World Development 199 (2026) 107219

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

World Development

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/worlddev

Urbanization and decentralization in the Congo: Examining governance in rural towns[☆,☆☆]

Soeren J. Henn [a,*], Aimable Lameke [b], Mastaki Mugaruka [b], Vincent Tanutama [c]

[a] University of Wisconsin-Madison, United States of America
[b] Marakuja Kivu Research, Democratic Republic of the Congo
[c] University of Bonn, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

JEL classification:
H11
H70
O17
P48

Keywords:
Rural towns
Governance
State-society relations
Decentralization
Traditional Authority

ABSTRACT

How are rural towns governed in a context of fragility? This paper provides descriptive evidence to describe and quantify urbanization and the local organization of the state in 67 rural towns in four provinces of the Democratic Republic and the Congo. We present rich data on urbanization, state and local governance, taxation, public good provision, and citizens' perceptions of governance. Three stories emerge. First, rural towns are growing, boosting high levels of ethnic diversity, and local trust, but are still largely agrarian and with unclear property rights. Second, a recent decentralization reform has been poorly implemented ten years on. Less than half the towns have a state administrators, no local elections took place, and revenue sharing is limited. Third, the governance goals of the reform remain largely unfulfilled. We observe a lack of democratic accountability, high levels of corruption, and an acute gap in financing. Finally, we find that these governance challenges are not correlated with levels of urbanization, implementation of the reforms, or levels of state capacity.

1. Introduction

Africa's urban population is continuously expanding. Much of this population growth comes not from major cities, but from secondary and mid-sized cities as well as small towns in the countryside (OECD and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and African Development Bank, 2022). Many of these agglomerations and emerging towns in Africa are situated in areas of limited statehood where citizens are governed by a mix of non-state actors and state actors of limited capacity. In this context urbanization is likely to spur political change and social transformation and alter state-society relations.

In this paper we study the local governance and state-society relations in rural towns in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). We build upon the intellectual tradition of "real governance" in the DRC (Titeca & De Herdt, 2011), and embarked on a quantitative examination to answer the following questions about governance in emerging urban centers of rural areas in the country. What are the demographic trends in rural towns in the DRC? How was a recent decentralization reform implemented and did it achieve its governance goals? What is the level of local state capacity in these areas? And, to what degree are the challenges faced due to recent demographic changes, struggles in the decentralization reform, or the endemic governance constraints in the DRC? Our systematic empirical investigation aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of important governance questions, which have previously only been studied qualitatively, on a case by case basis, or in cross-country studies.

Rural towns in the DRC provide a valuable setting to study local state capacity and state-society relations. The country has seen the

☆ This article is part of a Special issue entitled: 'Political Change in African Cities' published in World Development.

☆☆ We thank Mwami Jean Bosco Butsitsi Bigirwa, Chris Blattman, Kristian Hoelscher, Horacio Larreguy, Jeffrey Paller, Canice Prendergast, James Robinson, Raúl Sánchez de la Sierra, Abdifatah Tahir, Frank Borge Wietzke, and participants at APSA and GLD for helpful comments and discussions. Paulin Bazuzi Christian, Chance Iragi Bisimwa, Celestin Bundjembo, Jeanine Cijanu, Pascal Mulume Fungulo, Godefroid Machumu Karungu, Betina Kasengela, Israël Sudi Kilihukiro, Mao Mayobo, Doris Mayolo, Patrick Mayongo, Jacques Kambale Mbavumoja, Johny Bantu Muakadi, Oscar Kashala Muanda, Isaac Batulani Mugereke, Jospin Fikiri Murhimbo, François Mushagalusa Bapolise Lazart, Judith Cibangu Mutamba, Eddy Ngwakoyo, Etienne Ramazani, Claude Rutore, Eric Stolz, Marlene Tshala, and Jeanmarcel Tshikiema provided excellent research support. This project is funded by the InternationalGrowthCentre COD–21086 and the University of Chicago's PearsonInstitute. This project was approved by the University of Chicago IRB21–1251.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: sjhenn@wisc.edu (S.J. Henn), amanilamek@gmail.com (A. Lameke), christian999mastaki@gmail.com (M. Mugaruka), tanutama@uni-bonn.de (V. Tanutama).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2025.107219

Available online 19 November 2025

emergence of numerous new towns in its countryside, driven by rapid population growth and population concentration due to insecurity. In addition, the country has implemented a decentralized system since 2012, in which both traditional and state officials are responsible for separate local jurisdictions. By examining localities that have recently come under the purview of the central state we have the opportunity to assess local state capacity, albeit in a context where such implementation is fraught (Englebert & Mungongo, 2016) and authority remains contested (Büscher, Perazzone, Cuvelier, Lumbu, Rwakira, Bulambo, Yabauma, & Muzalia, 2024). This allows us to quantify to what degree reforms to local governance were implemented and the impact on local governance. Additionally, it allows us to understand how citizens react to local governance arrangements in emerging towns.

In order to systematically gather evidence of the local governance landscape, we designed surveys that assess multiple dimensions of state capacity for both government and household respondents. These dimensions included the availability of state services, personnel characteristics, bureaucratic structure, collective action, and attitudes towards governance, as well as outcome measures of public goods and economic development. During the summer of 2022, our team of researchers from Marakuja Kivu Research conducted surveys of 536 households and 267 local leaders in 67 localities in the provinces of North and South Kivu, Kasaï, and Kasaï Central. These 67 towns account for 10 percent of the provinces' total population. In addition to the locality, government agent, and household surveys, we also collected all available administrative and financial records from each locality, as well as qualitative reports on local governance from our enumerators.

Our data on urbanization in rural towns suggests a heterogeneous and changing community. Steady population growth, new migrants and high levels of fractionalization meet a largely agricultural economy where most households do not own land and instead have to rely in traditional leaders for land allocations. Given these development it is perhaps surprising that trust among citizens is reportedly high.

Partially in response to the recent urbanization of rural towns, the DRC enacted an ambitious decentralization reform in 2012. Our data reveals that the reform has been implemented as intended only in a small subset of rural towns. Most towns are still governed by traditional leaders and not state administrators, the population has largely not had the chance to elect its leaders, revenue sharing happens in less than a third of towns, and only half of local leaders have good knowledge of the decentralization reform.

We then investigate governance outcomes in the localities to assess to what degree progress has been made on the goals of the decentralization reform surrounding state capacity, public good provision, local government finances, and accountability. Our findings document the presence of various government agents across localities, who perform a variety of state functions and exhibit high levels of administrative proficiency.

Yet, our data uncover three critical challenges of local governance in rural localities in the DRC. Firstly, there is a notable absence of democratic accountability. The majority of local leaders are not elected but rather appointed by traditional or provincial leaders. Furthermore, a considerable number of government agents hold their positions due to familial connections, and have appointed family members to positions as well. Despite leaders dedicating a significant portion of their time to engaging with community members, there is a disconnect between citizens' preferences for public goods and those of their leaders.

Secondly, corruption is prevalent in the local governance landscape. Both government agents and citizens report widespread corruption and government agents admit to engaging in corrupt practices themselves. We estimate that government agents earn more in bribes than in their official salaries. This pattern is likely to persist due to the fact that only half of the agents surveyed receive an official salary.

Thirdly, our findings indicate a severe shortage of financing in towns. Leaders lack the resources to significantly expand the state and revenue and expenditure across localities are minimal. In predominantly agricultural settings, citizens have limited additional income that can be mobilized by government agents, even with their administrative capacity and the bribes they already pay. This highlights how corruption may be crowding out legitimate resource generation.

We then investigate what mechanism might explain the governance challenges in rural towns. We find no consistent evidence that high rates of urbanization, lack of implementation of the decentralization reform, or low levels of state capacity are correlated with the poor governance outcomes we observe. This suggests that the issue runs deeper and might require significant more resources from central and provincial governments than local governments can muster on their own.

Additionally, it is noteworthy to mention that despite the challenges posed by the lack of democratic accountability and widespread corruption, citizens remain active and engaged. They report high levels of participation in public works and display a willingness to contribute to public goods, as evident in their responses in the behavioral games. Our qualitative reports from enumerators further reinforce this observation, highlighting that citizens are eager to participate and contribute once the governance challenges have been addressed. These findings offer a cause for optimism and suggest that there is a strong foundation to build upon in promoting better governance and improving local state capacity.

Building on recent ethnographic evidence (Olivier de Sardan, 2011; Titeca & De Herdt, 2011) we observe a state that is present but limited in its capabilities. Despite facing challenges with individual incentives and collective resources for public projects, the bureaucracy comprises personnel who engage in developmental interventions. This administrative capacity and the organizational architecture form an infrastructural foundation of a working state. Although this seems innocuous, this foundation is precarious and vulnerable to aspects of state motives.[1] On the one hand, the abundance of paper records and population statistics demonstrates rudimentary, yet noteworthy, administrative capacity of the state, whose record-keeping can be used to increase the returns of the state for collective interest. On the other hand, in an environment where leaders are appointed, lack of democratic accountability makes "legibility" (Scott, 1999) easier to be used against the collective interest and deepen corruption.

Similar predisposition can be seen in the organizational structure of town bureaucracies. The appointment of local leaders by upper-level governments can foster the flow of innovative practices from the central government, particularly in the context of the DRC where fiscal resources are engrossed in Kinshasa and mining-heavy provinces.[2] However, this interconnectivity can also be detrimental, especially if the upper-level government is corrupt and seeks to retain control over local leaders and citizens. The hierarchy and labor specialization in towns help to eliminate redundant tasks, but it also highlights the need for effective communication and follow-up processes. We acknowledge the significance of this organizational heterogeneity in

[1] This infrastructural capacity is one aspect of Mann (1984)'s "infrastructural power" as referenced in the earlier paragraph. The capacity to influence civil society to implement political decisions, it comprises other foundational aspects such as centrally-organized services that are carried out through a division of labor, literacy of population, creation of systems of currency to facilitate the exchange of goods, supply of effective systems of communication and transportation.

[2] Englebert and Mungongo (2016) reported that top three revenue-contributing provinces of Katanga, Kinshasa, and Bas-Congo also enjoy the largest amount of "retrocession" or profit-sharing funds to their provinces. Additionally since the decentralization reform which constitutionally mandated 40% of these provincial "retrocession" funds from the central government to be further downstreamed to the lower-level decentralized entities, only 3.1% of funds were on average transferred in 2011. This suggested stratified, highly skewed revenue mobilization.

the context of Congolese decentralization reform, particularly as town agents transition away from traditional leadership structures, leading to an increased competition for tax revenues between the state government and traditional chiefs.

The present study provides valuable insights into the governance dynamics in rural towns. This research fills an important gap in the literature by shedding light on the unique characteristics of governance in smaller towns.[3] The importance of this research is further emphasized by the fact that smaller towns play a critical role in the rural–urban migration chain (Ingelaere, Christiaensen, De Weerdt, & Kanbur, 2018; Rodrigues, 2022), as well as in contexts of mining booms (Kirshner & Power, 2015) and insecurity (Raeymaekers, Menkhaus, & Vlassenroot, 2008), both of which are prevalent in the DRC (Büscher, 2018). Further research is needed in this area, given the differences between smaller towns and larger cities with regards to the provision of public goods (Post & Kuipers, 2022), as well as the important role that emerging towns can play in these types of contexts (Kumar & Stenberg, 2023).

Our research contributes to the current discourse surrounding state-building in contexts of limited statehood (Risse & Stollenwerk, 2018) particularly state-building in the DRC. While much of the research has focused on state collapse in the 80s and 90s (Callaghy, 1984; Schatzberg, 1991; Young & Turner, 1985), and the following perverse effects of conflict (Autesserre, 2012; Englebert, 2006; Kisangani, 2020; Sweet, 2020), more recent literature has focused on the potential of pockets of effectiveness (Moshonas, 2013; Olivier de Sardan, 2011; Titeca & De Herdt, 2011), hybrid governance (De Herdt & Titeca, 2019), local governance reforms (Balán, Bergeron, Tourek, & Weigel, 2022; Weigel, 2020), and human resource management (Moshonas, 2018, 2019). Local approaches to overcome governance challenges are particularly important to create sustainable solutions and reduce exposure to uncertain international support. Our paper examines such a home-grown approach to state-building in rural towns and shows the opportunities and pitfalls of it generates.

