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Decentralized education in Somalia: lessons from East African models

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes decentralized education reforms in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania and derives actionable lessons for Somalia's evolving federal system. Adopting a conceptual, comparative, and narrative review of peer-reviewed literature, government documents, and policy reports, the analysis is organized around administrative, fiscal, and political dimensions of decentralization. Evidence from East Africa indicates that devolution expands access and strengthens accountability when subnational authorities receive clear mandates, predictable intergovernmental transfers, and institutionalized avenues for community participation. However, capacity asymmetries, politicized decision-making, and weak oversight can entrench spatial inequities and erode quality. Somalia's context, fragmented federalism, donor dependence, irregular fiscal flows, and a dominant private sector amid low enrolment, amplifies these risks. The study proposes four priority reforms: transparent, formula-based fiscal equalization to promote equity, clarified federal-state roles to reduce duplication and improve implementation, legally empowered school- and community-level accountability mechanisms, and integration of private providers through standards, routine data reporting, and performance-linked regulation. It further argues that digital public infrastructure can bolster monitoring, financial transparency, and learning assessment where administrative capacity is thin. The paper contributes to education governance in fragile settings by translating regional experience into a sequenced, context-sensitive reform agenda for Somalia.

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Introduction

Decentralized education in East Africa has emerged as a significant trend aimed at enhancing the quality and accessibility of education. This movement towards decentralization is often rooted in the broader context of the region's socio-economic conditions, democratic aspirations, and the need for enhanced community involvement in school governance.

The fundamental premise of decentralizing education in East Africa is to transfer decision-making authority from central governments to local entities, leading to more tailored educational solutions that reflect the needs of local communities. This approach resonates with a global shift towards local governance structures that empower communities. For instance, the South African experience illustrates the emphasis on community involvement and self-management following the enactment of the South African Schools Act in 1996, which can serve as a comparative model for East Africa (Heystek, 2011). In East Africa, similar trends are observed as governments and educational institutions aim to create more responsive educational frameworks by embedding local governance in educational policy-making (Kiswanto et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the role of decentralized education is crucial in addressing the unique challenges faced by various subgroups within East African societies, such as refugees and pastoral communities. A study examining social emotional learning interventions among refugees in East Africa highlights the complexities related to cultural dynamics and educational implementation, underscoring the necessity of

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localized decision-making processes tailored to diverse cultural contexts (Dalrymple, 2023). Additionally, a grounded theory study focusing on pastoral communities affirms the need for educational strategies that resonate with their distinct lifestyles, further emphasizing cultural alignment in educational curricula (Keiper & Rugira, 2015).

Moreover, decentralized education is posited as an effective means of enhancing educational equity and accessibility. Evidence suggests that local administrations are often better poised to address educational disparities and allocate resources more effectively compared to centralized systems (Katsakioris, 2021). This assertion is supported by numerous studies indicating that decentralization in education can enhance school governance, ultimately leading to improved student outcomes and community satisfaction (Edwards & DeMatthews, 2014). The trend towards decentralization, however, demands strong political commitment and leadership to navigate the complexities inherent in transitioning from centralized to decentralized systems effectively (Yarim, 2022).

Despite these promising developments, Somalia faces distinct challenges. Years of civil conflict have significantly disrupted governance structures and hindered the implementation of national education policies. The resulting fragmentation has created severe regional disparities, inconsistent standards, and a heavily privatized education sector that operates with limited oversight. Developing a decentralized education system within the Somali federal government involves navigating complex social, political, and educational factors. This approach is crucial for Somalia, given its history of fragmentation, as it aims to create a cohesive and resilient educational framework that addresses the diverse needs of its population.

Collaborative leadership and governance are crucial in shaping education systems, particularly in fragile states like Somalia. Effective practices are essential for implementing decentralized education. This leadership approach involves engaging multiple stakeholders—government, civil society, and local communities—in decision-making, which fosters a more tailored educational experience and empowers local communities to participate in governance. This involvement enhances both ownership and accountability in education (Bincof, 2023).

This study aims to analyze decentralized education practices in Somalia, comparing them with those in other East African countries to identify key challenges and opportunities. The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform policymakers and educators about effective strategies for improving educational access and quality in Somalia. Understanding the unique barriers and potential strategies can provide valuable insights for enhancing educational outcomes.

