

Collaborative Governance in the Decentralization Process and Strengthening of Local Government Autonomy in Dili, Timor-Leste

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Collaborative Governance, Decentralization, Regional Autonomy, Dili, Timor-Leste

Received : 21 July

Revised : 23 Agustus

Accepted: 23 September

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the implementation of collaborative governance in the context of administrative decentralization and strengthening local government autonomy in the Municipality of Dili, Timor-Leste. This study aims to evaluate the dynamics of collaboration between actors and identify the determinants of its success using the Ansell and Gash (2008) model. The study employed a descriptive qualitative method with data collection through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation studies with government officials, traditional leaders, NGOs, and academics. The results indicate that collaborative governance in Dili remains at an immature stage of collaborative rhetoric. Formal processes tend to be top-down consultative (tokenism) rather than deliberative. Key inhibiting factors include extreme power asymmetry between the central and regional governments, a less inclusive institutional design, and a hierarchical bureaucratic culture. Despite the presence of local social capital (halibur) and crisis pressures that trigger incidental coordination, the sustainability of collaboration is hampered by structures of fiscal dependency and practices of political patronage. This study concludes that institutional design reforms are needed to be more deliberative and strengthen fiscal autonomy to create substantive collaboration

INTRODUCTION

Decentralization has become the dominant paradigm in global public sector reform, viewed as a vital instrument for deepening democracy and improving public service efficiency (Rondinelli, 1981; World Bank, 2008). In Timor-Leste, a post-conflict nation, decentralization is not merely a matter of administration, but also a state-building strategy to distribute development. The Constitution of the RDTL and Law No. 3/2014 mandate the transformation of districts into autonomous municipalities. The Dili Municipality, as the capital city and center of economic gravity with a population of over 315,000 (GDS, 2022), serves as the central locus in this experiment.

The transition toward autonomy in Dili faces the challenge of wicked problems complex issues such as waste management, clean water, and informal settlements that involve multiple stakeholders and lack a single solution (Head & Alford, 2015). The traditional hierarchical governance paradigm has proven rigid in responding to these dynamics. Limitations in the fiscal capacity and human resources (HR) of the local government demand a shift toward Collaborative Governance. This concept emphasizes the involvement of non-state actors (NGOs, private sector, indigenous communities) in collective decision-making oriented toward consensus (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

The phenomenon of institutional fragmentation is a crucial issue hindering governance effectiveness in Dili. Overlapping authority between the Municipal Authority and central ministries often creates bureaucratic confusion and inefficiency in resource allocation. For instance, regarding drainage infrastructure management, there is often ambiguity regarding responsibility between the national Ministry of Public Works and municipal technical agencies, resulting in a "blame game" when flooding occurs (UNDP, 2018). This condition exacerbates the public service deficit felt directly by the community, eroding public trust in newly formed local government institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social dynamics in Dili are marked by the presence of non-state actors who are very active but often marginalized from formal policy processes. Civil society organizations (NGOs), the Church, and traditional authorities (Lian Nain) possess strong social legitimacy at the grassroots level, yet their involvement in development planning is often ad-hoc or merely ceremonial. This gap between the formal legitimacy of the government and the social legitimacy of non-state actors creates a governance gap that ideally could be filled through structured collaborative mechanisms (da Costa, 2020). Although the urgency for collaboration is high, literature regarding decentralization in Timor-Leste often remains fragmented; focusing on legal-formal aspects (UNDP, 2018) or technical capacity alone (da Costa, 2020), without deeply dissecting the micro-interaction dynamics between actors within a collaborative framework. There is a gap between ideal policy design and the reality of implementation on the ground, which is colored by power asymmetry and a legacy of centralistic culture. This study aims to fill that void by analyzing the collaborative governance process in Dili using the Ansell & Gash (2008) model. The analysis focuses on starting conditions, institutional design, leadership, and

the collaborative process itself, as well as the factors inhibiting or supporting it. The urgency of this research lies in the need to formulate a more inclusive and effective governance strategy for Dili, which can serve as a model for other municipalities in Timor-Leste.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive type. This approach was chosen to deeply explore the meanings, processes, and dynamics of social interaction between actors in their natural context (Creswell, 2014). The research focus is limited to the analysis of the collaborative governance process in decentralization in Dili and the identification of its determinant factors. The research location is the Dili Municipality. Research subjects (informants) were selected using purposive sampling techniques, including: Officials of the Dili Municipal Authority (representing the state), Traditional Leaders/Chefe de Suco (representing the community), Leaders of Local/International NGOs (representing civil society), and Academics from the National University of Timor Lorosae (UNTL).