Finally, our findings contribute to the discourse surrounding decentralization reform in a context of limited state capacity (Englebert & Mungongo, 2016). The implementation of governance reforms, including decentralization, can be challenging for states with limited capacity. However, decentralization, in the right institutional environment, has the potential to bring about significant benefits of increased accountability and reduced corruption (Bardhan, 2002; Dickovick, 2014; Olowu & Wunsch, 2004). However, decentralization reforms are hard to measure (Ayee, 1996) and the success of reforms to local government depends on how they are implemented and enforced (Ayee, 1997; Faguet & Pal, 2023; Henn, Larreguy, & Marshall, 2020). Given the imperfect institutional environment in which this policy is implemented, it is essential to approach decentralization reform with caution in the context of limited state capacity (Booth, 2012; Dickovick & Wunsch, 2014). Our findings of extreme low fiscal capacity (less than 1% of GDP) suggests these localities operate below the minimum threshold for viable state-building and challenges the assumption that local governments can mobilize resources more effectively than central states. In contexts of extreme poverty and limited monetization, decentralization without fiscal transfers may simply formalize low levels of state performance rather than improving governance.

2. Background: History of local governance in the democratic Republic of the Congo

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has experienced various systems of local governance since the colonial period. Insecurity, high fragility, and mining booms, have led to a increased concentration of population in rural centers in the last 30 years. How these towns have been governed has changed over time. Following a decentralization reform in 2008, rural towns turned into communes which were to be governed by elected mayors.

Characteristics of the country and the limited capacities of the central state make the DRC a suitable, yet vulnerable, setting for decentralization. The DRC covers an enormous geographical area (2.345 million km^2, more than four times the size of France, the largest country in the European Union). The capital, Kinshasa, is located in the far west of the country; vast parts of the country are covered with rain forest; and the road network is poor, making over-land travel impractical. The country also boasts an incredible heterogeneity in its population (e.g., over 200 spoken languages). Regional, cultural, linguistic, and religious differences lead to different preferences for public good and governance that are difficult to grant by a central actor. Additionally, the DRC has been plagued by extremely low levels of governance capacity making governing effectively from the center implausible. These realities, along with political negotiations following the Second Congo Wars, have led to the establishment of an ambitious decentralization reform post 2005. It is important to note that the weakness of the Congolese state also affects the implementation of these reforms, a fact to which we will return to in this paper.

The DRC population grew from 53 million at the beginning of its Third Republic after the Second Congo War in 2003 to 105 million today. Population growth rate consistently stayed above 3 per cent in the last two decades, where the urban population grew far more than the rural population, at an average of 4.7 per cent per year in contrast with 2.6 per cent per year. The urban population now makes up 47 per cent of the total population, making the DRC among the fastest growing urban population in Sub-Saharan Africa and the world.[4] The rapid urbanization in the DRC is situated within the administrative reorganization of the Third Republic. The new constitution of 2006 subdivided 11 previous provinces into 27 provinces, put into effect in 2015. This new creation of provinces added new capital cities in the administrative subdivision, as well as elevated the status of other cities of similar population size or economic importance, officially under the urban areas of the provinces called *villes*. The number of cities grew from 21 to 98 (See Table A1). Accordingly, the number of city subdivisions (urban towns, called *communes*) also grew from a total of 97 to 336.

The rural subdivision stayed in tact, except for the urban clusters. The number of territories (rural subdivisions of the province) stayed at 145, whose rural subdivisions of sectors and chiefdoms also stayed at 477 and 260 in total. The biggest change came from the appointment of rural towns from urban agglomerations, from 227 before 2006 to 289 rural towns.

Decentralization in the DRC begins with the provinces, the highest level of decentralized administrative unit. Governed by elected governors and provincial legislatures, the 26 provinces raise their own revenue and implement public goods. Below the province are territories (*territoires*) and cities (*villes*) governed by appointed territorial administrator (*administrateur de territoire*) and mayors (*mairies*), respectively. The local governance we focus on in this paper is found within the territories. Territories consist of several chiefdoms (*chefferies*) which are also decentralized units, meaning they can raise their own revenue and decide over the implementation of public goods. Chiefdoms are governed by traditional rulers, kings (*mwami* sing., *bwami* pl. in the Kivus; *mulopwe* sing., *balopwe* pl. in the Kasaïs),[5] and have two entities:

[3] For a review of governance in larger urban areas in Africa see, for example, Kamana, Radoine, and Nyasulu (2024).

[4] Urban DRC's population growth rate ranks 9th fastest in the world, and 7th fastest in Sub-Saharan Africa, just behind urban Burundi, Uganda, Tanzania, Mali, Ethiopia, and Niger (UNDESA, 2024). This makes urban DRC the second fastest growing among Sub-Saharan nations above 100 million population.

[5] Some chiefdoms are instead called a sector (*secteur)* which is governed by a sector chief (*chef de secteur*).

an executive college composed of the chief and aldermen appointed directly by the chief; and a chefferie council that is directly elected by the public. The traditional leaders of the chiefdoms have enjoyed privileges similar to mayors since 2008. For instance, traditional leaders receive service passports, social advantages, and other official symbols. Chiefdoms themselves are further divided into groupements and villages governed by traditional groupement chiefs and village chiefs (*chefs de village*). These (largely) hereditary leaders act as agents of the chiefdom, are in charge of land allocation, provide justice in non-criminal cases, levy taxes, and organize the provision of public goods. They form part of a traditional governance system that has a long history in the DRC and has had a changing relationship with the state.

In the colonial era, traditional chiefs often played an intermediary role between their communities and the colonial power. During the post-colonial rule of Mobutu Sese Seko their *de jure* influence generally declined, but weakness of the central state allowed many traditional leaders to retain *de facto* influence. Since the fall of the Mobutu regime and the ascension of Laurent-Desiré and Joseph Kabila, traditional governance has regained prominence. Traditional governance is now an established part of the state structure and recognized in the constitution. With some exceptions, specifically in Kasaï, traditional leaders and Joseph Kabila (president from 2001 to 2019) have grown to rely on each other to stay in power. Traditional rulers began acting as intermediaries for the new political parties, and gained influence at high levels of government. For example, in Maniema, the governor created a "council of sages" composed of traditional leaders to help ease ethnic tensions, but in reality this council began acting as a shadow government that replaced the official administration. At the national level, traditional leaders are overseen by the Ministry of the Interior, although traditional leaders have been pushing for a Ministry of Customary Affairs to be created. In areas governed by customary rule, traditional leadership tends to most of the day-to-day needs, although the central government does provide some socio-economic services (e.g., schools, hospitals, etc.) and security (military and police). When the central government wants to operate in areas under customary rule, they generally have to negotiate with the traditional leaders for access.

However, not all local governance is purview of traditional authority, some localities fall under the jurisdiction of the state. Most notably, towns (*cités*) have since the colonial period been assigned to state governance. Towns are governed by state administrators (*bourgmestre*) appointed by provincial and central governments.[6] They are able to levy taxes and can decide on the use of some of the funds for public good provision.

As a result, some localities – villages – fall under traditional governance while others – towns – fall under state governance. This paper provides empirical evidence to investigate state and society in the latter. Importantly for the analysis in this paper, between 2008 and 2012, the Congolese government reorganized the decentralization system and with it the distinction between villages and towns (now called *communes*). Every locality with a population of at least 20,000 was designated as a town and thus assigned state governance.[7] In the process, many localities that were previously designated as villages were now designated as towns. We focus on such localities that were villages before 2008–12 and became towns.

Ultimately the implementation of the decentralization reform has been extremely lacking and many towns have not yet been assigned an administrator. Even ten years after the reform, most towns are not yet "operational towns", meaning they do not have a state administrator yet, and are missing other structures required for a functioning town. The data we present below confirms this. These "would-be" towns often inherit the administrative structure of villages because they are still within the area of authority of the traditional chief. Furthermore, qualitative interviews with central government officials indicate that Kinshasa's fiscal interest determines the operationability of a town.

3. Data collection

Data was collected from 67 localities in 4 provinces of the DRC (covering 279,295 km^2, or slightly larger than the United Kingdom). Sample selection included the universe of known 67 communes or "towns" (state-governed) in the four provinces[8] excluding territory headquarters with the exception of one town in South Kivu which could not be reached for logistical reasons. Fig. 1 presents a map with the location of each locality in our sample.

Data collection took place between May and August 2022. Figure A1 in the Appendix shows a detailed timeline of data collection activities. Congolese researchers from the research organization MarakujaKivuResearch visited each locality in teams of two.

In each locality, 8 household heads were selected at random to participate in our survey. To increase representativeness, each team of two enumerators was specifically instructed to divide themselves further into two distinct parts of the locality, one to an area with densest population, and another to that with least dense population. Within these population density strata, each enumerator conducted a simple random sampling of 4 households in the locality, following every fifth house after a public point of interest. Enumerators would then return as a team and interview 4 community leaders to complete in the survey. These 4 leaders comprise the locality head (*bourgmestre* in the case of town or chief in the case of village/*agglomeration*), their administration secretary, their treasurer, and the head of a sub-administration. The 4 leaders in each locality also provided information for a locality survey, one per locality. At the end of data collection, we collected 536 household surveys, 268 leader surveys, and 67 locality surveys.

Additionally, in each locality, enumerators asked local leaders whether they have organizational charts of the local bureaucracies and financial documents of their budgeting process. We then asked if we could take pictures of these documents or if they could draw their organizational chart if a printed version did not exist. Appendix Figure A2 shows both examples.

After finishing data collection we asked enumerators to write a short report (2–3 pages) on their experience and perception of decentralization in the field and to contrast their experience of state governance vs. traditional governance. This allowed enumerators to express additional insights that did not fit into the standard survey format. The authors of the two best reports received a bonus payment. These were used for theory building and as illustrative cases.

4. Demographic development in rural towns

We begin by analyzing demographic development in our sample. Limited evidence exists on trends in urbanization in smaller towns, especially in contexts without good official statistics.[9]

Fig. 2 shows the distribution of population in our sample in 2021 according to locality leaders. The average locality has a population of 33,637 and the median is 27,000. According to the 2008–2012 decentralization reform the population of a rural commune has to be above 20,000 which 57 out of 67 towns in our sample fulfill. All together, the 67 rural towns in our sample have 2.3 m inhabitants, about 10 percent of the total population in the four provinces.

---

[6] The current constitution requires these administrators to be elected, but no such election has yet taken place.

[7] "Loi organique n° 08/016 du 07 octobre 2008 portant composition, organization et fonctionnement des Entités Territoriales Décentralisées et leurs rapports avec l'Etat et les Provinces"

[8] The provinces were selected because they were the ones with the most towns included in the reform.

[9] The last census in the DRC was undertaken in 1984.