Although decentralization has been widely studied in African contexts, there is limited scholarship that systematically compares East African decentralization models with Somalia's evolving federal education system. Most existing studies on Somalia focus on post-conflict reconstruction or governance more broadly, leaving a gap in understanding how regional experiences in education governance can inform Somalia's fragile context.

This study contributes by situating Somalia's educational decentralization within a comparative East African framework, analyzing lessons from Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. In doing so, it offers both theoretical insights into decentralization in fragile states and practical recommendations for Somalia's policymakers.

To guide this inquiry, the research is organized around three questions. First, what lessons from Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania's decentralization models are most relevant to Somalia's education governance? Second, how can Somalia adapt these models given its unique challenges, including fragmented federalism, donor dependency, and reliance on private providers? Finally, what implications do these comparative insights hold for building a more equitable and sustainable education system in Somalia?

Theoretical framework

The theoretical foundations for decentralized education in Africa are informed by governance, development, and educational theories that emphasize local empowerment, participatory accountability, and equity in resource allocation. Within the African context—where many countries are characterized by post-conflict recovery, regional disparities, and centralized legacies—decentralization is often viewed as

both a reform tool and a democratizing strategy to improve service delivery and reduce educational inequalities.

A central argument in decentralization theory is that shifting authority closer to communities strengthens ownership and responsiveness. Liu and Li (2024), for example, investigated community empowerment in rural China through surveys and case-based analysis, finding that devolved authority enhanced citizen participation and accountability. While their context differs from East Africa, their findings provide relevant insights into how empowerment mechanisms can increase responsiveness in local governance structures. Similarly, Kamat (2000) argues that decentralization helps dismantle colonial-era, top-down bureaucracies that often alienate citizens from decision-making. Kamat draws on historical and institutional analyses of education governance in South Asia to substantiate this claim, showing how decentralization created space for community-driven reforms. These insights highlight that empowering local actors can transform governance structures into more inclusive and accountable systems, a principle highly relevant to Somalia.

Another critical dimension of decentralization is the distribution of financial and material resources across regions. Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006) demonstrate through cross-national analysis that fiscal decentralization can promote efficiency but may also exacerbate inequalities without clear equity safeguards. In the East African context, Kenya's devolution illustrates both the promise and the risks: while fiscal transfers enabled counties to expand access to education, resource disparities between wealthier and poorer counties persisted (Muwonge et al., 2022). These findings underscore that without transparent allocation mechanisms, decentralization may deepen regional inequalities rather than reduce them. For Somalia, this highlights the importance of designing equitable resource distribution frameworks to ensure balanced access to education across its diverse federal member states.

A third pillar of decentralization theory is the involvement of citizens in governance processes. Manor (1999) and Saito (2011) provide evidence from South Asia and Uganda respectively, showing that participatory structures such as local councils and school management committees increase accountability, improve service delivery, and foster a sense of community ownership. In Tanzania, decentralization by devolution expanded opportunities for citizen participation, though bureaucratic inefficiencies and limited fiscal autonomy constrained effectiveness (Mollel & Tollenaar, 2013). These findings illustrate that participatory mechanisms are most effective when coupled with sufficient resources and genuine decision-making power. For Somalia, strengthening community participation in education governance will be essential to increase legitimacy and ensure that policies reflect local needs.

Taken together, these three dimensions provide a theoretical foundation for analyzing Somalia's decentralization process. They illustrate how empowerment, equity, and participation have been applied in other contexts, and highlight the potential benefits and risks for fragile and post-conflict states such as Somalia.

Models of decentralization in the african context

Decentralization in African education systems typically manifests in three interrelated forms: administrative, fiscal, and political.

Administrative decentralization involves transferring authority over routine operations—such as curriculum implementation, teacher deployment, and school planning—to regional or district-level authorities. In Uganda, for example, administrative decentralization since the 1990s has given local councils control over public education services.

