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Rasel Mpuya Madaha

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Decentralisation and the empowerment of local communities in Tanzania with special focus on water issues

Rasel Mpuya Madaha

Department of Agricultural Extension and Community Development, Sokoine University of Agriculture, Morogoro, Tanzania

ABSTRACT

Action researchers are empowered because they carry out research *with* rather than *on* participants. Likewise, the Tanzanian government has been attempting to devolve power to the people since independence. The latest efforts started in the 1980s and focused on the devolution of power from central government to the people through local governments. The uniqueness of the decentralization process and the associated reforms in the country have attracted some scholarly attention, with researchers asserting that the existing model of local government, famously known as Decentralization by Devolution (D-by-D), has considerable potential. However, past research on decentralization has generally been disempowering. Using Action Research (AR), this study aimed to explore strategies to empower local marginalized communities, as co-researchers, to identify key local challenges in accessing public resources, notably water, and enable them to take initial steps towards addressing them through existing local government structures. The application of AR suggests that Tanzania has strong local government structures that can accommodate the participation of marginalized communities in the management of water and other public resources. Nevertheless, local communities need to be empowered through participatory approaches to best interact with the local government structures and ensure accountability in the management of such resources.

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Introduction

Unique models of decentralization in Tanzania have attracted the attention of scholars from across the world (see Knight 1969; Liviga 1992; Boex and Martinez-Vazquez 2006; Eckert 2007; Graham 2008; Pedersen 2012; Hulst, Mafuru, and Mpenzi 2015). The promise of the theory of decentralization is that the devolution of power to the people at the local level makes local governments more accountable. Grindle (2009, 2) asserts that, 'decentralization promises better governance and deeper democracy as public officials are held more directly accountable for their actions and as citizens become more engaged in local affairs.' The argument stems from the classic political philosophy (see Grindle 2009; Pedersen 2012; Hulst, Mafuru, and Mpenzi 2015) and Smith's (1985) work on decentralization. However, critics argue that decentralization is, in fact, recentralization in disguise

CONTACT Rasel Mpuya Madaha rasel.madaha@sua.ac.tz; raselmpuya@gmail.com
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because central governments continue to maintain control of local governments. Furthermore, central governments impose conditions on the spending of devolved budgets (Kessy and McCourt 2010). Critics of the Tanzanian model, also known as Decentralization by Devolution (D-by-D), acknowledge that the decentralization process in Tanzania remains immature. For example, Jiménez and Pérez-Foguet (2010) assert that Tanzanian local governments receive inadequate funding from the central government, so they cannot provide adequate public services to their local communities, while Boex (2003) found that the central government disburses public resources in favour of the wealthy and urban communities. In addition, Venugopal and Yilmaz (2010) argue that centrally appointed executive officials excessively interfere with the functioning of the local governments in the country.

A number of studies have examined the relationship between central and local government in Tanzania (see Liviga 1992; Boex and Martinez-Vazquez 2006; Kessy and McCourt 2010; Pedersen 2012), with others focusing on political–administrative relations between local government officials and politicians (see Hulst, Mafuru, and Mpenzi 2015). However, the literature exploring strategies to empower local marginalised communities is limited (see Mollel and Tollenaar 2013). While past research indicates that the Tanzanian model of decentralization may be better than others in key respects, it has not been given an adequate opportunity to thrive. With this in mind, the main objective of this study was to explore strategies to empower local marginalised communities and to enable them take initial steps to address local challenges through existing local government structures. The study can pave way for the Tanzanian model of decentralization to thrive, enabling other countries to draw lessons from Tanzania's experiences.

Tanzania has been making noteworthy attempts to devolve power to its people since it achieved independence in the 1960s. The initial reforms were similar to those happening elsewhere, whereby decentralization took place through the deconcentration of power to local agencies of central governments. Mollel and Tollenaar (2013) use the term 'centralized de-concentration' and link it to centralization, rather than decentralization, and, indeed, deconcentration in Tanzania led to a reduced role for local governments in the 1970s due to underperformance (see Liviga 1992). Although Tordoff (1994) argues that deconcentration appeared to be effective in Tanzania, and the rest of Africa, in the two decades following independence i.e. from 1960 to the 1980s, the first wave of decentralization experienced a number of structural flaws that led to poor performance.

The second wave of reforms led to an increased role for local governments through D-by-D, actively devolving power away from the central government. These reforms started in the early 1980s, and significant steps were taken in the late 1990s (see Boex 2003), with some scholars suggesting that the later reforms originated in the wave of democratization associated with the fall of the Berlin Wall (Tordoff 1994). The reforms of the 1990s aimed to devolve more responsibility for administering the country's resources to the local level through local governments; however, unlike the first wave of reforms, the second did not target central government agencies, and they happened hand in hand with the privatization of some central government agencies.

