

Decentralization, Governance, and Rural Change

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the spatial impacts of decentralization on rural service delivery and the evolving geography of rural economies in the context of globalization and agro-industrial transformation. The study was guided by two research questions: (i) how decentralization influences the spatial distribution and accessibility of public services in rural areas, and (ii) how globalization and agro-industrialization reshape rural economic geographies. A qualitative meta-synthesis and integrative conceptual review design was adopted, drawing on ten recent peer-reviewed journal articles (2014–2023) in political geography, rural studies, and development studies. Data were analyzed through thematic synthesis and comparative interpretation of cross-contextual findings. The findings reveal that decentralization enhances service delivery responsiveness, spatial accessibility, and local participation where fiscal autonomy, institutional capacity, and accountability mechanisms are strong. However, significant territorial disparities persist, as regions with limited administrative capacity and weak economic bases experience constrained service provision, reinforcing uneven spatial development. Furthermore, globalization and agro-industrial transformation have reconfigured rural economies through integration into global value chains, the emergence of agro-industrial clusters, and the expansion of rural–urban linkages. These processes have generated hybrid rural economies characterized by diversification, commercialization, and increased connectivity, but have also intensified socio-spatial inequalities and marginalized resource-poor regions. The study concludes that decentralization and globalization operate as interconnected multi-scalar processes that reshape rural governance and economic systems in uneven ways. Effective policy interventions require strengthening local institutional capacity, promoting spatial equity, and ensuring inclusive integration of rural areas into global economic systems.

Key words: Decentralization, Rural Service Delivery, Globalization, Agro-Industrialization, Spatial Inequality, Rural Economic Geography.

INTRODUCTION

Background Information

Globally, decentralization has emerged as a prominent new governance paradigm aimed at strengthening democratic accountability, public service delivery, and resolving spatial disparities in development outcomes. It comprises a spatial rearrangement of state authority, with political, administrative, and fiscal functions shifting from central governments to sub-national territorial units such as regions, counties, and municipalities (Rondinelli *et al.*, 1989; Faguet, 2014). This spatial shift of governance functions profoundly alters the geography of public service delivery, territorial governance, and state society relations. Empirical research shows that decentralization can improve service delivery responsiveness and local participation; however, its spatial effects are highly uneven due to disparities in institutional capacity, fiscal autonomy, political dynamics, and territorial contexts, resulting in substantial disparities in outcomes across regions and communities (Agrawal & Ribot, 1999; Crook & Manor, 1998; Smoke, 2015).

Rural areas, particularly those in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America, continue to face significant spatial disparities in access to healthcare, education, infrastructure, and agricultural extension services, reflecting

persistent center-periphery development patterns and uneven territorial development (Faguet, 2014; Smoke, 2015). As a result, decentralization is increasingly viewed as a spatial restructuring process that yields variable territorial development results rather than uniform gains in service delivery. Globalization and agro-industrial revolution have radically altered rural economic landscapes. Globalization has accelerated rural regions' integration into global value chains, transnational agrifood systems, and international commodity markets, resulting in considerable transformation of agrarian economies, land use patterns, and rural livelihoods (Woods, 2007; Reardon and Barrett, 2000).

Agro-industrialization, defined as the vertical and horizontal integration of agricultural production with processing, distribution, and agribusiness sectors, has resulted in new spatial arrangements for rural production, such as agro-industrial clusters, contract farming systems, and logistics corridors that connect rural hinterlands to urban and global markets (Reardon *et al.*, 2009; Robinson, 2018). These changes have transformed rural areas into hybrid socioeconomic landscapes typified by commercial agriculture, rural industrialization, labor migration, and increased rural-urban links (Woods, 2011; Barcus *et al.*, 2022). However, globalization has exacerbated spatial inequalities by integrating some rural regions while marginalizing others, reinforcing uneven territorial development and socio-spatial differentiation, which can lead to disparities in access to resources, economic opportunities, and social services (Woods, 2011; Robinson, 2018).

This paper examines the spatial impacts of decentralization and the evolving geography of rural economies under globalization and agro-industrial transformation. Specifically, it addresses two research questions: (i) What are the spatial impacts of decentralization policies on service delivery in rural areas? and (ii) How is rural economic geography evolving under globalization and agro-industrial transformation? Therefore, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how governance reforms and global economic processes jointly shape spatial development trajectories in rural regions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Decentralization and Spatial Service Delivery

Decentralization is widely framed as a governance reform intended to enhance efficiency, accountability, and equity in public service delivery (Faguet, 2014; Smoke, 2015). From a geographical perspective, it constitutes a territorial restructuring of state power that reconfigures spatial patterns of resource allocation and service accessibility (Rodríguez-Pose & Ezcurra, 2011). However, the debate over whether decentralization reliably improves service delivery remains unresolved, underscoring the importance of context and the need for further rigorous investigation.