Fiscal decentralization, which allows local governments to manage budgets and determine spending priorities, is central to educational efficiency. In Tanzania, Kazungu and Mabula (2013), using panel data from 94 local government authorities, find that higher local shares of total public expenditure are associated with increased education spending and improvements in the quality of primary education services. Their results indicate that when subnational governments receive greater control over fiscal resources, they can expand access and enhance service delivery, but outcomes remain uneven across districts. Combined with evidence from Kenya and Uganda that links devolved funding to expanded access yet persistent regional disparities (Cilliers et al., 2022; Muwonge et al., 2022; Twinomujuni et al., 2023), these findings suggest that fiscal decentralization can strengthen local governance while also risking deeper

inequalities if not accompanied by transparent, equity-oriented transfer formulas and robust oversight mechanisms.

Political decentralization entails involving local elected officials, school boards, and civil society actors in education policymaking. This model is seen in Tanzania's decentralization by devolution (DbD) policy, where district-level authorities influence education priorities. Komba (2017) notes that political decentralization in Africa promotes legitimacy and community buy-in, though it must be coupled with mechanisms to prevent elite capture and ensure accountability to the broader public.

In the East African context, decentralization has significantly shaped the delivery of education services. Kenya's 2010 Constitution introduced devolution, which allocated resources and authority to county governments, thereby enhancing local responsibility and expanding access to education (Muwonge et al., 2022). Uganda's model of administrative decentralization empowered district councils to oversee education, strengthening accountability and promoting community participation in school governance (Saito, 2011; Twinomujuni et al., 2023). Tanzania's adoption of decentralization by devolution (DbD) increased opportunities for citizen engagement in education decision-making, although it also exposed the limitations of constrained fiscal autonomy and persistent central oversight (Mollel & Tollenaar, 2013). These experiences demonstrate how theoretical dimensions of empowerment, equity, and participation are applied in practice and provide comparative insights that are highly relevant for Somalia's federal education system.

Emerging trends and african realities

Technological innovations are beginning to shape decentralization and education governance debates. Global and regional reports highlight how digital systems can support more transparent service delivery, strengthen data collection, and improve accountability in fragile and decentralized settings (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2023; World Bank, 2020). In Somalia's urban education landscape, where private and semi-formal providers dominate, such tools could help track enrolment, finance, and performance across providers in a more consistent way.

At the same time, comparative work on decentralization emphasises that reforms must be tailored to specific political and institutional contexts rather than imported wholesale (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006; Manor, 1999; Saito, 2011). For Somalia, this means that digital and governance innovations need to be embedded in its evolving federal arrangements and uneven administrative capacities, rather than treated as purely technical fixes.

Technological innovations is a mechanism that can reinforce the governance structures emphasized by decentralization theory. In fragile contexts such as Somalia, where institutional trust is weak and fiscal oversight remains limited, digital platforms and blockchain-based systems can serve as tools to strengthen accountability and transparency (World Bank, 2020). By supporting accurate data collection, enabling more transparent fiscal transfers, and facilitating participatory decision-making, such innovations may complement broader governance reforms and enhance the effectiveness of decentralized education (UNESCO, 2023).

Methodology

This study employs a conceptual comparative and narrative review design, synthesizing decentralization practices in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania to draw implications for Somalia. The approach is grounded in decentralization and participatory governance theories.

Data were drawn exclusively from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, government documents, and international agency publications. Literature was identified through systematic searches in major databases (Scopus, JSTOR, Google Scholar) using keywords such as decentralized education, East Africa, Somalia, and education governance. Publications from 2000 to 2024 were included if directly relevant; works outside this scope were excluded. The analysis followed a three-dimension framework, administrative, fiscal, and political decentralization, to compare East African cases and assess their applicability to Somalia's federal context.

This review is deliberately focused on decentralized education experiences in East Africa, particularly Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, and their relevance for Somalia's federal education system.

Limitation of the study is the absence of primary data, reliance on secondary interpretations, and limited generalizability beyond Somalia. These constraints highlight the need for future empirical studies involving Somali stakeholders.

Decentralized education in East Africa: Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania experiences

The forms of decentralization in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania display unique characteristics that reflect each nation's governance framework, historical background, and educational policies. Recognizing these distinctions is vital for evaluating the effectiveness and consequences of decentralized education systems in the region.