The local government reforms in the late 1990s led to the existing local government system in Tanzania today. The system enshrines political devolution and decentralization of the functions and finances of the central government to local governments. Rasheli (2016) believes that the reforms aimed at enabling local government to empower local

communities, with the role of the central government, at least in writing, largely that of a formulator of policies and guidelines, a provider of support and facilitation, and an overseer of monitoring, quality assurance and control of the local governments (see (Government of the United Republic of Tanzania (URT) 1998)). The bottom line is that the reforms of the 1990s focused on bringing public services under the control of people through their local councils, democratic procedures, and public participation (Government of the United Republic of Tanzania (URT) 1998).

The long-term goal of the reforms, as shared in the Government of the United Republic of Tanzania (URT) (1998), focused on improving quality, access, and equitable delivery of public services to marginalised communities with the aim of reducing the proportion of Tanzanians living in poverty. These appeared to be the most promising model of decentralization for other countries to emulate (see Wily 2003; Pedersen 2012; Hulst, Mafuru, and Mpenzi 2015); however, research suggests that the local government reforms have not managed to deliver on their promises (see Rasheli 2016; Pedersen 2012). Rasheli (2016) is of the opinion that the weaknesses of the decentralization process in Tanzania emanates from a lack of proper human capacity and of a legal framework, while Pedersen (2012) points out that the decentralization process in Tanzania has not effectively improved accountability and local-level service delivery.

Within this context, this study took place in Igale ward, in Mbeya district, located in Southern Tanzania. Mbeya District Council 'aspires to become a highly competent Local Government Authority (LGA) in improving people's living standards,' and the mission of the local government states that, 'Mbeya district council, in collaboration with stakeholders, intends to provide its community with high quality and sustainable social and economic services through proper management of resources and good governance' (Mbeya district council (MBC) 2020). The decentralization model and the local government system in Mbeya local council are somewhat similar to those in other Tanzanian local governments, and, it can provide an overall picture of the decentralization and local government system in Tanzania. The lessons learnt may therefore be applied in other parts of Tanzania and could also be useful in similar locations elsewhere in the world.

The particular process of decentralization in Tanzania calls for an action research (AR) approach, working with local marginalized communities as co-researchers to explore strategies to empower them to participate in the decentralization process. Although a number of studies have focused on the Tanzanian model of decentralization (see Knight 1969; Liviga 1992; Boex and Martinez-Vazquez 2006; Eckert 2007; Graham 2008; Hulst, Mafuru, and Mpenzi 2015), none of them has employed an AR approach.

Socio-economic characteristic of the study population

The study population consisted of all the community members living in Igale administrative ward. Located in the Mbeya council district, the ward is one of 27 in the district (see Table 1). Mbeya District is one of the six istricts that constitute Mbeya Region. The latest statistics show that the district has experienced a 20% population increase within the past 10 years. I sourced data on the socio-economic characteristics of the population from a documentary review of local government documents at the district offices. I also conducted Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with some local government officials to enrich the section.

Table 1. The profile of Mbeya district.

s/n	Item	Quantity
1	Division	3
2	Wards	27
3	Villages	148
4	Hamlets	951
5	Population in year 2002	254,069 (male = 118,597 and female = 135,472)
6	Population in year 2012	305,319 (female = 161,540 and male = 143,779)
7	Percentage increase from 2002 to 2012	20%
8	Total Land Area	243,200 ha, of which 189,818 ha is arable land
9	Area covered by forests	47,354 ha
10	Area covered by water bodies	6,028 ha
11	Percentage Contribution of Agriculture to the District Gross Domestic Product (GDP)	85%

Source: District Planning Officer (DPLO), 2016.

According to the District Planning Officer, Mbeya District Council does not own any land, as all land belongs to local communities. Some individual villagers own some land, and the Village Authorities own the rest on behalf of the villagers. This also applies to Igale ward and the rest of Tanzania (see the Land Act of 1999). The ward and the entire district supply agricultural products to several regions in Tanzania, including Dar es Salaam, Tanga, Arusha, Kilimanjaro, and Morogoro. The district grows food and cash crops, and the inhabitants of Igale ward grow several staple crops, including maize and beans. The main cash crops in the ward are coffee and pyrethrum. The consensus is that, given the scarcity of land and the presence of mountainous landscapes, the district needs to invest in high value agricultural crops as these require less land but generate high profits.

Tanzania is composed of over 120 ethnic groups, who speak different vernacular languages and who have different sub-cultures. The KIIs and documentary review show that the dominant ethnic groups found in Mbeya District are the Safwa, Malila, and Nyakyusa, residing in the Tembela, Isangati, and Usongwe administrative divisions, respectively. These divisions are the only ones existing in the district (see Table 2). Other ethnic groups found in the district include the Wanji, Ndali, Nyika, Kinga, Maasai, and Sukuma. Although some Maasai and Sukuma have settled in Mshewe and Ikukwa wards to practice agro-pastoralism, others continue to lead nomadic lifestyles. The ethnic groups in the district live peacefully among themselves and intermarriages are common.