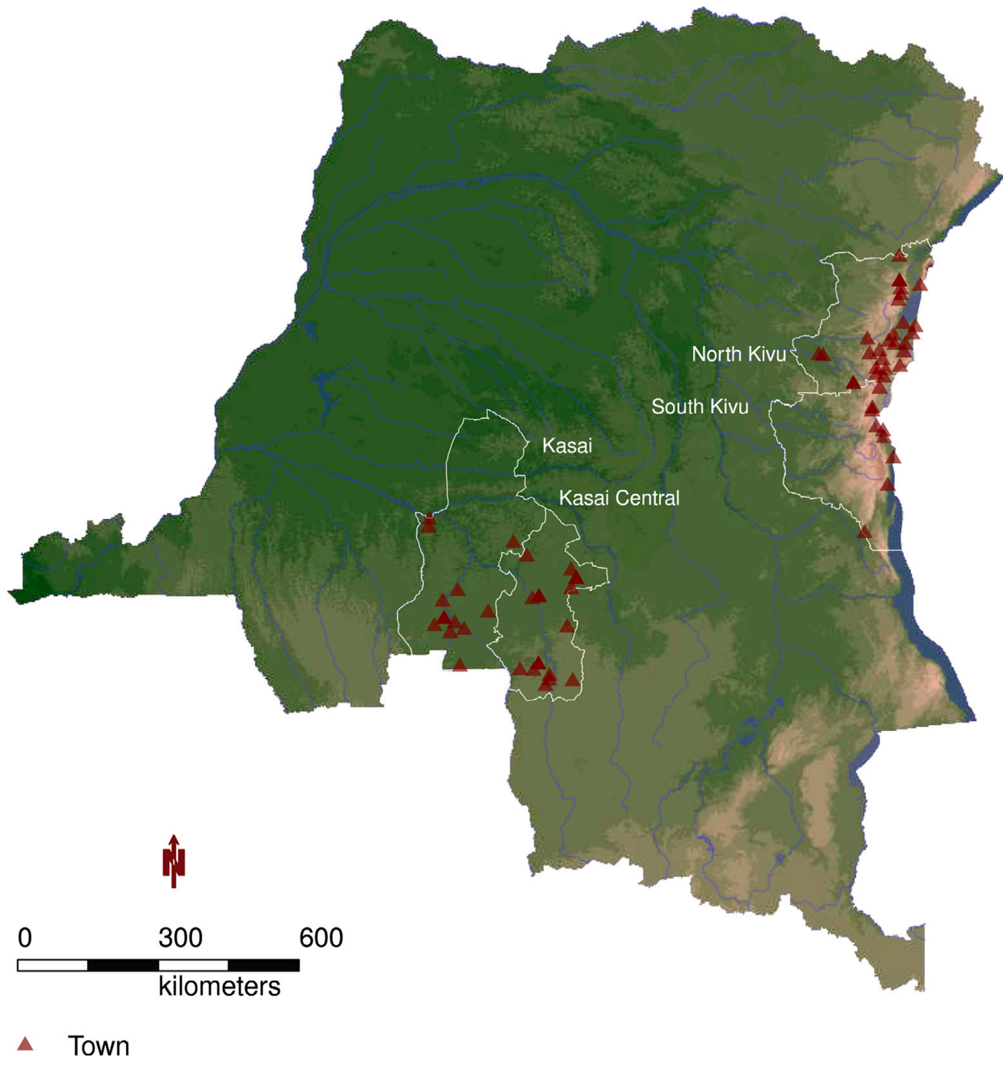


Fig. 1. Map of sample localities.
Notes: This map shows the location of the 67 towns across the 4 provinces of North Kivu (26 towns surveyed), South Kivu (10), Kasaï (14), and Kasaï Central (16) in the DRC.

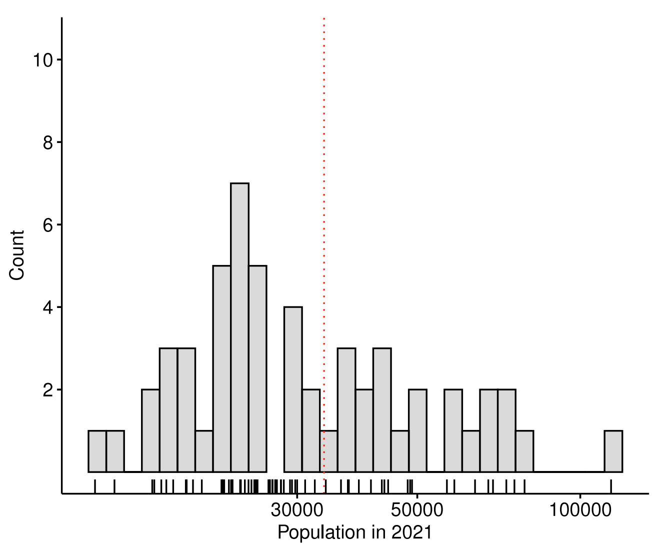


Fig. 2. Population.
Notes: This figure shows the distribution of 2021 population of localities on our sample. The *x*-axis is on a log-scale. The dotted line represents the mean.

Table 1 provides summary statistics on the make up of population in our sample. Panel A looks at socio-demographic characteristics. We asked locality leaders to estimate population totals for the past 16 years. The localities in our sample have seen a considerable growth in population with the average town growing by 71% from 2005 to 2021 (from a population of 19,621 in 2005 to 33,637 in 2021). Increases of similar magnitudes can be seen in other parts of the distribution (min, Q1, Q3, and max). In the same time period, the total population in the DRC is estimated to have grown by 69%, from 58.8 m to 99.1 m (UNDESA, 2024). 2005 to 2021 population growth in the capital Kinshasa, and the provincial capitals Goma, Bukavu, and Kananga has been 97%, 153%, 128%, and 102% respectively (UNDESA, 2024). This suggests that rural towns in our sample grew at lower levels than major cities but at higher levels than the population in the Congolese countryside.

Panel A of Fig. 3 plots the distribution of population in our sample over time. Both the figure and the Table show a steady increase in population over time rather than waves of increases.

Using population data based on the recollection of local leaders raises questions about measurement error. The fact that population growth in our data is in line with overall population growth in the DRC is a good sign for data quality. To further validate our data we use population estimates based on satellite data developed by Tatem (2017). Panel B of Fig. 3 plots the distribution of 2005–2021 population

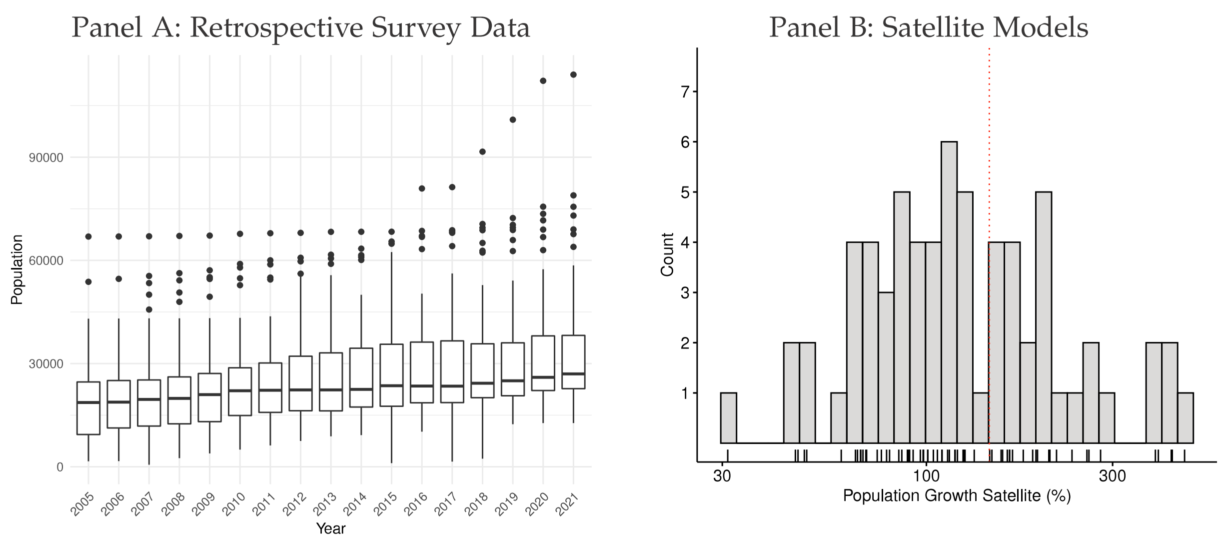


Fig. 3. Population Growth over Time.
Notes: This figure shows population growth in our sample. Panel A shows box plots of the population of localities in our sample over time using the retrospective leader survey. Panel B shows the distribution of population growth from 2005 to 2021 according to satellite models.

growth of a 10 kilometers radius around the center of each town in our sample. The mean population growth is 140% and thus almost double the size of the growth according to the community leaders. This could have two potential reasons. Either leaders underestimate population growth or the 10 kilometer radius includes places outside the locality and the extra growth in the satellite data comes from places that do not belong to the locality administratively. Absence of detailed maps of the localities we are unable to verify this difference. In either case, both the leader survey and satellite data point to significant population growth in rural towns in the DRC.

Next, we look at the composition of the population. The first question about composition is to what degree village-to-town migration plays a role in the observed population growth. Overall the impact seems to be limited. On average 5% of inhabitants were born outside of the town and the median is only 2%. This in line with evidence above that population growth has been similar to the general trend in the DRC with only some migration from the countryside and the absence of big abrupt changes in the population which would be an indicator of migration waves.

The second question concerning composition is the levels of ethnic and religious fractionalization. The DRC boosts incredible levels of ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity with, for example, 219 living languages (Ethnologue, 2013). Diversity is often measured using fractionalization variables which are computed as 1 minus the Herfendahl index of specific sub-group shares.[10] They represent the probability that two randomly drawn individuals belonged to different groups. Using data from 1983, Alesina, Devleeschauwer, Easterly, Kurlat, and Wacziarg (2003) estimate countrywide ethnic, linguistic and, religious fractionalization in the DRC to be 0.87, 0.87, and 0.70 respectively. Dražanová (2020) finds ethnic fractionalization in 2013 to be 0.7. However, high degrees of country-level fractionalization does not necessarily imply local-level fractionalization (Robinson, 2020). To what degree the DRC's national level diversity translates into local level diversity is thus still an open question, especially for small towns that do not necessarily need to be less diverse than major cities (Meili & Shearmur, 2019).

Anecdotally, rural towns in the DRC are often considered local melting points where people of different ethnic, linguistic, or religious backgrounds meet. Our data on fractionalization confirms this. Ethnic, linguistic, and religious fractionalization indices are high, with ethnic fractionalization the highest at 0.53, and higher than religious fractionalization at 0.41. While the level of ethnic fractionalization is lower than the average for the DRC, it is still high compared to many other parts of the world (Alesina et al., 2003). This adds further evidence that diversity in Africa is not just a feature of major cities or the country as a whole but also at the local level, at least when it comes to rural towns in the DRC.

How such local diversity is linked to trust, collective action, and conflict is still debated in the literature (Bahry, Kosolapov, Kozyreva, & Wilson, 2005; Gisselquist, Leiderer, & Nino-Zarazua, 2016; Robinson, 2020; van Staveren, 2025). Given the considerable level of population growth, in-migration, and demographic heterogeneity, trust in society might suffer. Panel B investigates this possibility by showing trust in rural towns. Trust is in general high with the majority of respondents reporting trusting relatives, other villagers, co-ethnics, chiefs and locality leaders "completely" or "somewhat". In contrast to cross-national surveys like the World Value Survey and the Afrobarometer there is little variation across the different variables. As a result trust in relatives is slightly lower than the African average in the World Value Survey and Afrobarometer while trust in other villagers is at similar levels (Afrobarometer, 2022; Haerpfer et al., 2020). Overall the data on trust suggests that recent changes in the demographics of rural towns have not altered trust in society.

We now turn our attention to the economy of rural towns. Understanding how the economy of rural towns is organized is crucial for thinking about the developmental and governance needs of the population. While urbanization generally leads to welfare gains (Lagakos, Mobarak, & Waugh, 2023), some questions have been raised about whether this link holds in African towns (Levira & Todd, 2017). Our data suggest these localities are still predominantly rural with on average over 70% of their economic activity coming from agriculture ranging from 28% to 95%. Most fields lie outside of the locality center, averaging at almost half a hectare per person. The average daily wage for manual work is \$1.59 with the median being \$1.11. Figure A3 in the Appendix further shows the distribution of non agricultural activities. Given the agricultural focus of rural towns, land ownership is an important issues. Who has the power to allocate land and do households own land? Panel B examines land holding. It reveals that the state has little control over land representative of a general lack of clear land policy in the DRC (Mudinga & Wakenge, 2021). Only 13% of

[10] $\text{FRACTIONALIZATION}_j = 1 - \sum_{i=1}^{N} share_{ij}^2$; where $share_{ij}$ is the share of group $i (i = 1 \dots N)$ in locality j.

Table 1
Summary statistics of society.