In Kenya, the predominant form of decentralization is devolution. The 2010 Constitution established a framework for devolved governance, aiming to transfer powers and resources from the national government to 47 county governments. This devolution seeks to enhance local governance, improve service delivery, and ensure that educational policies cater to the diverse needs of communities (Atuoye et al., 2020). For example, the implementation of the Free Primary Education (FPE) policy resulted in increased enrollment rates as local authorities became more capable of addressing educational demands (Rwiza, 2014). Nonetheless, challenges persist, including disparities in resource distribution and the ability of county governments to effectively manage educational resources, which may hinder the anticipated benefits of devolution (Cilliers et al., 2022).

Uganda utilizes a form of administrative decentralization, which has been operational since the mid-1990s. This system grants local governments significant authority over public service management, including education. Local councils are tasked with executing educational policies and managing resources at the district level (Verbeke et al., 2009). The focus on community involvement in educational governance has fostered greater accountability and responsiveness to local needs (Nalumenya et al., 2023). However, the effectiveness of this administrative decentralization faces challenges such as inconsistent policy implementation across districts and insufficient capacity and resources at the local government level to manage educational services effectively (Verbeke et al., 2009).

In Tanzania, the model known as decentralization by devolution (DbD) has been adopted, which aims to transfer decision-making authority to local government authorities while maintaining some central control (Mollel & Tollenaar, 2013). This approach, initiated in the 1990s, was designed to enhance service delivery efficiency and increase local participation in education management. Local governments in Tanzania are responsible for administering primary and secondary education, allowing for decision-making that is tailored to community needs (Matete, 2022). However, challenges remain, including bureaucratic inefficiencies, insufficient financial resources at local levels, and the influence of centralized governance structures that can limit local authority autonomy (Cilliers et al., 2022; Mollel & Tollenaar, 2013).

The experiences of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania demonstrate both the potential and the limitations of decentralized education systems in East Africa. While Somalia's federal arrangement is still evolving, comparative insights highlight important opportunities and risks.

In Kenya, the 2010 Constitution introduced devolution, transferring resources and authority to 47 counties. This facilitated greater local participation and increased enrollment, though resource disparities and political interference remain. Uganda pursued administrative decentralization through district councils, improving accountability but struggling with uneven implementation and capacity gaps. Tanzania adopted decentralization by devolution (DbD), expanding vocational education and community participation, yet fiscal dependency and bureaucratic inefficiencies limited its effectiveness.

To highlight these similarities and contrasts, [Table 1](#), summarizing forms of decentralization, key achievements, challenges, and lessons for Somalia. This comparative synthesis underscores transferable practices, such as Kenya's fiscal devolution and Uganda's community accountability mechanisms, while also cautioning against pitfalls like uneven resource allocation and bureaucratic fragmentation.

For Somalia, these lessons are particularly relevant. Its federal system faces fragmented authority, limited fiscal transfers, and heavy reliance on private providers. By critically engaging with East African

Table 1. Comparative analysis of decentralized education in East Africa and Lessons for Somalia.

Country	Form of decentralization	Key achievements	Major challenges	Lessons for Somalia
<i>Kenya</i>	Devolution (2010 Constitution) – authority and resources devolved to 47 counties	Increased enrollment through Free Primary Education; enhanced community participation at county level; education receives ~17% of national budget	Resource disparities between counties; political interference; strain on quality due to high numbers	Fiscal transfers can expand access, but Somalia must ensure equitable distribution and safeguard against political capture
<i>Uganda</i>	Administrative decentralization – district councils manage education services	Improved accountability through local councils; responsiveness to community needs; literacy rate ~81%	Uneven implementation; weak administrative capacity; insufficient resources	Somalia could adapt local council involvement for accountability but must first invest in training and capacity building
<i>Tanzania</i>	Decentralization by devolution (DbD) – local governments oversee education	Expansion of vocational training; increased community participation; literacy rate ~82%	Bureaucratic inefficiencies; limited fiscal autonomy; persistent central control	Highlights importance of genuine autonomy and streamlined administration within Somalia's federal framework
<i>Somalia</i>	Federal decentralization (2012 Provisional Constitution) – shared responsibility between Federal Government and Member States	Emerging federal/state structures; localized service delivery in some regions; private sector plays major role	Gross enrollment ratio ~21% (2023); donor dependency; weak fiscal transfers; reliance on private providers	Somalia must balance public–private roles, establish transparent fiscal frameworks, and harmonize federal–state responsibilities

models, Somalia may adapt strategies that strengthen transparency, local participation, and equitable access, while avoiding structural weaknesses evident in neighbouring systems.