This study focused on Igale ward located in Usongwe division (see Table 3). The ward has five villages, Horongo, Izumbwe, Shongo, Igale, and Itaga, and the Nyakyusa and Safwa are the dominant ethnic groups. The Nyakyusa form the majority of those living in Horongo and Izumbwe, while Shongo, Igale, and Itaga are predominantly Safwa.

Table 2. Administrative division.

Division	Land Area	No. of Wards	No. of Villages	No. of Hamlets
Usongwe	391	6	41	313
Isangati	825	5	48	380
Tembela	1216	6	54	317
Total	**2432**	**17**	**143**	**1,010**

Source: Mbeya District Planning Office.

Table 3. Statistics for Igale ward.

s/n	Indicator	Quantity	Remarks
1	Households	2621	A household is family unit headed by either a female or male head of household.
2	Hamlet	39	A hamlet is collection of 10 to 30 households headed by a hamlet head (in Kiswahili known as *Balozi*)
3	Population	11,384 (Male = 5342; Female = 6032)	
4	Total land area	9890 ha	
5	Arable land area	6500 ha	Agricultural production heavily relies on agricultural fertilizers. A farmer can hardly harvest in absence of fertilizer application.
6	Annual maize production	7621 tons per annum	Major crops
7	Annual coffee production	360 tons per annum	
8	Annual beans production	457 tons per annum	
9	Annual tomato production	367 tons per annum	

Source: Field Data, and the Office of the District Executive Director.

I selected 24 co-researchers with representation from the two dominant tribes for the AR (see Table 2 for details); 16 co-researchers belonging to the Nyakyusa ethnic group and eight to the Safwa ethnic group. Responses from the key informants and focus group discussions (FGDs) revealed that the Nyakyusa ethnic group is patriarchal, with men as the breadwinners. Findings also revealed that the Nyakyusa are seen locally as experiencing a relatively high standard of living; however, I would argue that this falls short of international standards, such as those set by the World Bank, which state that adults need to consume a minimum of $1.90 a day (World Bank Statistics, 2015). Key informant interviews and FGDs further highlighted that the Safwa ethnic group is relatively less developed than the Nyakyusa. The co-researchers participating in the FGDs arrived at a consensus that the Safwa used to be less receptive of western education from missionaries and colonialists. They used to stay away from the western civilization, and this tendency continued for some time after Tanzania's independence in 1961. In contrast to the Nyakyusa, the co-researchers were of the opinion that Safwa women depended less on their husbands and often laboured on their husbands' farms. There is a strong belief among inhabitants of the ward that Safwa women are willing to work extremely hard to get extra income, with the output of their labour used to feed the entire household. Nonetheless, Safwa traditions do not allow women to own land.

The claims made by the co-researchers may not necessarily be true. However, I also observed that women from across all ethnic groups rely on income generating activities to address their needs and those of their families. The findings from FGDs and KIIs suggest that women usually have membership in Rotating, Savings, and Credit Associations (ROSCAs). Introduced by international NGOs in 1990s, ROSCAs offer affordable and accessible microloans to the women who in turn invest them in small informal businesses. Overall, patterns of patriarchal gender relations appear to be embedded in economic activity and are different within each ethnic group (Madaha 2021). As an action researcher, I make concerted efforts to avoid making personal presuppositions as these might affect the research process; however, I acknowledge that my position as a male researcher in a patriarchal society might have an influence on the outcome of any research.

The research design and data collection

Bradbury (2017), 1) emphasizes that AR "is fundamentally about transforming the inherited systems of 'power-over' to 'power-with'", thereby empowering both researchers and co-researchers. While conventional research approaches are often disempowering, because they ignore the ability of local communities to participate in research (see Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014), AR researchers carry out research *with* as opposed to *on* participants (see Hawkins 2015, 464). Where a conventional approach can make research too distant from practical realities (Nyemba and Mayer 2017), the major goal of AR is to change habitual action into informed and committed action, through self-critical reflection, to emancipate people. AR seeks to make systematic change to avoid imposed and random changes that generate frustration and dissatisfaction for communities.

Most significantly, AR acknowledges the expertise of local communities on their environment (see Chevalier and Buckles 2013; Reason and Bradbury 2008). As Bradbury (2015) argues, AR is a practical process of co-creation of knowledge with people, and Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon (2014) acknowledge the ability of local communities to collaborate with external researchers to make improvements in local practices as well as the associated environment. In this light, I integrated my expertise with that of the local communities by working together with them, as opposed to telling them about their problems (Swantz in Bradbury et al, 2019). Furthermore, Bradbury (2019) points out that action researchers focus on participative, action-oriented inquiry into issues of relevance to people to make them flourish in their social and physical environment, and I managed to collaborate with the co-researchers to make some improvements in Igale ward. In addition, Swantz's (1975, 119) classical article on AR states that scientists should leave the observer's position to make the research situation a motivational tool for the development of all who are engaged in it. At the end of the AR exercise, both I and the co-researchers felt empowered. We learnt about the challenges faced by the local communities and improved our skills in conducting AR at the local level.