Label	Mean	SD	Min	Q1	Q2	Q3	Max
	Panel A: Socio-demographic						
Population 2005	19,621	(12,730)	1,589	9,379	18,679	24,659	66,923
Population 2010	24,083	(13,349)	4,990	14,900	22,105	28,772	67,720
Population 2015	27,402	(14,888)	1,057	17,601	23,560	35,616	68,328
Population 2021	33,637	(18,582)	12,700	22,712	27,000	38,189	114,000
Proportion migrant from other villages	0.05	(0.07)	0.00	0.002	0.02	0.06	0.40
Proportion migrant from other chiefdoms	0.04	(0.07)	0.00	0.003	0.01	0.03	0.40
Proportion migrant from other provinces	0.02	(0.05)	0.00	0.001	0.004	0.02	0.40
Ethnic fractionalization	0.53	(0.16)	0.16	0.42	0.54	0.59	0.98
Language fractionalization	0.48	(0.12)	0.32	0.38	0.46	0.54	1.00
Religious fractionalization	0.41	(0.08)	0.25	0.37	0.39	0.44	0.73
	Panel B: Trust						
Trust in close relatives	0.66	(0.17)	0	0.5	0.7	0.8	1
Trust in other villagers	0.60	(0.16)	0.1	0.5	0.6	0.7	1
Trust in co-ethnics	0.66	(0.18)	0.1	0.5	0.7	0.8	1
Trust in traditional chief	0.60	(0.19)	0	0.5	0.6	0.7	1
Trust in locality head	0.64	(0.17)	0	0.5	0.7	0.8	1
	Panel C: Economy & Land Ownership						
Agriculture (% of households)	74.58	(14.41)	28.24	64.23	77.95	86.01	95.24
Agricultural land (m^2 per capita)	4870	(9964)	12	100	375	4469	52 000
Daily manual wage ($)	1.59	(1.86)	0.34	0.75	1.11	1.52	14.66
State-registered land (%)	13.41	(12.63)	0	2	10	22	43
Customary land (%)	60.54	(34.74)	0	36	70	88	100
Household owns land	0.44	(0.50)	0	0	0	1	1

Notes: This table presents the summary statistics (mean, standard deviation, minimum, first quartile, median, third quartile, and maximum) of the social, economic, and political organization of our sample localities. It displays the characteristics of the 67 towns. Responses are derived from a collective survey of the locality, for which 4 members of locality leaders provided one collective answer for each locality. Currency responses were recorded in Congolese Francs and presented in US Dollars (1 USD = 1,989 Congolese Francs).

Table 2
Summary statistics of decentralization reform implementation.

Label	Mean	SD	Min	Q1	Q2	Q3	Max
	Panel A: State Administration						
Town has a bourgmestre	0.37	(0.49)	0	0	0	1	1
	Panel B: Locality Leader Selection						
Election by population	0.08	(0.27)	0	0	0	0	1
Appointment by traditional authority	0.51	(0.50)	0	0	1	1	1
Appointment by provincial state	0.22	(0.42)	0	0	0	0	1
Appointment by central state	0.10	(0.30)	0	0	0	0	1
	Panel C: Retrocession						
Funds received from central state	0.12	(0.33)	0	0	0	0	1
Funds received from provincial state	0.22	(0.42)	0	0	0	0	1
	Panel D: Leader Knowledge						
Knows correct sub-national division	0.49	(0.28)	0	0.25	0.50	0.75	1
Knows decentralization function	0.43	(0.24)	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.6	1

Notes: This table presents the summary statistics (mean, standard deviation, minimum, first quartile, median, third quartile, and maximum) of the implementation of the 2012 decentralization reform. It displays the characteristics of the 67 towns combined. Responses are derived from a collective survey of the locality, for which 4 members of locality leaders provided one collective answer for each locality.

land is registered by the state, and customary authority still controls the majority of the land as is common in the Great Lakes region (Claessens, Bisoka, & Ansoms, 2021). When we ask households if they own their land, 44% of households report doing so.

To further investigate how urbanization has changed society in rural towns, we next look at how these variables vary by a locality's population size. Fig. 4 shows that ethnic fractionalization, migration, and households owning land all remain relatively stable across population sizes. However, larger localities contain more land registered by the state (and less customary land holding) and trust decreases somewhat as a locality becomes larger.

Overall, our data on the make-up of society in rural towns suggests a heterogeneous and changing community. Steady population growth, new migrants and high levels of fractionalization meet a largely agricultural economy where most households do not own land and instead have to rely in traditional leaders for land allocations. Given these development it is perhaps surprising that trust among citizens is reportedly very high.

5. The implementation of decentralization reform

Partly as a result to the proliferation of rural towns, the DRC enacted an ambitious decentralization reform between 2008 and 2012. This included putting them under the purview of state administrators – as opposed to traditional chiefs –, the mandating of local elections, revenue sharing between the local, provincial, and national level, and local authority to tax and implement public good projects. We now aim to quantify to what degree these reforms were implemented.

Table 2 provides summary statistics of to that effect and reveal low levels of implementation. First, the majority of towns are still not under state administration. The 2008–12 decentralization reform designated all the towns in our sample as *rural commune* which means that they

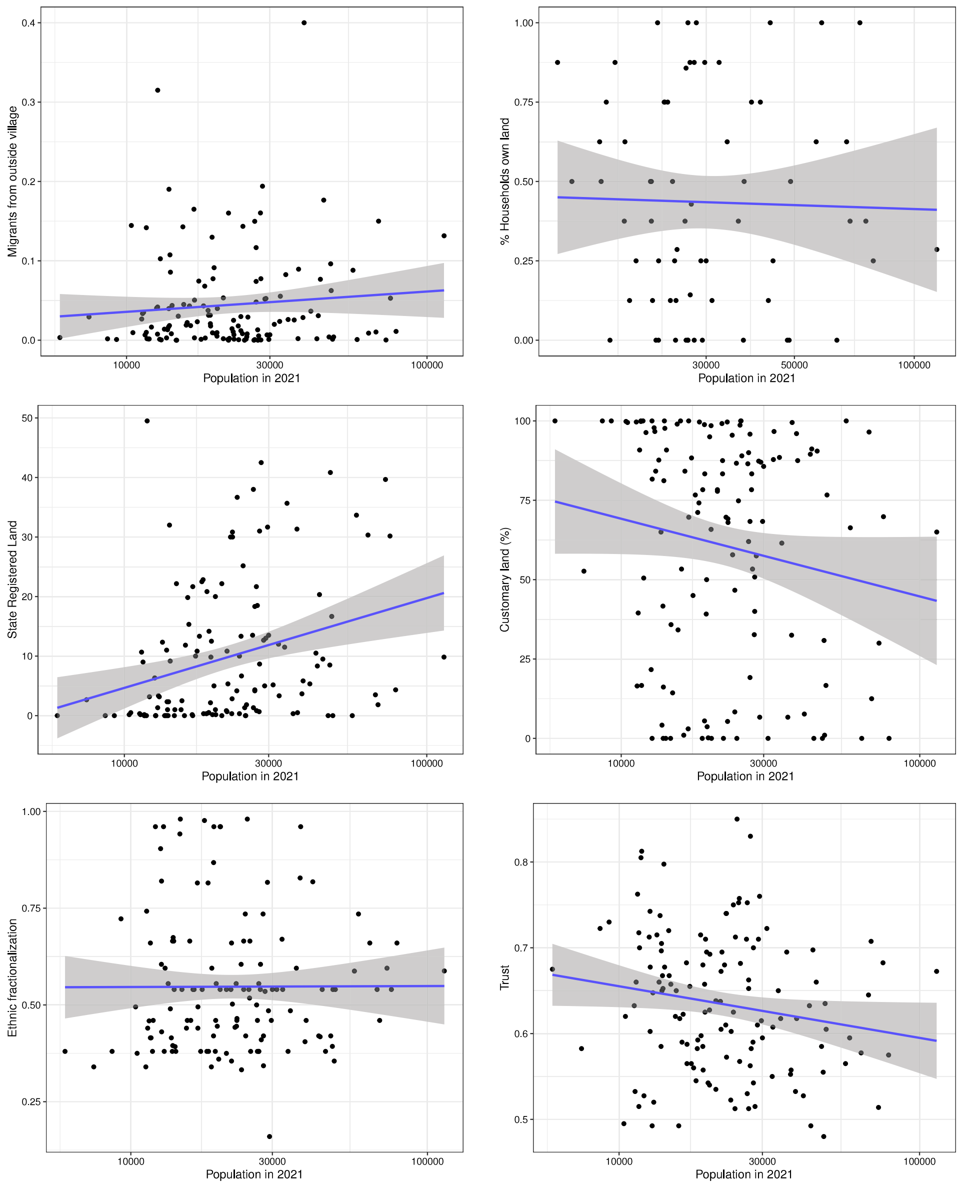


Fig. 4. Society and Population.
Notes: This figure shows a scatter plot of societal outcomes and entities 2021 population. Panel A depicts ethnic fractionalization (1 minus Herfindahl index of ethnic compositions), Panel B depicts ownership of land by traditional leadership, Panel C depicts social capital/generalized trust, averaged out across trust in close relatives, other villagers, co-ethnics, traditional chief, and locality chief. The x-axis is on a log-scale.

should be governed by a *bourgmestre*. Such bourgmestres are supposed to be elected local mayors, yet in the absence of local elections prior to 2023, these positions were filled by decree by the central and provincial government. However, only 37 percent of rural towns in our sample have such a mayor to administer the town. Instead, the remaining 63 percent are still governed by traditional chiefs. The absence of these mayors in the majority of towns surveyed shows that the 2008–12 reform has not been implemented fully and most rural communes are not yet operational. Only 37% of towns have a state administrator (bourgmestre). The rest is still governed by traditional chiefs. As a result, rural towns in the DRC exist at the intersection of traditional and state authority, which raises important questions about how the state and chiefs interact (Henn, 2023), if the state tries to govern through chiefs (Balán et al., 2022; Henn, Marchais, Mugaruka, & Sánchez de la Sierra, 2025), and what happens when state administrators displace chiefs (Henn & Tanutama, 2025).

Second, the decentralization reform failed to put selection mechanism in the hands of the population. By the time of our data collection, local elections had still not been nationally organized despite being mandated by the 2006 constitution. Nevertheless, our respondents report 7% of community leaders being chosen through elections by the local population. Still, the vast majority was appointed. 51% were appointed by traditional authorities (virtually all village chiefs), 22% by provincial authorities, and 10% by the central state. This is in line with findings from other context, for example Tanzania, that report decentralization did not necessarily lead to more local appointment of officials (e.g., Kessy, 2023).

Third, revenue sharing remains the exception rather than the rule. The decentralization reform stipulates reciprocal revenue sharing between local, provincial, and central governments. Yet, only 12% of localities have received funds from the central state and 22% have received funds from the provincial level. Given that the majority of local governments do not receive funds from higher administrative units they are also less likely to share their tax revenue with them in turn as mandated by law. This confirms Englebert and Mungongo (2016)'s account of the failures of revenue sharing in 2014 almost ten years later.

Fourth, the decentralization reform has not created clear knowledge and expectations among leaders. Only 49% of leaders know which local entity has taxation authority and only 43% know the main distinction across entities created by the decentralization reform. In other African contexts, decentralization reforms have led to better knowledge outcomes among decision makers (e.g., Zon, Pavlova, & Groot, 2023).

Overall, the evidence suggests that the decentralization reform had been implemented as intended only in small subset of rural towns. Most towns are still governed by traditional leaders and not state administrators, the population has largely not had the chance to elect its leaders, revenue sharing happens in less than a third of towns, and only half of local leaders have good knowledge of the decentralization reform.

6. Decentralization reform goals

The objective of the decentralization reform was to increase state capacity, improve local government finances, increase public good provision, and improve accountability (Englebert & Mungongo, 2016). How do rural towns fare on these dimensions, more than 10 years after the enactment of the reform?

6.1. Efforts in state capacity building and public good provision

Table 3 presents overall characteristics of state presence in the rural towns in our sample. Our data show a state that is remarkably present across localities and shows willingness for developmental activities, but is ultimately constrained by structural problems and limited resources. Operationalizing state capacity is challenging due to the variety of conceptualization and measurement strategies in the literature (see e.g., Hanson & Sigman, 2021). Our empirical analysis attempts to mirror this diversity by showing state capacity in physical presence, procedural capacity, administrative capacity, and public goods provision outcomes.

Panel A shows variables associated with the physical presence of the state, in terms of personnel and buildings. While most towns lack a top state official to administer the town, the average number of state personnel is quite high with 29. The median is of a similar magnitude with 22 and even the bottom quartile has 10 officials working for the state. Of the state personnel, about a third is administrative and two thirds are security personnel, police or military. With an average population of 33,000, this puts the number of security personnel per 100,000 residents at around 60 which is low in international comparison (United Nations, 2014, p.19). Similarly, the state can also be observed in physical buildings with the average rural town having two government buildings.