Achievements and challenges

The decentralized education systems in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania have yielded a range of achievements and challenges, reflecting the complexities inherent in local governance and community engagement in educational provision.

In Kenya, the government has made significant strides through the decentralization of educational funding via initiatives such as the Constituency Development Fund (CDF), which aims to improve local service delivery and facilitate citizen participation (Mati & Ongore, 2020). This reform has notably led to an increase in enrollment rates, particularly as part of free primary education policies (Bulut & Abdow, 2018). Kenya stands out as a leading performer in East Africa, ranking 7th in Africa and 95th globally (Business Insider Africa, 2024), thanks to substantial government investment in education, which allocates about 17.58% of the national budget. This funding has resulted in improved literacy rates, enhanced school infrastructure, and expanded access to higher education. However, challenges persist, including disparities in resource allocation and political manipulation of local governance structures, which occasionally detract from educational objectives (Wagana et al., 2016). Moreover, the pressure of increased student numbers without corresponding increases in resources has strained teachers and instructional materials, thereby negatively impacting educational quality (Lawrence & Kinemo, 2019).

Uganda's decentralized education system reflects proactive engagement of local communities in school governance, particularly through Local Council structures. This system has allowed for more responsive educational services tailored to local needs (Frumence et al., 2013). Uganda, with a respectable literacy rate of 81%, ranks 156th globally (World Population Review, 2024). However, ongoing issues such as inconsistent implementation of policy at local levels and varying local government capacities to manage educational resources effectively continue to pose significant barriers to success. The lack of adequate training and capacity building for local education officials further complicates the realization of decentralization benefits (Nnunduma & Hussein, 2023).

Tanzania, similar to its neighbors, initiated the decentralization of education to enhance local management and community participation. Programs like the Secondary Education Development Program (SEDP) aimed to empower local authorities and communities to take ownership of educational initiatives

(Chaula & Mhando, 2023). Tanzania ranks 149th globally with an 82% literacy rate (World Population Review, 2024) and has invested significantly in vocational training and educational infrastructure, contributing to gradual academic improvements. Despite these intentions, Tanzania faces challenges linked to bureaucratic inefficiencies and the persistent influence of central government control over local educational matters. Studies suggest that while decentralization has brought some improvements—such as increased community involvement—political interference and insufficient local capacity hinder potential advancements in educational quality and accountability (Kazungu & Mabula, 2013; Saidi et al., 2019). Furthermore, inadequate financial resources at the local government level often impede the successful implementation of decentralized education programs (Mollel & Tollenaar, 2013).

Moreover, community participation has been a focal point for Tanzanian educational reform, but there exists a gap between policy and actual community engagement in service delivery. Without robust mechanisms for sustaining community interest and participation, many initiatives fail to meet their targets (Nnunduma & Hussein, 2023). Additionally, local governments struggle with financial autonomy, often facing constraints that limit their ability to enact meaningful changes in educational practices (Bulut & Abdow, 2018). Therefore, the implications of decentralized education systems in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania reveal notable improvements in educational quality, such as increased enrollment rates in Kenya under the Free Primary Education policy, enhanced accountability in Uganda, and greater community participation in Tanzania. However, challenges persist, including resource disparities and local government capacity issues in Kenya, inconsistent policy implementation and inadequate training in Uganda, and bureaucratic inefficiencies and financial constraints in Tanzania, which hinder the full realization of decentralization benefits.

Decentralized education practices in Somalia

The evolution of Somalia's educational landscape has been shaped by prolonged conflict, governance fragmentation, and the emergence of a federal political system. Since the collapse of the central government in 1991, Somalia's education system has become a tapestry of informal, community-based, and private sector-led initiatives. This fragmentation prompted a natural shift toward decentralized education, which has only recently begun to be formalized under Somalia's evolving federal governance framework (Hassan, 2022; Mohamed, 2024).