Concerning the recruitment and selection of the research participants (see Table 4), I observed the following steps. First, I selected Igale ward from among 27 wards in Mbeya district using the following criteria: a) the presence of many economic groups of low-income villagers; b) the marginalisation of the ward; c) considerable distance from the district office to provide feedback sessions to local government officials; and d) the potential vibrancy in grassroots activism. Igale ward met them best.

Second, I selected 24 co-researchers from those who were actively involved in community-based organizations (CBOs). CBOs are organizations based at a community level that serve as engines for bottom-up development initiatives by mobilizing local people to own the development process within their communities (Eswarappa 2020; Okeke-Ogbuafor, Gray, and Stead 2018). I selected CBO members who were active in voicing the concerns of marginalized people too. In line with the study objective, the co-researchers served as catalysts in the empowerment of the rest of their marginalized communities. The co-researchers participated in the identification of key local challenges within their communities and took initial steps to address them through existing local government structures. Although I collected some normative quantitative data through the review of archives at ward and district council offices (see Tables 1, 2, and 3), we

Table 4. Research participants and co-researchers.

SN	Description	Quantity	Gender Disaggregated Data		Remarks
			Female	Male	
1	New wards identified	1	NA	NA	Identified based on the criteria
2	Community co-researchers	24	17	7	These were selected from vibrant community groups to serve as co-researchers. I spent four days with them to explore issues in line with the study objectives. I used AR tools to engage with them.
3	Special groups including elderly (1 group), People living with HIV (1 group), and members of VICOBAs (1 group)	3	37	11	These were vibrant groups that facilitated cross-learning. That is, I facilitated FGD with each of the group to further explore the issues brought about by the co-researchers.
4	Ward officials	15	3	12	I invited the Ward government Officials and other ward experts to participate in a feedback session.
5	District Officials	16	7	9	Following the feedback session at the ward level, I invited the district officials participated in the feedback session at the district level.
6	Journalists	25	14	11	I organized an audience with local journalists to share the findings.
7	Key Informants	15	8	7	These were local government officials that were identified during the AR exercise. I communicated with the officials to enrich the data that had been gathered during the AR. These were independently made to seek clarifications on certain issues that emerged during the AR exercise. They were also made to cover existing gaps in information that could not be gathered during the AR exercise. Some correspondences were made after leaving the study location through phone calls. I took the measure to improve the report for sharing to Tanzania Gender Network Program (TGNP), the local government and other stakeholders. The report was prepared in English to attract the wider audience to collaborate with the local communities in Igale ward.
	Total		**86**	**57**	

Source: Field Data, July 2016 to July, 2021.

mainly focused on the collection of qualitative data through the following AR data collection methods: participant observation, brainstorming, and FGDs. I facilitated the FGDs through vision circle, provoking pictures, and community mapping (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014). I also conducted KIIs to further explore and verify some of the issues raised by the co-researchers. I then shared the verified issues with the rest of the co-researchers for them to make informed decisions during the AR exercise.

We jointly explored problems within the local communities and identified 56 issues that blocked them from accessing key basic social services. The issues that we identified fell into four categories: agriculture, education, health, and water themes. There were 14

agricultural issues; 15 educational issues; 13 health issues, and 11 drinking water issues. The key issues are presented in the section entitled, 'Local key challenges of communities,' and I have also shared some of the issues identified in the water sector.

Third, I collaborated with the co-researchers to identify additional community-based groups to share their insights on these issues. These were selected based on their strengths and economic engagement in the ward and invited to participate in FGDs. I facilitated the FGDs to further explore the issues, which had been raised by the 24 co-researchers.

Fourth, we organized a feedback session at both the district and ward levels to share our findings with local government officials. We started with the ward-level feedback session and invited government officials and other ward experts to participate. Following the feedback session at the ward level, we invited the district officials to participate in the feedback session at the district level, which was held on the following day. Details of the feedback sessions are provided in the section entitled, 'Interaction with Local Government Officials and Local Communities.'

Finally, I collaborated with the co-researchers to identify 15 local government officials to serve as key informants. I then conducted KIIs to further explore issues raised by the 24 co-researchers and the other groups that participated in FGDs. I conducted face to face KIIs while I was at the study location. I also sought some clarifications and additional information from the key informants through phone calls after leaving the location. My interaction with the key informants started in 2016 and continued until the article was submitted for publication.

