently intercorrelated and that the grouped items measure the CASC. The alpha coefficient for the 10 items is .75, suggesting that the items have acceptable internal consistency.

The study uses the World Bank's School Autonomy and Accountability Scale for benchmarking school autonomy. There are five main indicators in the School Autonomy and Accountability Scale and each of them has a set of variables, namely (i) school autonomy in budget planning and approval**,** (ii) school autonomy in personnel management, (iii) participation of the SC in school finance, (iv) assessment of school and student performance, and (v) school accountability. SCs in Tanzania still lack autonomy to hire and fire teachers and to conduct school inspections. Therefore, the study dropped the second and third indicators, meaning that the relevant measures adapted from the World Bank's scale are (i) school autonomy in budget planning and approval (power over planning and budgeting)**,** (ii) participation of the school committee in school finance (power over school finance)**,** and (iii) school accountability (power over school accountability).

Table 2: *School Autonomy Scale*

| Indicators | Items |
|---|---|
| Power over school planning and budget | Does the school committee assist in the preparation of the school budget? |
| | Does the school committee use authority to approve the school budget? |
| Power over school finance | Does the school committee use its authority to oversee the school operational budget? |
| | Does the school committee use its authority to raise funds in addition to the transfers from the government? |
| | Does the school committee use its authority to monitor school procurements? |
| | Does the school committee use its authority to supervise the implementation of the school budget? |
| Power over school accountability | Does the school committee commission audit of school finances? |
| | Does the school committee deal with accountability issues as required by PEDP guideline? |

## Statistical Analysis

The study performed descriptive statistics to summarise the ratings from the CASC scale using the Stata 15 software (StataCorp., 2017). Given the different contexts between Arusha City and Iringa District, independent-sample *t test* was run to provide a statistical test of the observed differences in CASC between the two study sites. Then, OLS models for simple linear regression and multiple linear regression (MLR) were used to estimate the variance of SA relative to CASC controlling for sociodemographic and socioeconomic factors. Simple linear regression model was performed to estimate the relationship between SA and CASC. The variables were denoted as follows: $X_1$= school autonomy and Y= collective action in the school committee. The simple linear regression equation takes the following form:

$$y = b_0 + b_1 x_1 \quad (1)$$

Where $b_0$ is the *Y* intercept, $b_1$ is the estimated regression coefficient that quantifies the relationship between SA and CASC. To control for age, sex, education attainment, occupation status, distance from school and membership experience, the potential covariates $X_2$ through $X_p$ were added. The multiple regression equation takes the following form:

$$y = b_0 + b_1x_1 + b_2x_2 + \ldots + b_px_p \quad (2)$$

Where $b_{1,2\ldots p}$ are the regression coefficients, which represent the value at which the collection action in the school committee changes when the school autonomy changes. Here, the study compared $b_1$ from the simple linear regression model to $b_1$ from the MLR model. As a rule of thumb, if the regression coefficient from the simple linear regression model changes by more than 10%, then $X_2$ is said to be a control variable (Kiernan, 2014). The test of significance of the regression coefficient associated with the school autonomy was used to assess whether its relationship with CASC is statistically significant after accounting for age, sex, education attainment, occupation status, distance from school and membership experience.

Data from FGDs and interviews were analysed using thematic analysis as suggested by Guest, Macqueen and Namey (2012). The aim was to develop codes that serve as labels for identifying the themes that emerged from the study and therefore corroborate the findings from regression models. This approach is often used as a part of case study design (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## Findings and Discussion

### Variations in CASC

Descriptive statistics provide a brief account of the degree of variations in CASC within and between Arusha City and Iringa District. Table 3 shows that the mean CSP (collaboration on school planning/budgeting) score in Arusha City (*M*=4.59, *SD*=0.66) is the highest and mean CSO (collaboration on school operations) score (*M*=4.21, *SD*=0.92) is the lowest. Similarly, the mean CSP score in Iringa City (*M*=4.43, *SD*=0.83) is highest and CSA (collaboration on school attendance) score (*M*=3.28, *SD*=0.93) is the lowest.