Panel B shows how rural towns fare on procedural measures of state leaders. A majority of towns visited had an organigram (61%). Only half of the local leaders surveyed received a salary, which, conditional on being received, averaged 625 USD per year with a maximum of 3,041 USD. Leaders worked an average of 32 hours per week, 90% of which was spent on administrative tasks. The majority of leaders received their job through family connections and almost no one received professional training. Thus, though there has been progress made in public human resource management in other parts of the DRC (Moshonas, 2018, 2019), human resource management in rural towns remains flawed.

Furthermore, our sample of agents surveyed showed that in addition to the chief or mayor in charge, each locality had an administrative and a finance secretary. The agents we surveyed also demonstrated a high degree of administrative capacity in local governance. We found evidence of a wealth of local records being kept, from detailed financial documents and organizational, to complete household rosters of the localities. Panel C measures the capacity of the local administration. Tax collection is organized in 40 per cent of rural towns. On average tax revenue collected in the previous year totaled a little over 8,000 USD. Only a minority of leaders has college education, and knowledge of subnational division and decentralization is low. Leadership is not very politicized with only 30% of leaders having a party affiliation. 55% of sample localities (38 towns spread proportionally across all four provinces) have accounting of public tax and expenses. This administrative capacity is often seen as a building block for a developmental state (Scott, 1999) because it can allow the state to mobilize local resources for development projects, yet it could also be misused by a predatory state or predatory officials to extract resources for private gain.

Finally Panel D shows public good provision. Public good coverage per capita does not speak for a developmental state. Public good coverage is low, even by developing country standards. Localities feature 0.64 schools per 1,000 people[11] and 0.19 health centers.[12] The average town in our also sample has 0.05 markets per 1,000 people. 40% of households have electricity and 72% say they feel safe. The presence of 20 security personnel per locality indicates that, similar to research on the police in major towns in the DRC (Sánchez de la Sierra, Titeca, Xie, Lameke, & Malukisa Nkuku, 2024; Thill, 2025), the issue is less with the absence of security personnel but rather how they are deployed. Figure A5 in the Appendix shows the number and quality of public goods.

However, the low public good provision is not due to a lack of recent activity by authorities which speaks to some developmental ambitions by the local state. Figure A6 shows the construction or significant refurbishment of public goods in our sample localities in the last 20 years.[13] One can observe a flurry of new construction across all major public good categories. An average locality in our sample has seen 3.9 new schools, 2.7 new health centers, 1.6 new markets and 2.6 new roads constructed in the previous 20 years.

Overall, the data on the locality characteristics and government agents suggest a present state in towns in rural Congo. A typical locality has an assortment of governance personnel present who are quite busy with an array of tasks and demonstrate considerable administrative capacity, *even* as only half of these agents receive a salary and there are limited opportunities for professional development. Further, the state has undertaken a significant amount of public good construction, yet the service provided are still inadequate to serve all of the population to appropriate standards.

6.2. Challenges in accountability, corruption, and public finance

While the data on state capacity and public good provision shows positive developments ten years after the decentralization reform, the same cannot be said for accountability, corruption and the state of local public finance. We now turn to these three challenges of local governance that emerge from our data. Ultimately they show that the

[11] A seminal study which investigated the effects of school construction on years of education and wages recorded the construction of 1.98 schools per 1000 children (extensive margin, 505 children per school) in 1973 in Indonesia (Duflo, 2001). Using a contemporary figure and a neighboring developing country of Uganda in 2015, there are 1.6 schools 1000 people (Crawfurd, 2017). Simple arithmetic using our sample household reporting 4.8 children on average per household in an average locality of 33,637 residents with 5,825 households, the 0.64 schools per 1,000 people translate to 4.8×5825 children per $0.64 \times 33637/1000$ schools implies an oversubscribed school serving 1,298 children per school. The US has about 100 children per school.

[12] This number is very likely below the safe guideline of recommended 1 hospital bed per 1000 people as the majority health centers reported by government respondents were clinics or health posts.

[13] We restrict to public goods constructed by the state and exclude those constructed by other actors such as NGOs.

Table 3
Summary statistics of state capacity.

Label	Mean	SD	Min	Q1	Q2	Q3	Max
	Panel A: Presence						
Town has a bourgmestre	0.37	(0.49)	0	0	0	1	1
Number of state personnel	28.57	(26.43)	0	10	22	36	117
of which administrative	9.03	(12.58)	0	0	5	12	68
of which police and military	19.54	(23.16)	0	5	11	24	107
Number of government buildings	1.97	(1.50)	0	1	2	3	5
	Panel B: Procedure (Professionalization)						
Organigram exists	0.61	(0.49)	0	0	1	1	1
Personnel received salary	0.50	(0.50)	0	0	0.5	1	1
Annual salary if received ($, 2021)	625	(655)	3	106	452	1,034	3,041
Work hour/week	32.26	(13.93)	0	25	32	40	92
Percent time spent on administration	28.76	(18.78)	0	15	25	40	90
Obtained job through family	0.58	(0.50)	0	0	1	1	1
Worker training exists	0.04	(0.13)	0	0	0.02	0.03	1
	Panel C: Capacity						
Tax collection	0.40	(0.49)	0	0	0	1	1
Tax revenue if collected ($, 2021)	8,191	(10,182)	27	1,733	3,032	9,805	33,890
Total incidence if collected (2021)	92.61	(166.50)	1	26	58	106	1,340
Has college education	0.26	(0.44)	0	0	0	1	1
Knows subnational division	0.49	(0.28)	0	0.25	0.50	0.75	1
Knows decentralization function	0.43	(0.24)	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.6	1
Party-afiliated	0.30	(0.46)	0	0	0	1	1
President coalition if affiliated	0.44	(0.50)	0	0	0	1	1
	Panel D: Outcome						
# Schools per 1,000 people	0.64	(0.52)	0.11	0.33	0.51	0.75	3.21
# Health centers per 1,000 people	0.19	(0.15)	0.03	0.09	0.15	0.24	0.87
# Markets per 1,000 people	0.05	(0.11)	0.00	0.02	0.04	0.05	0.87
Household has electricity	0.40	(0.49)	0	0	0	1	1
Household feels secure	0.72	(0.24)	0	0.56	0.78	0.89	1

Notes: This table presents the summary statistics (mean, standard deviation, minimum, first quartile, median, third quartile, and maximum) of the social, economic, and political organization of our sample localities. It displays the characteristics of the 67 towns combined. Responses are derived from a collective survey of the locality, for which 4 members of locality leaders provided one collective answer for each locality. Currency responses were recorded in Congolese Francs and presented in US Dollars (1 USD = 1,989 Congolese Francs).

decentralization reform failed to fundamentally change the nature of local governance in rural towns.

First, there is an apparent lack in democratic accountability. Virtually none of the local leaders are elected but instead selected by traditional or provincial leaders. This is despite the constitution mandating the election of commune mayors. Furthermore a significant portion of government agents received their position from a family member and many appointed family members to jobs. While leaders do spend over a quarter of their time meeting community members there seems to be a disconnect between citizens' preferences over public goods and their leaders'. Fig. 5 compares the opinions of citizens to those of their leaders. Citizens see education as a higher priority than their leaders while leaders have a higher priority for combating crime and improving agriculture. If democratic accountability was functioning well, we would see smaller differences in priorities between leaders and citizens. Citizens and leaders also have significantly different views on overall governance (Panel B) further documenting a disconnect. This lack of democratic accountability is especially concerning given the high levels of insularity by some local leaders – especially village chiefs – discussed in the previous section and the lack of potential oversight it entails. If government agents are not closely monitored by their superiors and citizens cannot hold them accountable either, malfeasance can easily emerge.

This is precisely the second governance challenge we observe: high levels of corruption. Table 4 provides evidence from government agent and household surveys. 43% of government agents we surveyed report that other agents in the same position as them take bribes and 88% of these admit to potentially doing the same. The amount of bribes request per demand is quite high given price levels and wages in the localities with a mean bribe value of $28 and a median of $10. Citizens confirm widespread corruption, with 13% reporting having had to pay a bribe to the community leader in the past year and 20% having made a payment to other government agents (8% to the police) in the past month. Interestingly, the amounts households report to have paid per year to the community head correspond closely to what government agents report per payment received. Extrapolating these numbers using each locality's population estimates suggests that government agents earn considerably more in bribes than in official salary. Considering that half the agents in our sample do not receive a salary and the low pay for those that do, the presence of widespread corruption should not come as a surprise. Rather it is commonly observed that Congolese public officials supplement meager, infrequent, or unpaid salaries with informal payments from citizens (Sánchez de la Sierra et al., 2024; Thill, 2025), and is often anticipated, if not intended, by national and provincial policy makers.

However, the lack of democratic accountability and high degree of corruption have not resulted in apathetic and disengaged citizens. For example, over 80% of citizens report regularly participating in the weekly public works program Salongo and report doing so out of a sense of duty.

Third, our evidence suggests an acute lack of financing in towns and villages. Panel C in Table 4 presents data on localities' revenues and expenditures for the subset of localities for which we have accounting documents (27 out of 67 localities). Leaders simply do not have the resources to significantly expand the state. On average, annual town revenue is less than $12,773 or $0.37 per citizen. The median revenue per year is only $3,048.[14] To put this in perspective, this

[14] Note that this is conflicting with what households report in Panel B. Of the citizens that pay taxes (32%), the average yearly tax burden is $57. This mismatch could either be because citizens pay some of these taxes to other state agents or because state agents do not record these payments in their accounting documents.

Table 4
Summary Statistics of Challenges to Local Governance.

Label	Mean	SD	Min	Q1	Q2	Q3	Max
	Panel A: Challenges from survey of government agents (N = 264)						
Malfeasance							
Nepotism							
Received job from family members	0.58	0.50	0	0	1	1	1
Gave job to family members	0.58	0.50	0	0	1	1	1
Perception of corruption (bribe-taking)							
Frequency reported for other agents [0-1]	0.43	0.26	0.00	0.25	0.42	0.58	1.00
Self would do the same = 1	0.88	0.23	0.00	0.75	1.00	1.00	1.00
Bribe amount, per demand ($)	28.05	34.68	0.00	3.35	10.05	44.17	176.92
Enough money for top priorities	0.04	0.15	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.00
Satisfied with govt. help for top priorities	0.18	0.22	0.00	0.00	0.11	0.33	1.00
	Panel B: Challenges reported by households (N = 536)						
Number of tax payments	0.37	0.59	0	0	0	1	4
Tax payment amount in 2021 ($), if paid tax	56.95	79.92	0.20	13.33	30.18	62.86	402.34
Amount paid in other fees/bribes in 2021 ($)	22.01	30.84	0.50	4.52	9.80	22.62	125.67
Bribed other agents past month	0.20	0.40	0	0	0	0	1
	Panel C: Aggregate financing challenges in locality (N = 27, Missing = 37)						
Total fiscal revenue in 2021 ($)	12,772.35	25,814.25	27.14	1,782.96	3,048.17	11,046.34	131,886.60
from land and property tax	2,542.40	7,273.40	0.00	199.56	453.40	1,033.48	36,882.64
from sales and duty tax	2,616.12	4,342.26	0.00	238.01	779.64	3,468.40	21,361.81
from manufacturing establishments	1,626.12	3,229.37	0.00	136.98	324.17	1,512.02	12,667.19
from retail establishments	2,282.46	3,908.08	0.00	195.44	356.89	1,588.43	14,547.16
from service establishments	332.30	632.66	0.00	0.00	113.10	298.53	2,714.43
from central government transfer	62.37	290.89	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1,508.00
from provincial government transfer	78.01	290.43	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1,508.00
Total fiscal expenditure in 2021 ($)	10,962.65	25,885.30	73.89	497.30	864.59	9,047.99	132,087.70
for development	8,327.47	16,010.03	40.21	377.00	675.83	5,159.37	64,405.84
for government personnel	694.32	855.71	0.00	33.18	243.79	1,027.95	2,966.74
Total fiscal revenue in 2015 ($)	13,214.90	38,831.92	0.00	387.05	1,000.05	3,518.66	178,019.30
Total fiscal expenditure in 2015 ($)	4,733.31	8,883.97	0.00	88.47	369.96	3,267.33	27,500.87
Total fiscal revenue in 2009 ($)	4,191.18	7,512.79	0.00	326.92	736.91	1,671.11	23,503.67
Total fiscal expenditure in 2009 ($)	3,390.24	6,887.80	0.00	111.84	297.40	554.57	22,016.78
Per capita fiscal revenue in 2021 ($/cap) (i.e. tax burden per person)	0.34	0.51	0.001	0.05	0.11	0.27	1.81
Per capita fiscal expenditure in 2021 ($/cap)	0.28	0.49	0.002	0.02	0.04	0.22	1.81