The AR process and outcomes

This section presents the strategies that I used to facilitate the empowerment of the local marginalized communities through the identification of local challenges. It also includes some findings on the local key challenges for these communities as well as on the interaction of grassroots local communities with local government structures.

Challenge identification and prioritization

I facilitated the participation of co-researchers in the challenge identification and prioritization exercise for five consecutive days. I began by providing training on some AR techniques to facilitate the learning process by the co-researchers. Here, I shared a number of AR techniques with the co-researchers, asking them to select those that were most suitable for their environment. I then provided some basic training on those techniques. Afterward, I actively engaged with the co-researchers at a venue in Horongo village. We spent three days identifying the key challenges in their communities and a further two days to prioritize them (see Table 5).

The activities over the five consecutive days of AR were: introducing the co-researchers to AR techniques and team working; visioning an ideal community and associated challenges; forming four groups in line with the challenges that emerged; conducting rounds of FGDs and plenary sessions, using community mapping, visioning, pictures, and brainstorming, to further scrutinize the challenges; and prioritizing challenges through

Table 5. Identification and prioritization of challenges.

Time	Phases	Activities
Day 1		Arrival at the field on Sunday
Gap	24 hours	
Day 2		Selection of co-researchers Brief planning session for the AR exercise with the co-researchers
Gap	24 hours	
Day 3	Phase 1 of AR: preparatory Challenge Identification	Introducing the co-researchers to AR techniques and team working Visioning an ideal community and associated challenges Community mapping Writing all of the challenges on a flipchart and categorizing them into major themes (four major themes emerged). Forming four groups in line with the four major themes of the challenges that emerged.
Day 4 and Day 5	Phase 2 of AR: Comprehensive challenge identification through conducting rounds of FGD and plenary sessions	Stimulating discussions in each of the groups using provoking pictures and brainstorming, Writing the major challenges on flipchart for presentation at the plenary session. Presenting challenges to plenary sessions to further scrutinize the challenges in collaboration with other co-researchers. I facilitated FGD with Special groups including elderly (1 group), People living with HIV (1group), and members of VICOBAs (1 group) to further explore the issues brought about by the co-researchers. I conducted the FGD with the special groups in the evening for two to three hours. Take note that I conducted sessions with the co-researchers in the morning for five to six hours.
Day 6 and Day 7	Phase 3 of AR: Prioritization of challenges	Prioritizing challenges through voting, follow up discussions, and problem-tree analysis Preparation of annual work plan
Year 2016 to 2021	Key Informant Interviews (KII)	I conducted face to face KIIs while I was at the study location. I also sought some clarifications, and additional information from the key informant through phone calls after leaving the study location. My interaction with the key informants started in 2016 and continued until when the article was submitted for publication. The KII were useful in clarifying some of the challenges raised by the co-researchers.

voting, follow-up discussions, and problem-tree analysis. Further details of each stage are given in the following paragraphs.

Firstly, I facilitated the drawing of a ward community map (community mapping) to reinforce the teamwork skills of the co-researchers (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014). Using chalks, the co-researchers a drew community map of the entire ward and identified the availability and distribution of resources. The activity also enabled us to identify social services and locate unsafe areas in the ward. Secondly, I used visioning (see Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014) to prompt participants to imagine an ideal situation for themselves and the entire ward. We then identified a number of challenges that blocked the ward from attaining their ideal situation.

We then categorized the challenges into four major themes, forming four groups in line with the four major themes. These groups then engaged in FGDs separately. Fourth,

I presented certain images to the participants of each FGD to make them scrutinize the challenges. I shared Tanzanian context-specific pictures that reflected the actual situation of the communities. I then requested them to discuss the pictures using real-life cases from their communities. These pictures enabled the co-researchers to bring to light additional challenges for their communities and to begin to identify locally available opportunities to address them.

Following the FGDs, and in collaboration with the co-researchers, I conducted a plenary session to consolidate and prioritize the challenges identified through the FGDs. The plenary session allowed all of the 24 co-researchers to meet at the same location to discuss and prioritize the challenges. This involved three steps: voting, follow-up discussions, and problem-tree analysis. We initiated the prioritization process by voting to select a few pertinent challenges. We then engaged in a group discussion to further explore the reasons for the selection of a particular challenge. The discussion enabled me and the co-researchers to gain additional insights into the challenges from the community perspective. We concluded the exercise by conducting a problem-tree analysis of the challenges to identify the root causes of each challenge. Subsequently, the co-researchers created an annual work plan to systematically address the prioritised challenges. I guided them in the preparation of the plan, which specified the resources needed, including the time frame, and the responsible government officials.