Following the establishment of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) in 2012, efforts to structure educational decentralization have intensified. The Provisional Constitution designates education as a concurrent responsibility of federal and state governments, promoting a governance model that distributes authority across various administrative layers (Hassan, 2022). Under this framework, the Federal Ministry of Education, Culture, and Higher Education (MOECHE) leads national education policy development, curriculum design, and examination standards, while Federal Member States (FMS) like Galmudug, Hirshabelle, Jubbaland, and South West handle local implementation and service delivery.

Somalia's decentralized education model features stark regional disparities. While most southern and central FMS adhere to a nationally standardized curriculum and participate in the federal unified secondary certificate examinations, regions such as Puntland and Somaliland retain autonomous systems. Puntland collaborates with the federal government under a memorandum of understanding but continues to operate with its own curriculum and examination systems. Somaliland, which self-declared independence in 1991, maintains complete control over its education sector, including curriculum, examinations, and private sector regulation (Auf, 2024).

Private education plays a dominant role in Somalia's educational ecosystem. In urban centers like Mogadishu, private institutions constitute the majority of service providers. It is estimated that the private sector accommodates a significant proportion of primary and secondary students and almost entirely dominates higher education. For instance, Mogadishu alone is home to around 40 private universities, all of which operate independently of direct government funding (Abdullahi, 2023). This reliance on private provision arises from the limited capacity of public education institutions, particularly in terms of infrastructure, teacher availability, and financial sustainability.

Despite the structured decentralization policies, Somalia faces substantial implementation challenges. One of the key issues is fiscal decentralization. While education responsibilities have been devolved, the

mechanisms for resource allocation remain unclear. Budgetary transfers from the federal to state levels are inconsistent and often donor-dependent, undermining the ability of state ministries to plan and execute educational programs effectively (Hassan, 2022). This ambiguity in financial governance has hindered the expansion of public education and constrained efforts to improve equity across regions.

Statistical indicators highlight the depth of the crisis. As of 2023, the gross enrollment ratio (GER) for primary education stood at approximately 21.2%, one of the lowest in the world (The Global Economy, 2023). Projections for 2024 indicate that between 3.6 and 4.9 million school-aged children in Somalia will lack access to formal education (ReliefWeb, 2024). These figures underscore not only the scale of the access challenge but also the urgent need for systemic reforms in both educational governance and financing.

Key insights and strategies

Effective decentralization depends on strong local governance structures capable of managing educational resources and implementing policies that respond to community needs. Evidence from East Africa shows that when local governments are given clearer mandates and some control over resources, they can become more responsive to citizens and improve service delivery in education and other sectors (Cilliers et al., 2022; Twinomujuni et al., 2023; Wagana et al., 2016). For Somalia, this suggests that gradually strengthening state-level ministries and district authorities, alongside clearer intergovernmental fiscal arrangements, could enhance educational governance, provided reforms are adapted to the country's fragile institutional landscape and uneven capacities (Bincof, 2023; Hassan, 2022).

Community participation is another critical factor. Studies from Uganda and Tanzania show that involving local councils, school committees, and community structures in school governance can strengthen accountability and make services more responsive to local priorities (Komba, 2017; Nkunduma & Hussein, 2023; Saito, 2011). Similar patterns are observed where decentralization reforms encourage local engagement but are constrained by weak capacity and limited resources (Mollel & Tollenaar, 2013). In Somalia, fostering participation through school management committees or parent-teacher associations could support local ownership and improve the responsiveness of education services, though such mechanisms would need adequate authority, data, and funding to be effective.

Training and capacity building remain essential for effective decentralization. Schotgues (2022) emphasize that capacity-building initiatives not only strengthen administrative efficiency but also enhance community engagement in education governance. For Somalia, investing in the skills of local education officials and administrators may be a necessary foundation for ensuring that decentralization improves service delivery.

Equitable resource allocation is also central. Evidence from Tanzania and Kenya shows that, while fiscal decentralization can increase education spending and expand access, it also risks widening gaps between better-resourced and poorer areas when transfer mechanisms are weak or politicised (Bulut & Abdow, 2018; Kazungu & Mabula, 2013; Wagana et al., 2016). More generally, Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006) argue that fiscal decentralization improves efficiency only when accompanied by clear equity safeguards. For Somalia, where intergovernmental transfers remain limited and uneven, this underscores the need for transparent, rule-based allocation formulas that promote inclusivity and protect disadvantaged regions (Hassan, 2022).