Table 3: *Variations in CASC within Arusha City and Iringa District*

| Sub-Scale | Arusha City | | | Iringa District | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Obs | Mean | Std. Dev. | Obs | Mean | Std. Dev. |
| CSO | 156 | 4.2120 | 0.9244 | 156 | 4.1883 | 0.9040 |
| CSP | 156 | 4.5886 | 0.6594 | 156 | 4.4286 | 0.8391 |
| CSF | 156 | 4.4019 | 0.8567 | 156 | 4.3312 | 0.8425 |
| CIS | 156 | 4.5506 | 0.7275 | 156 | 4.3377 | 0.8021 |
| CSA | 156 | 4.2880 | 0.8452 | 155 | 3.2810 | 0.9369 |

Looking at the standard deviations, it is clear that there is less variability in mean CSP than in other variables of CASC and hence confirming the high mean collaboration on school planning/budgeting in both sites. This suggests that planning and budgeting responsibilities preoccupy the surveyed school committees. In other words, school planning and budgeting constitute the major form of collective action in both Arusha City and Iringa District. Calculating the mean CASC for both sites, it indicates that collective action is higher in Arusha City ($M$=4.4) and low in Iringa District ($M$=4.1). The t-tests $t$ (310) = 4.5, $SEM$ = 0.00, $p < 0.001$ confirm the observed mean difference of CASC between Arusha City and Iringa District. Since the sampling unit is the school committee, the observed collective action is for all 156 members who participated in the survey in Arusha City and 156 members in Iringa District.

Table 4: *Difference in CASC between Arusha City and Iringa District*

| Group | Obs | Mean | T-test | *df.* | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Arusha City | 156 | 4.4091 | | | |
| Iringa District | 156 | 4.1136 | 4.5127 | 310 | 0.000 |
| Combined | 312 | 4.2633 | | | |

One possible explanation for the higher mean CASC in Arusha City is that SC members are more skilled in managerial issues than their counterparts in Iringa

District. For example, mastery of the school planning and budgeting processes as well as the monitoring of pedagogical affairs may require some skills which some members in rural school committees may not have. On the one hand, participants in Arusha chairpersons FGD stated that they are aware of their mandated roles and responsibilities and they complied with the PEDP manuals in the course of performing their duties. On the other hand, less than a quarter of the participants in Iringa chairpersons FGD demonstrated awareness of PEDP procedures that are supposed to guide their decision-making processes and monitoring roles.

Moreover, information from Iringa women FGD indicated that some members tended to skip meetings and sometimes they remained quiet during deliberations. A key informant attributed such free riding behaviours to his failure to organise orientation training for school committee members. He blamed the government for its decision to end disbursement of capacity building grants since 2006. From a descriptive point of view, it logically follows that some SCs may not rely on the granted autonomy when confronted with challenges in the course of accomplishing their collaborative roles and responsibilities. Comparatively, the difference in CASC between Arusha City and Iringa District suggests that the ability of school level actors to work together between the two sites differs. While SC members in Iringa indicated less collective action, their counterparts in Arusha City demonstrated a shared collective identity. This should not be a surprise given that Arusha City is an urban centre and Iringa District is a rural locality. In Nigeria, for example, school committees vary widely in functionality, with variations largely reflecting differences in contextual factors such as the extent of poverty (Uzor, 2017). In essence, these results contradict the conventional wisdom that collective action is easier in rural communities.

## The relationship between SA and CASC in Arusha City and Iringa District

The descriptive statistics reflected variation in CASC both within and between Arusha City and Iringa District. The results from the SLR model presented in Table 6 demonstrates that SA is related to CASC in both Arusha City (0.306, $p<0.01$) and Iringa District (0.292, $p<0.01$). The number obtained by the $R^2$ coefficient is 0.140 (Arusha) and 0.127 (Iringa), meaning that SA explains total variance in the CASC scale at 14% and 12.7% respectively.

**Table 5:** *Summary of Simple Regression Analysis for SA and CASC (N= 312)*

| | Arusha | Iringa |
|---|---|---|
| **Variables** | **CASC** | **CASC** |
| SA | 0.306*** | 0.292*** |
| | (0.0608) | (0.0621) |
| Constant | 3.101*** | 3.228*** |
| | (0.263) | (0.194) |
| Observations | 156 | 156 |
| R-squared | 0.140 | 0.127 |

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

The findings in Table 6 indicate that power over school planning, power over school finances, and power over school accountability granted to school site may influence the extent to which SC members collaborate together in the provision of public goods across rural and urban settings. Thus, the degree to which government genuinely cedes authority to the school site continuously appears as a key determinant of collective action (Prinsen & Titega, 2008). This suggests that school autonomy is likely to be an ideal reform for teachers and parents' collaborative provision of public goods across urban and rural settings of Tanzania.