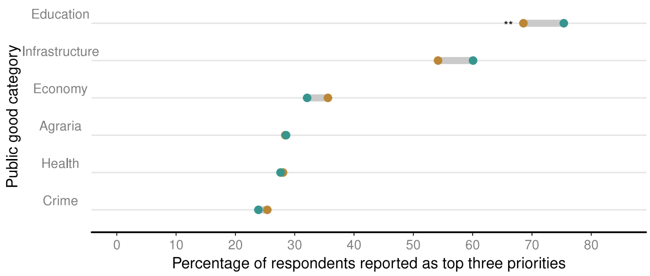
Notes: This table reports the summary statistics (mean, standard deviation, minimum, first quartile, median, third quartile, and maximum) of challenges to local governance. Panel A displays the challenges from surveys of government agents. Panel B displays the challenges reported by household respondents. Panel C displays aggregate financing challenges from locality surveys, of which only 74 localities reported because the financial documents existed at time of survey, whereas the remaining 60 localities did not have records of financial services or had lost them in conflict. In Panel A, perception of corruption (bribe-taking) was an average of four actions of state services (marriage statistics, meetings, public good construction, and public good usage). For each of the activities, enumerators asked how frequent *other agents* demand bribe, its amount if any, and finally to capture self-action, if respondents would do the same. In Panel B, household respondents were shown a list of tax schedule (Appendix Figure A4) and asked if they paid taxes to any of the listed activities. Tax payment amount adds the amount of tax paid at establishment and user fee per unit time. Amount paid in other fees/bribes records other fees demanded by officials outside of the official tax payments. Bribing "other agents" refers to the community heads ("nyumbakumi" in Swahili, literally ten households) or police. In Panel C, financial statistics were asked of locality leaders following the simplest templates which allowed distinction in public finance management. Notable are central and provincial government transfers, which are constitutional mandates of the Decentralization Reform to share tax profits across the decentralized localities. Per capita fiscal revenue is total fiscal revenue divided by population in 2021, which captures individual tax burden. Per capita fiscal expenditure is total fiscal expenditure divided by population in 2021, which captures individual benefit from public spending.

represents approximately 0.1% of per capita GDP (assuming DRC's per capita GDP of $580). Comparable local governments in other developing countries typically extract 2%–5% of local GDP. The $0.37 per capita is insufficient to pay even one day's manual wage ($1.59) per citizen per year. Of the extracted revenue, development spending averages only $8,327 annually—roughly $0.25 per citizen. This fiscal poverty creates a vicious cycle: without resources, local governments cannot provide services that would legitimize taxation; without legitimate service provision, citizens resist taxation and rely on informal mechanisms.

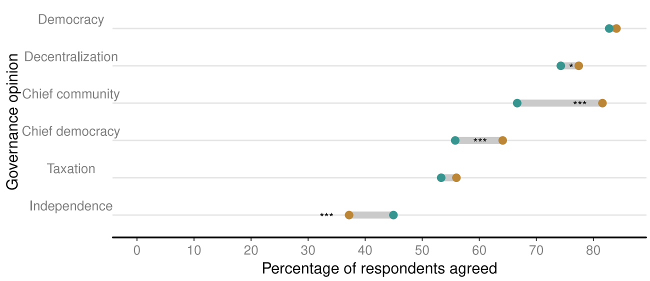
This is largely due to the limited economic activity and ability to raise taxes from citizens with little cash-flow. Revenue is generated through various taxes on land and property, sale and retail, manufacturing and services. In a pre-dominantly agricultural settings, citizens have little additional income that government agents can mobilize even with their considerable administrative capacity in addition to the payments they already make in the form of bribes. Thus, while we find that government agents use their administrative capacity to extract resources from citizens for their private gain, there is little evidence that they similarly mobilize resources for local development. Corruption is likely to crowd out legitimate resource generation as has been observed in other parts of the DRC (Henn, Paler, Prichard, Samii, & Sánchez de la Sierra, 2025).

Leaders also lament the lack of funds and support from higher levels of government. Given the low level of public good provision more funds are needed to spur development. Ultimately given the limited tax base these funds will likely have to come from outside the community. $140 of profit-sharing funds ("retrocession") from central and provincial government transfer per year simply would not be enough. The median locality and even the third quartile report not having received any funds from higher levels.

The extremely low fiscal capacity helps explain several of our other findings. First, it helps explain why corruption persists. With only 50% of officials receiving salaries (averaging $625/year when paid), and minimal operational budgets, rent-seeking becomes a survival strategy rather than mere malfeasance. Second, it suggests why traditional authorities remain dominant. Chiefs' ability to allocate land (60% remains under customary control) provides them with a revenue base that state



(a) Opinions on top public good priorities



(b) Opinions on governance

Fig. 5. Alignment between citizens and leaders.
Notes: This figure shows the alignment between citizens (household respondents) and leaders (government respondents) on which public goods they consider top priorities (Panel A), on attitudes about governance (Panel B). The x-axis in each panel is the percentage of respondents. In Panel A, a list of priorities are read aloud to respondents, from which they choose three that they consider most needed fixing in their localities. In Panel B, respondents were asked series of questions on their attitude about whether different dimensions on governance are good in Likert scale.

administrators lack. Third, low fiscal capacity is also likely to be a key determinant for the why decentralization has not delivered. The constitutional promise of 40% revenue sharing from central government (retrocession) remains unfulfilled, with median localities receiving $0 from higher levels and thus unable to implement policies mandated by the reform.

7. Mechanism for governance challenges

What explains the stubborn problems of low public good provision, corruption, and public finance? In what follows we consider three factors that could contribute to the DRC's governance challenges: increased urbanization, implementation failures in the decentralization reform, and uneven state capacity. To do so we create z-score indices for state capacity, public goods provision, and leader corruption. The state capacity index combines standardized measures for presence, professionalization, capacity, and outcomes as summarized in Table 3.[15] The public goods index combines per capita schooling, healthcare and market as well as indicators if households have electricity and feel secure.[16] The corruption index combines if leaders report other agents requesting bribes, if they would do the same, and the size of bribes.[17]

7.1. Urbanization

We first look at the potential role of urbanization in worsening governance challenges. With the population in rural towns and their surrounding areas increasing 70 to 140 percent within 16 years, local governments might struggle to keep up. This could be because the state in rural town is not equipped to provide for the additional population and keep its agents accountable. If urbanization of rural towns was a significant driver of these governance challenges, then we would expect localities with larger populations to fare worse across the dimensions discussed in the previous section: state capacity, public goods provisions, corruption, and tax revenue.

In Fig. 6 we investigate to what degree a locality's population is correlated with state capacity, public good provision, corruption, and local public finance. Across these four governance dimensions, population size is not associated with worse outcomes. While public goods provision and per-capita tax revenue is slightly lower for larger localities, these differences are small and not statistically significant. State capacity is actually positively correlated with 2021 population. The evidence thus does not suggest that it is the recent urbanization of rural towns that drives weak governance outcomes.

7.2. Decentralization reform

We next consider whether it was the poor implementation of the decentralization reform, documented in Section 5. The new governance arrangements mandated by the decentralization reform were meant to improve outcomes in rural towns. Yet, we saw that more than half of towns in our sample are still administrated by traditional leaders. They might be ill-equipped to solve these problems. In that case we would expect outcomes to be worse in towns that do not have a state administrator.

Fig. 7 shows the distribution of outcomes for localities with and without a state administrator. We find limited evidence for the decentralization reform being a major driver of rural towns' governance challenges. State capacity, public goods provision, and per-capita tax revenue are in fact higher in towns governed by chiefs. Only corruption seems to be worse under traditional governance. Overall, the decentralization reform's uneven implementation does not seem to be correlated with worse governance outcomes.

7.3. Low state capacity

Finally, we investigate the role of local state capacity in perpetuating governance challenges. Local state capacity could enable local leaders to provide public goods, keep their agents accountable, and mobilize resources via taxation. If state capacity was the main constraint explaining poor governance outcomes across rural towns, then we would expect those towns with higher state capacity to fare better. Fig. 8 shows little evidence for this mechanism. While public good provision is correlated with state capacity, corruption is not and per-capita tax revenue is negatively correlated with state capacity.

In Table 5 we put this analysis in a regression framework by using the following specification:

$$Outcome_i = \beta_1 LogPopulation_i^{2021} + \beta_2 StateAdmin_i + \beta_3 StateCapacity_i + \gamma_p + \epsilon; \tag{1}$$

where $Outcome_i$ is the governance outcome in town i, $LogPopulation_i^{2021}$ is the log population in 2021, $StateAdmin_i$ is a binary indicator if the town has a state administrator, $StateCapacity_i$ is the state capacity z-score, and γ_p are province fixed effects. The table confirms the patterns (or rather lack thereof) observed in the figures: neither urbanization, nor the implementation of the decentralization reform, nor low levels of state capacity consistently predict the governance challenges we observe in the data.

This suggests that the issue runs deeper and might require significant more resources from central and provincial governments than local governments can muster on their own.

[15] The index has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.44.
[16] The index has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.33.
[17] The index has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.7.

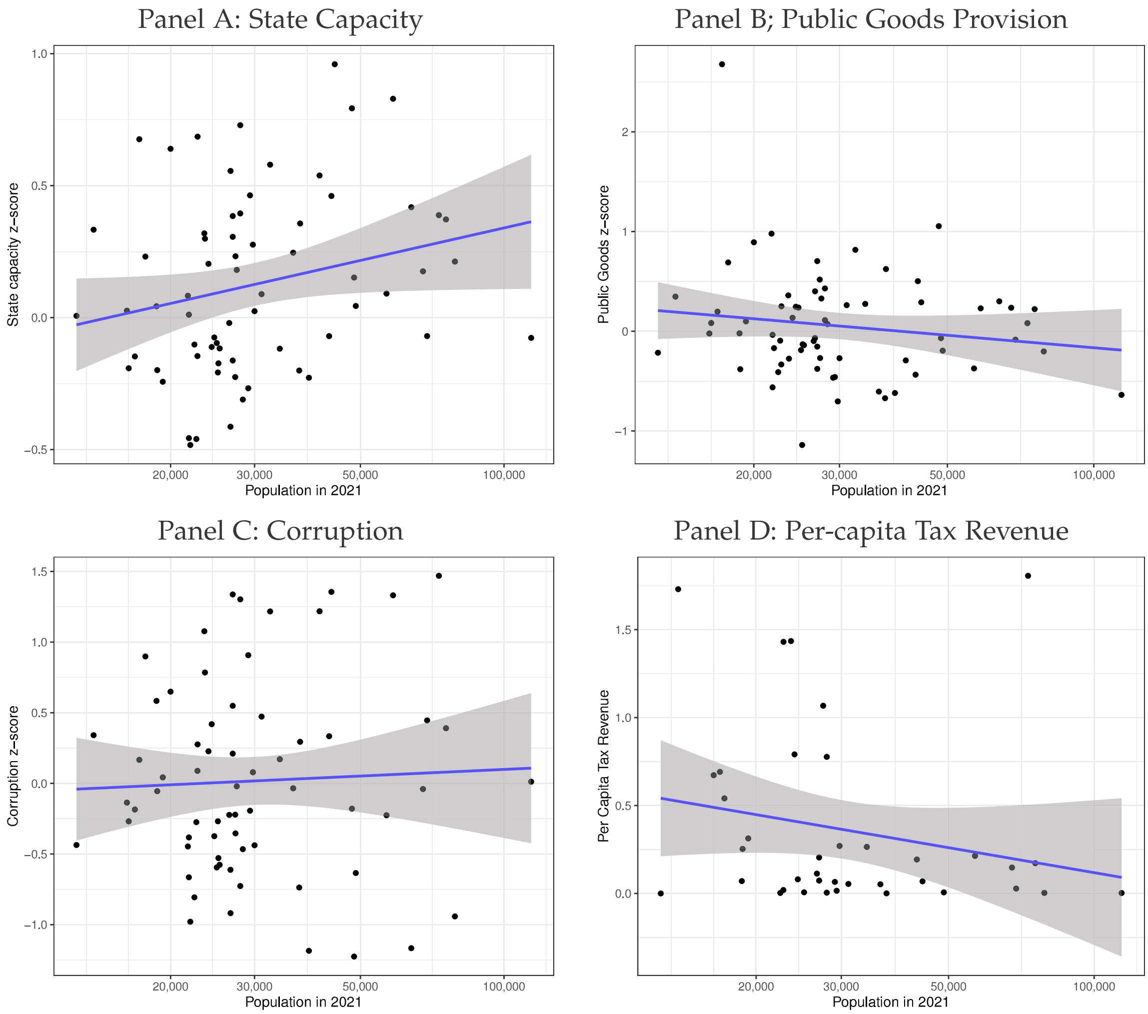


Fig. 6. Urbanization and Governance Challenges.
Notes: This figure shows scatter plots of governance challenges and locations' 2021 population. Panel A depicts state capacity, Panel B depicts public goods provision, Panel C depicts corruption, and Panel D depicts per-capita tax revenue. The *x*-axis is on a log-scale.