Policy consistency and coherence are equally important. Studies of decentralization in Uganda and Tanzania show that reforms are most effective when the division of responsibilities between central and local governments is clearly defined, supported by predictable funding, and backed by credible oversight; otherwise overlapping mandates and recentralising tendencies undermine local initiative (Lawrence & Kinemo, 2019; Mollel & Tollenaar, 2013). In Somalia, this may mean national frameworks that set core standards and minimum service norms while allowing Federal Member States to adapt implementation to local conditions, underpinned by strong accountability mechanisms at both federal and state levels.

Flexibility is a further lesson. Comparative work on decentralization emphasises that rigid, one-size-fits-all models often exacerbate existing challenges, whereas adaptable arrangements allow for context-sensitive solutions and gradual institutional learning (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006; Kamat, 2000). For

Somalia, decentralization policies should therefore be flexible enough to account for socio-political complexity and regional diversity, including periodic review of roles, transfer formulas, and accountability mechanisms as institutions and capacities evolve.

Continuous monitoring and evaluation are vital for adaptive learning in decentralized systems. Evidence from East Africa suggests that local governments and education managers can improve outcomes when they receive timely data on performance and are held accountable for results (Cilliers et al., 2022; Twinomujuni et al., 2023). Broader work on decentralization also emphasises the importance of information flows and feedback mechanisms for making local governance more responsive and effective (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006; Saito, 2011). For Somalia, this implies that decentralization reforms should be accompanied by robust evaluation and reporting systems that generate reliable data on enrolment, learning, and financing, and that this evidence should be used for incremental adjustments at both federal and state levels (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2020).

Finally, the private sector already plays a complementary role in education provision in Somalia, particularly in urban areas where private schools and universities dominate the supply of services (Abdullahi, 2023; Auf, 2024). Rather than treating these providers as entirely separate from the public system, decentralization reforms could bring them into a more coherent governance framework through clear registration, quality standards, and routine data reporting, while maintaining government responsibility for equity and oversight. Strategic partnerships with private institutions can thus help broaden access and improve quality, provided that regulation focuses on protecting learners and reducing regional disparities.

Conclusion

This study has examined decentralized education in East Africa, focusing on Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, and considered the relevance of their experiences for Somalia's evolving federal education system. By employing a conceptual comparative and narrative review design, the paper has highlighted both transferable practices and context-specific challenges.

The analysis contributes to decentralization and education governance literature by extending comparative insights to fragile and post-conflict settings. It demonstrates that while theories of local empowerment, equitable resource allocation, and participatory governance hold explanatory power, their application in Somalia requires adaptation to the realities of weak institutions and donor dependence.

The findings underscore that Somalia can benefit from lessons in fiscal devolution (as seen in Kenya), community accountability (Uganda), and participatory governance (Tanzania). However, these models also reveal risks—such as resource disparities, political interference, and bureaucratic inefficiencies—that Somalia must actively avoid. A balanced approach that harmonizes federal and state responsibilities, strengthens fiscal transfers, and formalizes the role of private actors is essential for building a more equitable education system.

This study relied on secondary sources and conceptual comparison, which provides important but limited insights. Future research should incorporate primary empirical data through fieldwork, interviews, and stakeholder engagement within Somalia. Such studies would offer a more nuanced understanding of local dynamics, improve contextual grounding, and test the applicability of comparative models in practice.

Somalia's education system faces profound structural challenges, regional lessons from East Africa provide a valuable foundation for designing reforms that are both context-sensitive and forward-looking.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Mohamed Yusuf Adan**: Writing – review & editing; **Said Abubakar Ahmed**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Said Abubakar Ahmed is a Somali scholar in the field of education and curriculum studies. He is a Professor and currently serves as the Dean of Postgraduate Program & Research at Mogadishu University, he has made contributions to the advancement of Somalia's education sector, particularly in curriculum development, teacher training. He has authored and co-authored numerous scholarly publications that focus on educational policy, pedagogy, and institutional development.

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