The significant relationship between SA and CASC observed in Table 5 is maintained in the MLR model, which controlled for age, sex, education attainment, occupation status, distance from school and membership experience. Table 6 shows that SA is related to CASC in both Arusha City (0.226, p<0.01) and Iringa District (0.232, p<0.01) together with membership experience in Arusha (0.226, p<0.01) and Iringa (0.232, p<0.01). Occupation status (0.0593, p<0.05) and education attainment (0.0916, p<0.05) are important in Arusha and Iringa respectively.

**Table 6:** *Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Related to CASC (N= 312)*

| Variables | Arusha CASC | Iringa CASC |
|---|---|---|
| SA | 0.226*** | 0.232*** |
| | (0.0616) | (0.0625) |
| Age | 0.0522 | -0.0157 |
| | (0.0459) | (0.0479) |
| Sex | 0.109 | 0.0449 |
| | (0.0809) | (0.0913) |
| Education | 0.00563 | 0.0916** |
| | (0.0331) | (0.0448) |
| Distance | -0.0371 | 0.0509 |
| | (0.0315) | (0.0375) |
| Experience | 0.271*** | 0.218*** |
| | (0.0702) | (0.0731) |
| Occupation | -0.0593** | -0.101 |
| | (0.0243) | (0.0645) |
| Constant | 2.454*** | 2.227*** |
| | (0.361) | (0.461) |
| Observations | 158 | 151 |
| R-squared | 0.270 | 0.235 |

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

The percentage changes of SA coefficient from the SLR is 26% in Arusha City and 20.5% in Iringa District, confirming membership experience as a control variable in both sites as well as occupation status in Arusha and education attainment in Iringa. The results from $R^2$ coefficient is 0.270 (Arusha) and 0.235 (Iringa), indicating that the model explains a proportion of the variability in CASC. In other words,

SA with membership experience and occupation status explains total variance in the CASC-scale at 27% in Arusha City. Similarly, it explains total variance in the CASC scale at 23.5% in Iringa District with membership experience and education attainment.

Comparing the two regression models for both Arusha City and Iringa District, a marked increase in the explanatory power is clear. The percentage of variance explained by the MLR model increased from 14% and 12.7% to 27% and 23.5% respectively. Therefore, the importance SA to CASC comes with a caveat. The significance of membership experience in both sites indicates that SC members are more likely to face collective action problem when they lack civic engagement experience regardless of the context. Similar findings were obtained by Sezary (2013) in Ilala District in Dar es Salaam Region where the author showed that low experience of SC members negatively undermined their collaborative supervision of school activities. Therefore, the possibilities of collective action problems in school committees (skipping meetings, remaining quiet or hiding solutions during deliberations) can also be attributed to inadequate experience in civic engagement.

Data from FGDs support the significance of membership experience as a control variable across the two study sites. For example, participants in Iringa chairperson FGD observed: "a few members have been dominating debates in my committee as the rest of the members tend to remain quiet. More often, I am compelled to rely on them during deliberations especially on technical matters." Conversely, participants in Arusha chairpersons' FGD stated:

> "Our school committee is very innovative. We don't wait for a grant from the government. We mobilise our own resources for financing development projects. Some members are very good at developing writeups. We have received support from a mobile phone company, a bank and an NGO."

Despite the different outcomes that accrued from experience of members between the two sites, the results indicated that previous exposure in civic engagement can facilitate the realisation of CASC across rural and urban settings of school committees.

From the foregoing, the qualitative results corroborates that while members of surveyed urban school committees seem to be more innovative in resources mobilisation, the situation in sampled rural school committees is different. This means while school communities are allowed to find ways to finance some of their responsibilities, some of them particularly those located at the disadvantaged settings may not have capacity to raise financial resources. The same applies to

Niger where schools do have relative freedom to resolve their problems in creative ways or to seek support from donors but some school management teams do not have time to engage in these extra activities and that they do not have any contacts with donor organisations so increasing their own resources is not possible (Cummings, Tahirou, Rhissa, Hamed, Goumey, & Noura, 2016). As UNESCO (2017) pointed out, no school autonomy approach can succeed if actors lack an enabling environment or are ill-equipped to meet their collaborative responsibilities. In general, this highlights the limitations of Decentralization Theorem when it is applied to school autonomy reforms.