Table 5
Investigating Mechanisms for Governance Challenges.

	Dependent variable:			
	State Capacity (1)	Public Goods (2)	Corruption (3)	Per capita tax revenue (4)
Log Population 2021	0.105	−0.281*	−0.126	−0.244
	(0.084)	(0.153)	(0.121)	(0.145)
State Administrator	0.117	−0.206	−0.026	0.164
	(0.088)	(0.158)	(0.126)	(0.200)
State Capacity		0.186	0.434**	0.543*
		(0.190)	(0.185)	(0.269)
Observations	67	67	66	38
R^2	0.247	0.123	0.642	0.316

Notes: This table reports the results of OLS regressions investigating the mechanisms of governance challenges. The outcome variables are the state capacity z-score index (Column 1), public goods provision z-score index (Column 2), Corruption z-score index (Column 3), and per capita tax revenue (Column 4). All regressions include province fixed effects. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

8. Conclusion

This paper provided new data on local governance in towns in rural DRC. We surveyed 264 government agents and 536 households across 67 localities. These towns contain about 10 percent of the total population of the provinces North Kivu, South Kivu, Kasaï, and Kasaï Central.

The research findings highlight the present yet precarious state of governance in rural areas of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Our study documents the presence of various government agents across our sample localities, who are charged with performing various state functions and exhibit substantial administrative proficiency. Nevertheless, these agents face significant challenges due to a lack of financial support, as only half of them receive a salary, and those who do receive a meager compensation. This absence of structural support has presumably led to widespread corruption and the near non-existence of local taxation. As a result, government agents are unable to expand the state and provide essential services to the population due to a scarcity of resources.

The local governance situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo presents a challenging scenario. The limited resources available to government agents hinder their ability to provide essential services to the citizens of rural towns. The lack of adequate salary and support also exacerbates the issue, as it forces agents to rely on local resources to supplement their income. Combined with a lack of democratic accountability and insularity of many locality heads this situation leads to a predatory state that does not serve its citizens, despite having a considerable infrastructural local capacity for development. However,

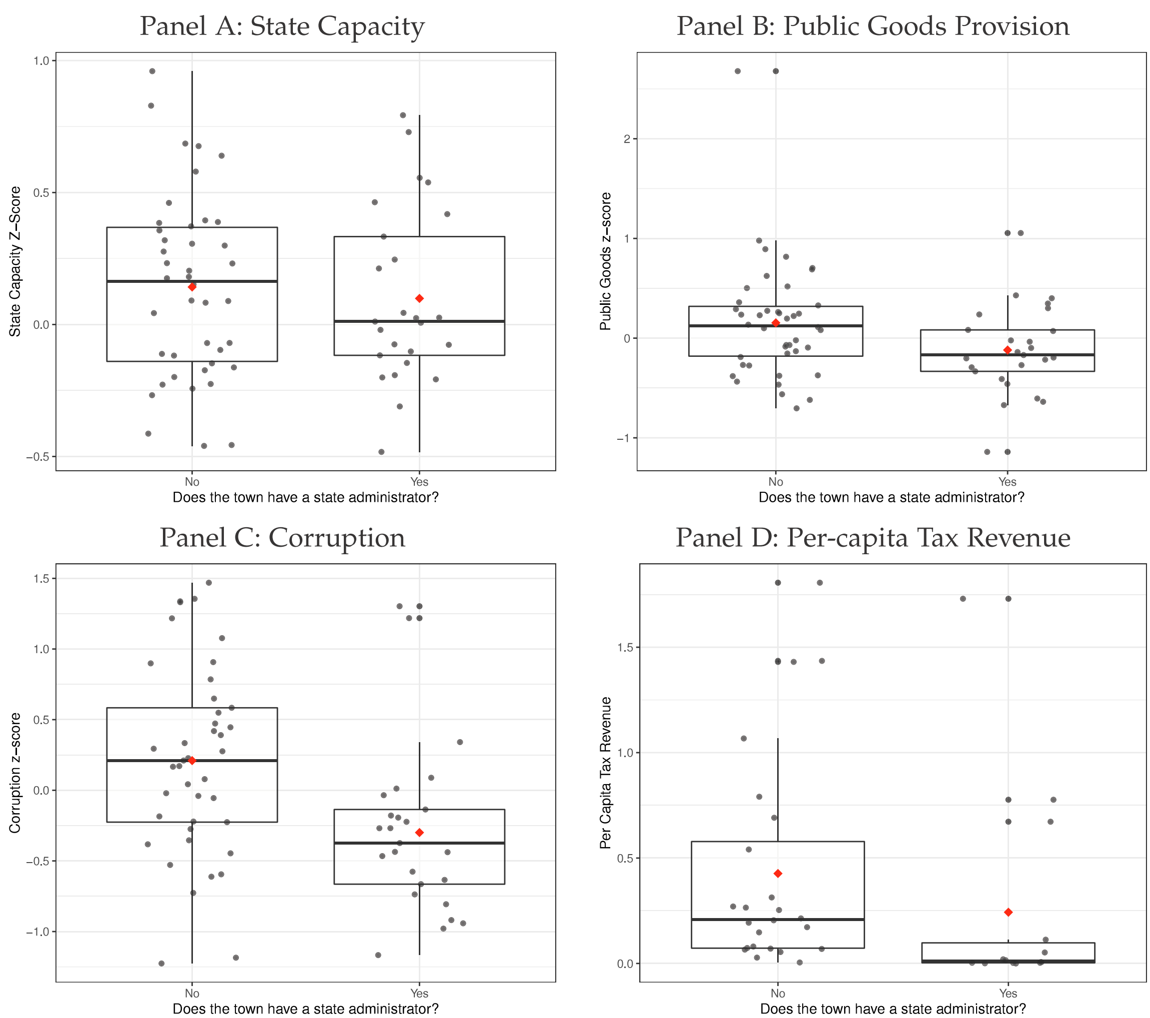


Fig. 7. State Administration and Governance Challenges. *Notes:* This figure shows scatter and box plots of governance challenges and whether locations have a state administrator. The mean is indicated by the red diamond. Panel A depicts state capacity, Panel B depicts public goods provision, Panel C depicts corruption, and Panel D depicts per-capita tax revenue.

with the proper support and resources, this capacity could be leveraged for local collective interest.

Our findings on fiscal capacity questions the ability of local governments to mobilize significant resources. The data suggests three urgent fiscal reforms. First, minimum fiscal transfers could provide necessary resources to local governments. A guaranteed minimum transfer of $5–10 per capita from central government would increase local budgets 15–30 fold. Second, formalizing even 10% of customary land could generate significant revenue. Third, simplifying tax instruments would make it easier for both citizens and officials. Current tax lists (Appendix A4) show 30+ different fees/licenses. Consolidation could reduce administrative costs and improve compliance.

In the absence of drastic changes coming from the central and provincial state in the DRC, two paths for local change could vitalize local governance. Firstly, the recent decentralization reform could be further embraced through increased empowerment of local leaders, enabling them to collect taxes and control their own funds, as well as through the organization of elections for decentralized units. Secondly, local governance in the DRC still largely rests in the hands and on the shoulders of traditional chiefs, who are present in virtually every village in the country. Possessing considerable local authority and administrative capacity, they could be made a more active and constructive part of state governance. This would tap into their potential and put the DRC on a path towards a developmental state.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Soeren J. Henn: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Aimable**

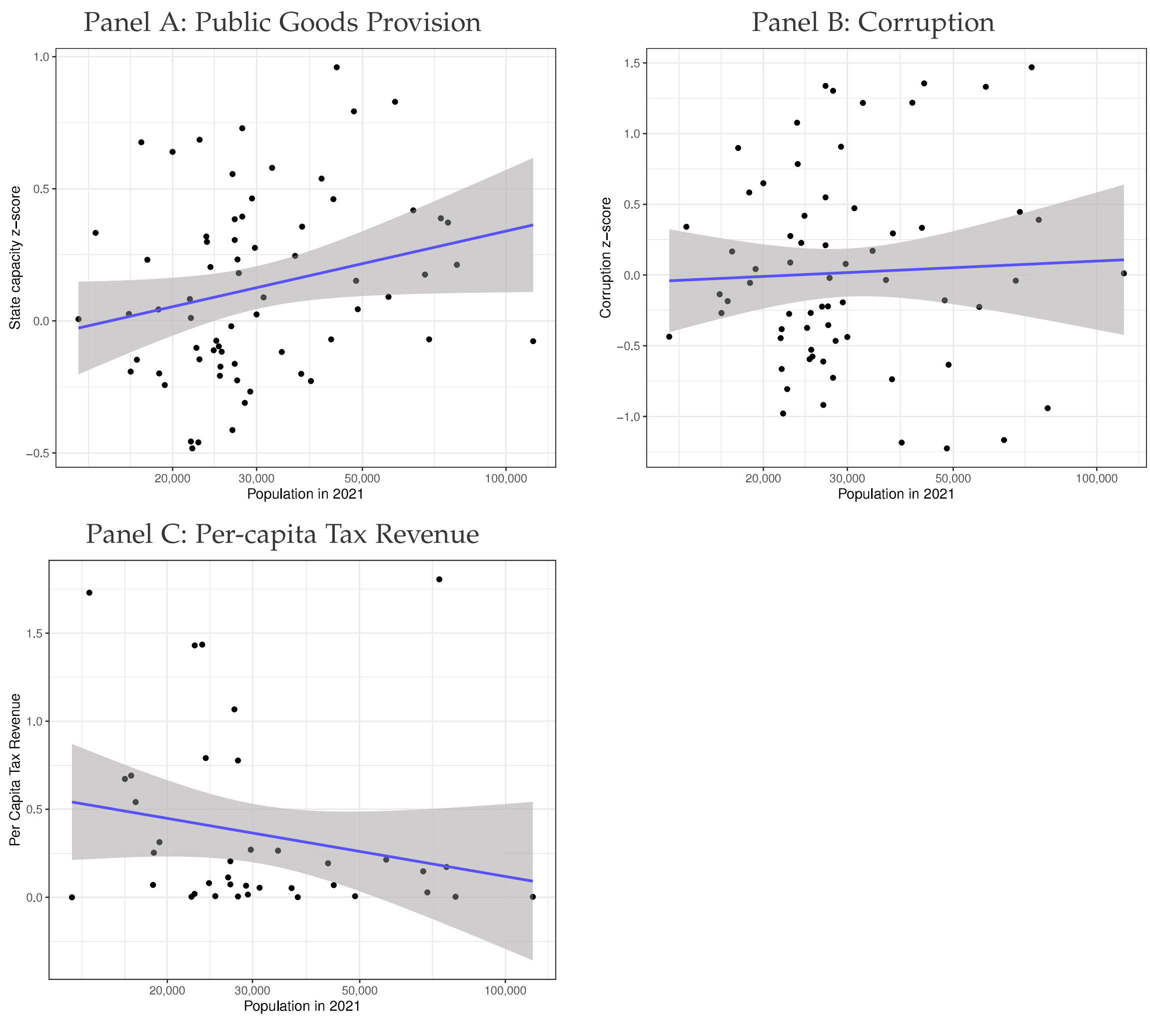


Fig. 8. State Capacity and Governance Challenges.
Notes: This figure shows scatter plots of governance challenges and locations' state capacity. Panel A depicts public goods provision, Panel B depicts corruption, and Panel C depicts per-capita tax revenue.