Formation of a Community-Based Organization (CBO)

The co-researchers learnt that they could not address the prioritised challenges without a formal structure to interact with the local government and other development stakeholders. In line with Article 5 (2) of the Local Government Act of 1982 and the Local Government Laws Act Number 6 of 1999, Tanzanian local governments have been given the mandate to create rules and regulations to guide organisations of people. Organized Tanzanians need to register into a CBO to operate legally in the country, and Mbeya district has created unique rules and regulations to guide the registration of CBOs. This is also the case in other districts across Tanzania. As a result, following the identification and prioritization of the challenges, we created a CBO to serve as a platform for sharing the AR findings with some key stakeholders, including journalists and local government officials. I offered the co-researchers one day's training on skills for the establishment, leadership, management, and administration of CBOs, and they became the founding members. This was accompanied by the creation of a constitution for the CBO to accommodate membership from other members in the community. I asked the co-researchers to propose a name for the CBO, and one of them proposed *Jitume Kituo cha Taarifa na Maarifa* meaning 'Work hard centre for information and skill development' CBO. The rest of the co-researchers accepted the suggested name unanimously. We spent one day (Day 9) forming the CBO and making preparations for presentations at a local press club and local government offices (see Table 6).

The CBO provided a mechanism for the co-researchers to create long-term partnerships, notably partner with TGNP Mtandao (TGNP), a Tanzanian national women's advocacy NGO that was established in 1993. TGNP has been collaborating with the CBO since its establishment in 2016, in accordance with the National NGO Act of 2002, which allows NGOs to forge relationships with organised communities at the grassroots level. In so

Table 6. CBO formation and Feedback Sessions.

Day	Phases	Activities
Day 8	Break	The majority of co-researchers attend church on Sundays.
Day 9	Phase 1: CBO formation	One day training to the co-researchers on skills for the establishment, leadership, management, and administration of CBOs The creation of a constitution of the CBO Making preparation for presentation to a local press club. Making preparations for ward and district feedback sessions to local government officials Establishing relationship with TGNP and other development stakeholders.
Day 10 to Day 12	Phase 2: Presenting challenges to key stakeholders	Presenting challenges to a local press club and selection of two Investigative journalists **(Day 10)** Presenting challenges to local government officials at the ward level **(Day 11)** Presenting challenges to local government officials at the district level **(Day 12)**
Day 11 to Day 15	Phase 3: Investigative Journalism	Investigative journalism throughout the ward. Preparation of investigative journalism report Sharing the investigative report to AR researchers, press club and co-researchers.

doing, the CBO serves as a focal point for TGNP at Igale ward. The status also gives the CBO some legal mandate to operate at the local level. One of the CBO leaders interviewed on 11th October 2021 reported: 'the AR exercise has empowered us. We continue using the AR skills to identify and address challenges. We have also expanded our network by collaborating with like-minded CBOs in the district. Specifically, we have formed a district CBO to network all CBOs whose members have AR skills.' This collaboration was still strong on 25th September 2019, when one of the CBO leaders said:

> The AR intervention has enabled women of Igale ward to fight for their rights. For instance, we use the CBO to mobilize women from across the ward to attend village decision making meetings. In so doing, we have ensured that the rights of women are not abused. We have also advocated for the allocation of funds in the district budget to meet practical gender needs of women in the ward. One of the pertinent practical gender needs is water. The local government has taken significant steps to address the challenge."

The finding suggests that the CBO is the most important feature to sustain benefits of the AR intervention. The CBO structure paved way for the members to collaborate with the local government and other like-minded organizations after the AR exercise.

Under my facilitation, the CBO presented the issues identified to a press club of local journalists on Day 10 (see Table 6). Four leaders of the newly formed CBO presented the issues to 25 journalists (14 Females, 11 Males) on behalf of all the members. The press club journalists had an opportunity to learn about the issues that emerged during the AR exercise, and they also got an opportunity to discuss them. The presentation was accompanied by the selection of two investigative journalists by the CBO leadership to follow up on the priority issues and seek further clarifications on the AR challenges from the local governments and other actors at the local and district level. The journalists selected had extensive experience and had covered Igale ward for over five years; they conducted their investigations independently for five days and then produced a report. The presentation of the findings to the press club also strengthened long-term relationship between local journalists and the local communities. In this regard, the members of

the CBO learnt how to present local issues in an attractive format for the journalists, and they, in turn, wrote stories about the AR findings. The main output of this interaction with the journalists was that seven shared news about the ward with four local media companies and three national media companies. The coverage happened after my departure; however, I did not treat the data gathered by journalists as the main data for the article but rather I wanted to increase coverage of the AR findings by the local media.