Data collection techniques include: (1) In-depth Interviews to explore actor perceptions and experiences; (2) Participatory Observation in public meeting forums and service processes; and (3) Documentation of regulations, performance reports, and meeting minutes. Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was tested through source triangulation, comparing government perspectives with those of non-state actors to obtain an objective picture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research results are presented based on the analysis of the four dimensions of the Ansell and Gash (2008) Collaborative Governance model, along with the identification of supporting and inhibiting factors.

1. Starting Conditions

The starting conditions in Dili are characterized by extreme power asymmetry and resource disparity. The Central Government (Ministries) holds full control over the budget and strategic policies, while the Dili Municipal Authority (DMA) possesses formal legitimacy but is fiscally weak. On the other hand, NGOs possess technical and advocacy capacity but rely on donors, whereas traditional leaders possess social legitimacy but lack material resources. According to Ansell and Gash (2008), significant power imbalances can be a major obstacle to initiating genuine collaboration, as weaker parties tend to be skeptical of the process.

Field data indicates a history of distrust. The relationship between the government and NGOs is often colored by suspicion inherited from the past; the government views NGOs as disruptors, while NGOs view the bureaucracy as slow and corrupt. This aligns with findings by Hidayat (2019), who noted that early relationships between the state and civil society in the context of decentralization are often antagonistic before transforming into collaborative ones. In Dili, this transformation has not fully occurred because the collective memory of oppressive centralism still overshadows the perceptions of non-state actors.

Incentives to participate are also transactional. For the community, participation in forums is often driven by the expectation of direct physical project assistance, rather than an awareness of political rights. This inequality creates an uneven playing field before collaboration even begins, where non-state actors feel inferior ("we wear flip-flops, they wear ties") in formal forums. This phenomenon creates a serious psychological barrier to equal dialogue, which is a prerequisite for effective deliberation (Fung, 2006).

2. Institutional Design

De jure, the institutional design for collaboration is available through mechanisms such as the *Konsellu Suco* (Village Council) and public consultations for municipal planning. However, de facto, this design is problematic. Findings show that these forums are often exclusive; invitations are limited to cooperative actors, while critical voices are marginalized. Process transparency is also low, with budget documents being difficult to access or provided at the last minute in non-user-friendly formats. This contradicts the principle of inclusive institutional design emphasized by Emerson et al. (2012) as key to collaborative legitimacy.

The "rules of the game" in these forums reflect top-down consultation rather than collaboration. The government sets the agenda and makes the final decisions, while other actors merely provide non-binding input. This creates "pseudo-participation" (Arnstein, 1969), where physical presence does not correlate with real influence on policy. This design failure leads to "participation fatigue" among the community, who feel their time is wasted on meetings that yield no tangible impact. Furthermore, the absence of clear

horizontal accountability mechanisms in the institutional design makes these forums vulnerable to co-optation by local elites. Without strict rules on how decisions are made and how dissent is managed, collaborative forums often turn into venues for mobilizing political support for incumbent officials rather than spaces for public deliberation (Widianingsih & Morrell, 2019).

3. Leadership

The Ansell & Gash model requires facilitative leadership that is neutral and capable of mediating conflict. In Dili, the government's role appears more often as a "Chairman" controlling the meeting agenda hierarchically, rather than as an empowering facilitator. Public officials tend to be defensive against criticism and reluctant to share decision-making roles. This directive leadership style stifles the creativity and innovation that should emerge from the collaborative process (Chrislip & Larson, 1994).

The research found that the mediation function is often carried out by informal actors, such as Traditional Leaders (Lian Nain) or the Church, who possess cross-group trust capital. The absence of formal facilitative leadership from the state is a major obstacle in building institutional trust. These findings confirm the importance of what Putra (2020) calls a "bridging leader" capable of spanning interest differences between sectors, which is unfortunately still rare in the Dili bureaucracy.

This leadership deficit is exacerbated by the high turnover of officials at the municipal level. Frequent changes in leadership sever the continuity of personal relationships that have been built, forcing the trust-building process to start from scratch repeatedly. This creates uncertainty for non-government collaboration partners and weakens long-term commitment to joint programs.

4. Collaborative Process

The collaborative process in the Dili Municipality has not yet succeeded in forming a sustainable virtuous cycle; instead, it resembles a series of disjointed efforts failing to build long-term momentum. The first element of this cycle, face-to-face dialogue, does occur frequently through various formal forums. However, the quality of such dialogue is low because it is dominated by one-way communication in the form of socialization or transactional project negotiations, rather than serving as a deliberative space to substantively solve shared problems. This failure hinders deep social learning among participants (Head, 2008).

The second element, trust-building, faces serious obstacles due to two main factors: unfulfilled promises and the high turnover of municipal officials. The government's inability to meet small commitments is often the primary killer of trust in the eyes of the community. On the other hand, excessively frequent leadership changes cause trust to be built only personally with specific individual officials, meaning it is never institutionalized into trust in the governance system as a whole.