Lameke: Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Investigation, Data curation. **Mastaki Mugaruka:** Validation, Supervision, Investigation, Data curation. **Vincent Tanutama:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2025.107219.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

References

Afrobarometer (2022). Afrobarometer data round 8.

Alesina, Alberto, Devleeschauwer, Arnaud, Easterly, William, Kurlat, Sergio, & Wacziarg, Romain (2003). Fractionalization. *Journal of Economic Growth*, *8*(2), 155–194.

Autesserre, Séverine (2012). Dangerous tales: Dominant narratives on the Congo and their unintended consequences. *African Affairs*, *111*(443), 202–222.

Ayee, Joseph R. A. (1996). The measurement of decentralization: The Ghanaian experience, 1988–92. *African Affairs*, 31–50.

Ayee, Joseph R. A. (1997). The adjustment of central bodies to decentralization: The case of the Ghanaian bureaucracy. *African Studies Review*, *40*(2), 37–57.

Bahry, Donna, Kosolapov, Mikhail, Kozyreva, Polina, & Wilson, Rick K (2005). Ethnicity and trust: Evidence from Russia. *American Political Science Review*, *99*(4), 521–532.

Balán, Pablo, Bergeron, Augustin, Tourek, Gabriel, & Weigel, Jonathan L. (2022). Local elites as state capacity: How city chiefs use local information to increase tax compliance in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. *American Economic Review*, *112*(3), 762–797.

Bardhan, Pranab (2002). Decentralization of governance and development. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, *16*(4), 185–205.

Booth, David (2012). *Synthesis report-Development as a collective action problem: adressing the real challenges of African governance*. Africa power and politics programme.

Büscher, Karen (2018). Urbanisation and the political geographies of violent struggle for power and control: Mining boomtowns in Eastern Congo. *International Development Policy*, *10*, 302–324.

Büscher, Karen, Perazzone, Stephanie, Cuvelier, Jeroen, Lumbu, Stephane, Rwakira, Espoir, Bulambo, Paul, et al. (2024). Contested 'commune rurales': Decentralisation and the (violent) struggle for public authority in the Democratic Republic of Congo. *Global Policy*, *00*, 1–13.

Callaghy, Thomas M. (1984). *The state-society struggle: Zaire in comparative perspective*. Columbia University Press.

Claessens, Klara, Bisoka, Aymar Nyenyezi, & Ansoms, An (2021). Rethinking communal land governance in the Great Lakes Region of Central Africa. *Progress in Development Studies*, *21*(2), 144–160.

Crawfurd, Lee (2017). School management and public–private partnerships in Uganda. *Journal of African Economies*, *26*(5), 539–560.

De Herdt, Tom, & Titeca, Kristof (2019). *Negotiating public services in the Congo: State, society and governance*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Dickovick, J. Tyler (2014). Foreign aid and decentralization: Limitations on impact in autonomy and responsiveness. *Public Administration and Development*, *34*(3), 194–206.

Dickovick, J. Tyler, & Wunsch, James Stevenson (2014). *Decentralization in Africa: The paradox of state strength*. CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers Boulder.

Dražanová, Lenka (2020). Introducing the historical index of ethnic fractionalization (HIEF) dataset: Accounting for longitudinal changes in ethnic diversity. *Journal of Open Humanities Data*, *6*.

Duflo, Esther (2001). Schooling and labor market consequences of school construction in Indonesia: Evidence from an unusual policy experiment. *American Economic Review*, *91*(4), 795–813.

Englebert, Pierre (2006). Why Congo persists: Sovereignty, globalization and the violent reproduction of a weak state. In *Globalization, violent conflict and self-determination* (pp. 119–146). Springer.

Englebert, Pierre, & Mungongo, Emmanuel Kasongo (2016). Misguided and misdiagnosed: The failure of decentralization reforms in the DR Congo. *African Studies Review*, *59*(1), 5–32.

Ethnologue (2013). *Ethnologue : Languages of the world*: *Technical report*, Dallas, TX: SIL International.

Faguet, Jean-Paul, & Pal, Sarmistha (2023). *Decentralised Governance. Crafting Effective Democracies Around the World*. London: LSE Press.

Gisselquist, Rachel M., Leiderer, Stefan, & Nino-Zarazua, Miguel (2016). Ethnic heterogeneity and public goods provision in Zambia: Evidence of a subnational "diversity dividend". *World Development*, *78*, 308–323.

Haerpfer, C., Inglehart, R., Moreno, A., Welzel, C., Kizilova, K., Diez-Medrano, J., et al. (2020). *World values survey: Round seven—Country-pooled datafile*. Madrid, Spain & Vienna, Austria: JD Systems Institute & WVSA Secretariat.

Hanson, Jonathan K., & Sigman, Rachel (2021). Leviathan's latent dimensions: Measuring state capacity for comparative political research. *The Journal of Politics*, *83*(4), 1495–1510.

Henn, Soeren J. (2023). Complements or substitutes? How institutional arrangements bind traditional authorities and the state in Africa. *American Political Science Review*, *117*(3), 871–890.

Henn, Soeren J., Larreguy, Horacio, & Marshall, John (2020). You get what you pay for: When do certification programs improve public service delivery? IAST working paper.

Henn, Soeren J., Marchais, Gauthier, Mugaruka, Christian M, & Sánchez de la Sierra, Raúl (2025). Indirect rule: Armed groups and customary chiefs in eastern Congo. Working paper.

Henn, Soeren J, Paler, Laura, Prichard, Wilson, Samii, Cyrus, & Sánchez de la Sierra, Raúl (2025). Seeing like a citizen: Experimental evidence on how empowerment affects engagement with the state. *American Journal of Political Science*, (in press).

Henn, Soeren J., & Tanutama, Vincent (2025). State expansion and social responses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Working paper.

Ingelaere, Bert, Christiaensen, Luc, De Weerdt, Joachim, & Kanbur, Ravi (2018). Why secondary towns can be important for poverty reduction – A migrant perspective. *World Development*, *105*, 273–282.

Kamana, Alanda A., Radoine, Hassan, & Nyasulu, Chimango (2024). Urban challenges and strategies in African cities–a systematic literature review. *City and Environment Interactions*, *21*, Article 100132.

Kessy, Ambrose Theobald (2023). Decentralization and administrative discretion in Tanzania: An analysis of administrative discretion on human resources, finance and service delivery. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, *8*(1), Article 100684.

Kirshner, Joshua, & Power, Marcus (2015). Mining and extractive urbanism: Postdevelopment in a Mozambican boomtown. *Geoforum*, *61*, 67–78.

Kisangani, Emizet F. (2020). Congo-Kinshasa: The military in the state-building process. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of politics*.

Kumar, Tanu, & Stenberg, Matthew (2023). Why political scientists should study smaller cities. *Urban Affairs Review*, *59*(6), 2005–2042.

Lagakos, David, Mobarak, Ahmed Mushfiq, & Waugh, Michael E. (2023). The welfare effects of encouraging rural–urban migration. *Econometrica*, *91*(3), 803–837.

Levira, Francis, & Todd, Gemma (2017). Urban health in tanzania: questioning the urban advantage. *Journal of Urban Health*, *94*(3), 437–449.

Mann, Michael (1984). The autonomous power of the state: Its origins, mechanisms and results. *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, *25*(2), 185–213.

Meili, Rahel, & Shearmur, Richard (2019). Diverse diversities—Open innovation in small towns and rural areas. *Growth and Change*, *50*(2), 492–514.

Moshonas, Stylianos (2013). Looking beyond reform failure in the Democratic Republic of Congo. *Review of African Political Economy*, *40*(135), 132–140.

Moshonas, Stylianos (2018). Power and policy-making in the DR Congo: The politics of human resource management and payroll reform. Working Papers/University of Antwerp. Institute of Development Policy and Management; UniversitÉ D'Anvers. Institut de Politique Et de Gestion Du Développement.-Antwerp.

Moshonas, Stylianos (2019). Reform of the public wage system in the DRC: The Système intégré de gestion des ressources humaines et de la paie and its prospects. In *Negotiating public services in the Congo: state, society and governance* (pp. 26–50). London: Zed Books.

Mudinga, Emery Mushagalusa, & Wakenge, Claude Iguma (2021). Land crisis and stakeholders' responses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. *Congo Research Briefs*, (9).

OECD and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and African Development Bank (2022). *Africa's urbanisation dynamics 2022* (p. 205). Paris: OECD Publishing.

Olivier de Sardan, Jean-Pierre (2011). The eight modes of local governance in West Africa. *IDS Bulletin*, *42*(2), 22–31.

Olowu, Dele, & Wunsch, James Stevenson (2004). *Local governance in Africa: The challenges of democratic decentralization*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Post, Alison E., & Kuipers, Nicholas (2022). City size and public service access: Evidence from Brazil and Indonesia. *Perspectives on Politics*, 1–20.

Raeymaekers, Timothy, Menkhaus, Ken, & Vlassenroot, Koen (2008). State and non-state regulation in African protracted crises: governance without government? *Afrika Focus*, *21*(2), 7–21.

Risse, Thomas, & Stollenwerk, Eric (2018). Legitimacy in areas of limited statehood. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *21*, 403–418.

Robinson, Amanda Lea (2020). Ethnic diversity, segregation and ethnocentric trust in Africa. *British Journal of Political Science*, *50*(1), 217–239.

Rodrigues, Cristina Udelsmann (2022). Hesitant migration to emergent cities: Angola's intentional urbanism of the 'centralidades'. *City*, *26*(5–6), 848–869.

Schatzberg, Michael G. (1991). *The dialectics of oppression in Zaire*: *vol. 694*, Indiana University Press.

Scott, James (1999). *Seeing like a state*. New Haven and London: Yale University.

Sánchez de la Sierra, Raúl, Titeca, Kristof, Xie, Haoyang, Lameke, Aimable Amani, & Malukisa Nkuku, Albert (2024). The real state: Inside the Congo's traffic police agency. *American Economic Review*, *114*(12), 3976–4014.

Sweet, Rachel (2020). Peacebuilding as state building? Lessons from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In *The state of peacebuilding in africa: lessons learned for policymakers and practitioners* (pp. 295–320). Springer.

Tatem, Andrew J. (2017). WorldPop, open data for spatial demography. *Scientific Data*, *4*(1), 1–4.

Thill, Michel (2025). *The police, the state and the Congo cop*. London: Zed Books.

Titeca, Kristof, & De Herdt, Tom (2011). Real governance beyond the 'failed state': Negotiating education in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. *African Affairs*, *110*(439), 213–231.

UNDESA (2024). *World population prospects 2024*: *Technical report*, United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division.

United Nations (2014). *State of crime and criminal justice worldwide: Report of the Secretary-General*: *Technical report*, Twelfth United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice.

van Staveren, Irene (2025). The 'ethnic fractionalization' variable in development economics—A systematic review. *Development and Change*, *56*(2), 306–334.

Weigel, Jonathan L. (2020). The participation dividend of taxation: How citizens in Congo engage more with the state when it tries to tax them. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *135*(4), 1849–1903.

Young, Crawford, & Turner, Thomas Edwin (1985). *The rise and decline of the Zairian state*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Zon, Hilaire, Pavlova, Milena, & Groot, Wim (2023). Exploring decision makers' knowledge, attitudes and practices about decentralisation and health resources transfer to local governments in Burkina Faso. *Global Public Health*, *18*(1), Article 1828983.