In October 2021, I made some follow-up on the progress of the CBO. I talked to four leaders of the CBO, two local government officials, and two TGNP staff. They were all of the opinion that the CBO was successful. One of the ward leaders, who had been present during the formation of the CBO, said:

> The CBO has played an important role in improving the relationship between the local communities and the ward local government authorities. Specifically, the CBO mobilises women to address some Gender Based Violence (GBV) issues. They, among other things, have identified some perpetrators of GBV and reported them to the authorities. They have also increased the awareness of women not to accept an inferior position.
>
> *(Personal communication with Igale ward official, 11th October, 2021)*

In sum, throughout the AR exercise, I made some attempts to foster joint understanding of the issues among all the participants. This included efforts to foster discussion on certain cultural misconceptions, most notably those denying women's participation in development. In this respect, I offered some basic training on gender empowerment to both the male and the female co-researchers, highlighting the idea that patriarchy interfered with the development of their communities. I shared my views that patriarchy is a product of socialization; this, it can be changed for the betterment of all. Likewise, I shared my opinion that the inferior position of women is a social construct, not a natural phenomenon. I also asked the co-researchers some provoking questions throughout the AR exercise, with the aim of encouraging the active participation of all members. Follow-up engagements with the co-researchers (from 2016 to 2021), shows that women have developed the ability to speak about their challenges without fear. They demonstrated this achievement at the feedback sessions for the first time. I have also observed similar trends at various meetings organized by TGNP at the district and national level. This observation is supported by successive follow-up engagements with the local government officials and the co-researchers (i.e. from 2016 to 2021). In addition, I have been occupying a position as a resource person for TGNP since 2014. This position has been instrumental in the follow-up engagement with the co-researchers, engagement, which has enabled me to monitor the progress of the CBO and the co-researchers since 2016.

Although we ultimately achieved our aims, I had to spend additional time with co-researchers who had trouble understanding the AR exercise in the beginning. However, I believe that these efforts played a key role in building the capacities of the co-researchers and in generating the findings. As such, the next section presents some details on the challenges in the water sector that emerged during the AR exercise. I have developed the section to show the potential of AR to produce context-specific and informative findings.

Key local challenges for communities

The co-researchers came up with many challenges in the water sector that have not been identified by previous research. When I asked them to prioritize the most pertinent challenges, they identified four priorities, including a) lack of water and facilities for irrigation along river Mbalizi; b) delayed completion of water projects at Horongo village; c) inadequate tap water availability for households across the entire ward; and d) the complete absence of tap water systems at Itaga and Igale villages. These were incorporated into the annual action plan of Jitume CBO (i.e. from 18th March 2016–28 February 2017), and the CBO also formed a special committee for the Water Sector to facilitate the implementation of the action plan. The committee is composed of a chairperson, a secretary and three members, and it continues to address related challenges to date. The next section focuses on the interaction between co-researchers and local government officials, which took place in the final stages of the AR exercise.

Interaction of local government officials and local communities

We concluded the exercise by conducting feedback sessions and presenting an annual work plan to the local government officials and other actors at the ward and district levels (see Table 6). We conducted the two exercises on the 11th and 12th days, respectively. The feedback sessions gave the 24 co-researchers an opportunity to present the challenges to 15 ward local government officials and 16 government officials at the district level. The main goal of the sessions was to establish a long-term relationship between the CBO and the local government as well as to seek commitment and accountability from the local officials for addressing the community challenges. The exploration of the potential of local communities to engage with local government officials took place through feedback sessions at ward and district levels. We carried out the feedback session at the ward level for five hours at the office of the Ward Executive Officer in Horongo village. The office had a venue that accommodated all of the participants, and key officials responsible for decision-making at the ward level participated in the session.

The CBO Water User Committees elected a co-researcher with relatively good presentation skills to present the challenges to the local government officials using a flipchart and a marker pen. Before the officials responded to the presentation, other co-researchers had an opportunity to ask them questions. They also provided further details on the challenges that had been presented. Although the officials responded to the questions and provided clarifications on the challenges, their responses implied that the government does not have adequate resources to address them all. The general consensus was that the CBO needed to collaborate with the government to address the challenges, and the CBO members agreed to arrange a follow-up on the issues at least once every month.

The CBO members used a similar approach at the district feedback session. This lasted for 4 h and 10 min, with 16 district officers attending. Generally, the district-level government mostly provided clarifications on issues raised. The major clarification was that the community members should be more proactive in addressing some of the challenges they face rather than relying completely on scarce government resources. The local government officials also advised the participants to continue reporting any challenges

to government authorities for action. However, the district officials also promised to take prompt action on all raised issues within their jurisdiction.

Overall, the feedback sessions played a key role in clearing misconceptions such as an overreliance on government resources by the participants. The sessions also brought to light community challenges, which were not previously known to the government officials. The key output of the feedback sessions was that government officials committed themselves to addressing some of the specific challenges. It was decided that the way forward was for the CBO to mobilize the local communities to give community contributions to address some of the challenges.

An important lesson from the feedback sessions is that the government needs to create platforms that allow local government officials to interact with the local communities directly. Follow-up engagement with the co-researchers and local government officials has provided some evidence that the AR exercise has boosted the morale of local communities to give community contributions. The findings suggest that the myth that the government is the provider of everything has been cleared.