The third element, shared understanding, also proved weak. Although all actors agree on surface-level symptoms—such as piles of trash or flooding there are sharp differences in defining the root causes. The government tends to view it as a technical issue and a lack of budget, while civil society views it as a governance and corruption issue. Without a shared understanding of the

problem definition, the solutions generated are often partial, fail to touch the root causes, and fail to gain broad support.

Amidst this disjointed cycle, the fourth element, small wins, emerges as the only bright spot. Specific programs like PNDS (Program Nasional Dezenvolvimentu Suku) or community-based cleanliness initiatives have succeeded in creating positive momentum locally. These small successes prove that collaboration is possible if given the right space and resources. However, these successes are often ad-hoc, isolated, and detached from broader municipal strategic planning. Consequently, these small wins have not been successfully scaled up into systemic trust in the city government (Bryson et al., 2015). Positive momentum built at the Suco level often withers when faced with rigid municipal bureaucracy. This creates a paradox where micro-level success does not contribute to macro-level governance improvement, leaving the collaboration cycle at the city level stagnant. An in-depth analysis of this process indicates that collaboration in Dili remains trapped in a very fragile early stage. The existing interaction cycle reinforces public cynicism rather than building new social capital. The absence of effective feedback mechanisms causes the same mistakes to recur, hindering evolution toward a more mature and institutionalized form of collaboration.

Inhibiting and Supporting Factors

Data analysis identified the determinant factors as follows:

Table 1. Inhibiting and Supporting Factors of Collaborative Governance in Dili

Category	Determinant Factor	Description
Inhibiting	Fiscal Dependence	Near 100% dependence on central transfers kills local initiative and horizontal accountability.
	Bureaucratic Culture & Patronage	The logic of political patronage (distribution of projects/positions) contradicts the principles of meritocracy and collaborative transparency.
	HR Capacity	Limited technical ability of local bureaucrats in facilitating complex participatory processes.
Supporting	Crisis Pressure	Disasters (floods, outbreaks) often become policy windows that force sectoral egos to collapse for the sake of emergency cooperation.
	Social Capital (<i>Halibur</i>)	Strong traditional spirit of mutual cooperation (<i>gotong royong</i>) at the <i>Suco</i> level serves as a

		potential basis for bottom-up collaboration.
	Role of Donors	Pressure and prerequisites from international donor agencies force a minimum standard of participation in projects.

Source: Researcher's Processed Primary Data, 2025

Collaboration Amidst the Trap of Centralization The findings of this study confirm that decentralization in Dili remains trapped in what Ribot (2002) calls "decentralization without autonomy." The lack of fiscal autonomy leaves the municipal government with no strong incentive to collaborate with its citizens, as their accountability is directed upward (to the Central Government as the funder). The collaboration that occurs is more of a bureaucratic survival strategy to meet donor requirements or address momentary crises, rather than a long-term governance strategy.

The application of the Ansell & Gash (2008) model shows that without improving the Starting Conditions (specifically power asymmetry), any institutional design will struggle to be effective. The phenomenon in Dili shows that collaborative governance is often co-opted into a tool of legitimacy for decisions that have actually been made centrally. This resonates with the critique by Sørensen and Torfing (2007) that without structural changes in power distribution, governance networks will merely become disguised extensions of the state.

The existence of small wins at the community level indicates that the potential for collaboration is real if given sufficient autonomous space, regardless of the hindering macro structure. The strong social capital of halibur (mutual cooperation) at the Suco level is an invaluable asset not yet optimally utilized by the formal design of decentralization. If institutional designs can be reformed to better accommodate these informal structures, the chances of collaborative success would increase significantly.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that the implementation of collaborative governance in the decentralization process in Dili, Timor-Leste, remains "pseudo-collaboration." Procedurally, collaborative forums have been formed, but substantially, the process is dominated by hierarchical logic and one-way consultation. The main inhibiting factors are structural: acute fiscal dependence, a paternalistic bureaucratic culture, and political patronage practices that erode trust. Supporting factors such as local social capital and external pressure (crisis/donors) provide sporadic opportunities but are not yet sufficient to institutionalize sustainable collaboration.

The theoretical implications of this study enrich the Ansell & Gash model by highlighting that in the context of post-conflict countries with weak institutions, the Starting Conditions variable (power asymmetry) carries a much greater determinant weight than process variables. Strategic recommendations include: (1) The Central Government must accelerate the transfer of real fiscal authority

to municipalities to create local collaboration incentives; (2) Municipal Authorities need to reform the design of consultation forums from mere hearings into deliberative forums with participatory budget allocations; and (3) Non-state actors need to consolidate themselves to improve their bargaining position in collaborative forums.

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