From theoretical perspective, the success of school autonomy reforms can be contingent upon the degree to which parent representatives are entrenched in school committees with previous experience in civic engagement. For example, Putnam (1993) observed that participation in civic organizations inculcates skills of cooperation as well as a sense of shared responsibility of collective endeavours. As Prinsen and Titega (2008) noted, parents need to have a certain experience and maturity before they can be elected into school committees. Otherwise, new members are required to attend trainings on how to assume their responsibilities in school management. Nevertheless, the present study indicates that capacity building trainings are rarely provided largely due to abolishment of school capacity building grants. This has implication for practice because head teachers are now required to use readily available resources to provide orientation trainings to first time SC members.

Since socioeconomic status (SES) tends to influence the formation of social capital (Jicha, Thompson, Fulkerson & May, 2011), particularly norms of reciprocity (Bétrisey & Mager, 2014; Gavrilets, 2015; Ido, 2019), SC members with previous experience in civic engagements are more likely to behave reciprocally than those who lack such an exposure (Grujić et al., 2012). In other words, the argument that collective action is logically easier in a small group than in a large group (Olson, 1965) is not necessarily the case. This has implication for school autonomy reforms because membership experience has shown the potential to overcome collective action problems in school committees regardless of the context.

## Conclusions

The present study confirmed an assumption that school autonomy (SA) is related to collective action in school committees CASC across rural and urban settings of school committees. However, the percentage changes of 26% in Arusha City and 20.5% in Iringa District suggest that membership experience can control the

relationship between SA and CASC in both sites. The same applied to occupation status in Arusha City and education attainment in Iringa District. In other words, socioeconomic factors are likely to interfere with the relationships between SA and CASC. One inference that can be drawn here is that school autonomy is a necessary step towards CASC but it may not be sufficient.

The two cases presented in this study demonstrate notable differences in CASC, supporting the notion that rural and urban areas have unequal capacities to overcome collective action problems. Because rural communities tend to be more traditional than urban communities, SC members in Arusha City and Iringa District may provide different forms of public goods albeit collaboratively. Closely related to this view is that the ability of education decentralisation to reduce the inefficiencies of district-level management of primary schools is not the same across the country.

Majority of members in the surveyed school committees in Iringa District seem not to be aware of procedures that are supposed to guide their decision-making processes and monitoring roles. When this is coupled with inadequate trainings, it can be said that a sizeable number of school committee members in rural settings may lack understanding of their devolved roles and responsibilities. Thus, the capacity of school-level actors to govern their schools should be taken into account. In particular, incentives should be introduced to facilitate head teachers to utilise readily available resources such as physical and human resources to provide orientation trainings to first time members.

This study reaffirms the existing evidence that school committees remain instrumental in ensuring delivery of equitable and quality primary education in Tanzania. However, the extent to which power over school planning, power over school finances, and power over school accountability are devolved from district education authorities to the school site may not necessarily lead to improved CASC. The previous experience of members seems to be important across rural and urban contexts. Therefore, by placing parents and teachers at the helm of school management without considering their socioeconomic contexts, the current design of school autonomy may not be enough for collective action in school committees.

The central argument of this study is that respect to conventional logic alone can blind voluntary collaboration among the SC members and thereby diluting the power of such collaboration to trigger reciprocal collective action. Consistent with reciprocity logic of collective action, the design of school autonomy in Tanzania needs to reflect the socioeconomic dimensions of school-level actors.

Specifically, the next round of school autonomy reforms should consider adding experience in civic engagement to school committee membership criteria for parent representatives.

This study stimulates further research on school autonomy and collective action in school committee in the context of low and middle-income countries (LMICs) particularly in a longitudinal research design to establish the impact of devolved school management responsibilities on CASC. Similarly, research is also needed to track the significance of education attainment and occupation status in collective action across rural–urban settings of school committees.

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