Discussion and analysis

The goal of decentralization is the empowerment of local communities (see Grindle 2009; Pedersen 2012; Hulst, Mafuru, and Mpenzi 2015). Likewise, the central goal of AR is to empower local communities (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014). The findings of the study suggest that AR can play a crucial role in the decentralization process by empowering local communities. The findings further suggest that Tanzanian local government structures including the *district council, administrative ward* and *village user committees* can play an important role in the empowerment of local communities. However, these structures often underperform their role in the decentralization process and the empowerment of local communities, due, in part, to poor links between the local government and the local communities due to inadequate participation. That is, there is an absence of mechanisms to encourage local communities to make use of the existing local government structures and demand accountability from local governments. The absence of such mechanisms hinders the progress of such communities.

The findings of this study are consistent with some previous research, which found that Decentralization by Devolution (D-by-D) has resulted in the development of stable local government structures in Tanzania with potential (see Boex and Martinez-Vazquez 2006; Eckert 2007; Graham 2008; Pedersen 2012; Mollel and Tollenaar 2013; Hulst, Mafuru, and Mpenzi 2015; Grindle 2009). However, I believe that, although these government structures can foster the engagement of grassroots local communities with local government to demand more accountability, more needs to be done to create way for citizens' participation. I disagree with Pedersen (2012), who claims that the decentralization process in Tanzania cannot improve accountability and local-level service delivery. My key argument is that decentralization can indeed lead to better governance and deeper democracy *if* citizens become more engaged in local affairs through participatory approaches. The findings of this study suggest that participatory approaches have the potential to enable local communities to hold local government officials accountable. They also challenge past research that dismisses decentralization as an illusion (see Grindle 2009). Although Rasheli (2016) is of opinion that the weakness of the decentralization process in Tanzania emanates

from the lack of proper human capacity and of a reliable legal framework, the findings of this study suggest that local communities need to sacrifice their time and resources by participating in local governance. That is, existing local government structures cannot by themselves devolve power to the local communities.

The presence of a number of misconceptions on the role of local governments leads to poor local participation in community development activities. These misconceptions led to the over dependency of local communities on the scant resources from the local government, meaning they ignored locally available resources to develop their communities. One explanation of the finding is that a successful decentralization process is a joint responsibility of local government and local communities; one cannot succeed without the active participation of the other. This leads me, therefore, to disagree with previous research that overemphasizes the role of government at the expense of the participation of local communities (see Steiner 2008; Mollel and Tollenaar 2013).

Unfortunately, research on decentralization in Tanzania has tended to take the conventional approach, making it less empowering for local people. However, by using AR, I was able to facilitate the empowerment of local communities to address some of their local challenges. I thus agree with Hawkins (2015), who points out that although AR is demanding, it remains empowering, transformative, respectful, and collaborative. AR encourages researchers to go beyond the binary of researcher/researched to make meaningful contributions, moving away from hegemony to inclusiveness (see Bradbury 2017).

From this perspective, I managed to co-facilitate the formation of a CBO, which, in turn, served as a platform for marginalised communities to interact with the local government officials on a more professional basis. The CBO has remained operational since 2016. Follow-ups on the AR intervention reveal that the CBO continues to network with community members, the local government, and potential stakeholders outside the ward. The finding is consistent with the mission of AR embedded in the creation of solution for the public as opposed to recreating the status quo (Bradbury 2018).

The finding of this study suggests that local government across Tanzania should consider adopting the CBO set up as a platform to facilitate the interaction of local communities and local government. This set up is missing in the existing Tanzanian decentralization model, and there is also a need to build the capacity of other forms of CBOs to enable them to participate in the decentralization process, as well as serve as hubs of knowledge and context-specific expertise. The government should create platforms to allow CBOs to interact with the local communities, while, at the same time, organizing local communities to make use of locally available resources.

Conclusion

The latest model of decentralization in Tanzania i.e. D-by-D emanates from the devolution of power from the central government to local governments. The present study is in line with past research highlighting that this model has significant potential. However, there is a need to provide more participatory platforms for them it thrives. Unlike past studies, the present study used AR to empower local communities and explore the potential of local communities to engage with local government structures to demand accountability. In this regard, the research empowered local marginalized communities, as co-researchers, to identify key local challenges and potential solutions to address them. The main

outcome of the AR exercise was the creation of a local CBO, something which was still existing and thriving at the time of the submission of the article for publication. The AR skills gained by the co-researchers enabled them to make the CBO a hub to address community challenges, and they have also been sharing the AR techniques they learnt during the project with the rest of the community members. In so doing, they have managed to contribute to social and economic justice in Igale ward. Finally, the local communities need to reduce their dependency on the local governments to warrant the sustainability of the proposed interventions, and CBOs offer great promise in this regard.

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