Theoretical Foundations: Spatial Equity and Territorial Governance

Fiscal federalism theory posits that local governments are better positioned to deliver services efficiently due to proximity to local needs (Oates, 2005). Yet, this efficiency argument has been challenged on both empirical and conceptual grounds. Political geography scholarship argues that decentralization is embedded within historically uneven territorial structures, meaning that local governments do not operate on a level playing field (Rodríguez-Pose & Gill, 2003). Critically, Agrawal and Ribot (1999) question whether decentralization genuinely transfers power to local populations or merely reassigns authority to local elites. Similarly, Crook and Manor (1998) demonstrate that decentralization may reinforce patronage networks in contexts where democratic institutions are weak. This raises a fundamental tension: does decentralization democratize governance, or does it re-territorialize existing power inequalities?

Empirical Evidence: Improvements in Rural Service Accessibility

Empirical evidence on decentralization outcomes is mixed and often contradictory. While studies from Ethiopia show improvements in agricultural extension and input access (Kosec & Mogue, 2016), other research highlights limited or uneven gains, particularly in capital-intensive sectors. In Kenya, devolution has improved healthcare access and participatory governance (Kate, 2023). However, Sirite *et al.* (2025) note persistent inefficiencies, including delayed fiscal transfers and bureaucratic fragmentation. This suggests that

improvements in service delivery may reflect incremental administrative adjustments rather than structural transformation. Moreover, some scholars argue that observed improvements may be overstated due to methodological limitations, including reliance on aggregate indicators that obscure intra-regional inequalities. Thus, the empirical record does not unequivocally support the effectiveness of decentralization.

Spatial Inequality and Institutional Capacity

A central debate concerns whether decentralization reduces or exacerbates spatial inequality. While proponents argue that localized governance enhances equity, Rodríguez-Pose and Ezcurra (2011) provide evidence that fiscal decentralization often increases regional disparities in the absence of strong redistributive systems. This contradiction reflects a deeper structural issue: decentralization assumes that local governments have sufficient capacity to manage devolved responsibilities. In practice, however, many rural regions lack the administrative, financial, and technical resources required to deliver services effectively (Smoke, 2015). Consequently, decentralization may institutionalize uneven development by transferring responsibilities without commensurate capacity.

Synthesis: Decentralization as a Politically Contested Spatial Process

Rather than a universally beneficial reform, decentralization emerges as a politically contingent and spatially uneven process. Three critical insights arise: its effectiveness is conditional upon institutional capacity and accountability mechanisms; It can simultaneously improve service delivery and deepen territorial inequalities and it redistributes power, often reproducing local hierarchies. Thus, decentralization should be understood not as a technical reform, but as a reconfiguration of spatial power relations with inherently uneven outcomes.

Rural Economic Geography under Globalization and Agro-Industrial Transformation

Globalization has transformed rural areas from relatively isolated agrarian spaces into components of multi-scalar economic networks (Woods, 2007, 2011). This transformation is driven by global value chains, agro-industrialization, and financialization.

Global Value Chains and Spatial Reconfiguration.

Integration into global value chains (GVCs) is often presented as a pathway to rural development through increased productivity and market access (Reardon & Barrett, 2000). However, this optimistic narrative is increasingly challenged. Neilson *et al.* (2014) argue that GVCs are characterized by asymmetric power relations, where multinational corporations exert control over pricing, standards, and market access. As a result, smallholders frequently occupy subordinate positions, capturing limited value while bearing production risks. This raises a key contradiction: while GVC integration promises inclusion, it often produces selective incorporation, benefiting well-capitalized producers while excluding marginal farmers. Therefore, globalization does not simply integrate rural areas rather it stratifies them.

Agro-Industrialization and Rural Transformation

Agro-industrialization is associated with rural diversification, employment creation, and infrastructural development (Barcus *et al.*, 2022). However, critical perspectives highlight its dependency-creating tendencies. Contract farming, for instance, is frequently framed as a mechanism for integrating smallholders into global markets. Yet, it often shifts risk onto farmers while concentrating profits within agribusiness firms. This dynamic reflects what some scholars describe as “adverse incorporation”, where participation in markets does not translate into equitable benefits. Furthermore, the spatial concentration of agro-industrial clusters raises concerns about uneven regional development, as investment tends to favor already accessible and productive regions.

Socio-Spatial Differentiation and Environmental Change

Agro-industrial expansion is also associated with significant environmental trade-offs. While it can enhance productivity, it often contributes to deforestation, biodiversity loss, and water stress (Robinson, 2018). A growing debate concerns whether sustainability standards and certification schemes mitigate or reinforce

inequalities. While they promote environmentally responsible practices, they may also exclude smallholders who lack the resources to comply. Thus, environmental governance becomes another mechanism of differentiation within rural economies.

Synthesis: A Multi-Scalar Rural Transformation

Rural economic geography is increasingly: networked through global value chains; hybrid through diversified livelihoods and uneven due to differential integration. These dynamics produce complex rural landscapes characterized by both opportunity and marginalization. Consequently, rural spaces are not simply transformed rather they are restructured into differentiated socio-economic landscapes shaped by power, access, and scale.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative meta-synthesis and integrative systematic review design to examine the spatial impacts of decentralization and the transformation of rural economic geographies under globalization and agro-industrialization. The approach is appropriate for synthesizing theoretically and empirically diverse studies across political geography, rural studies, and development research, where phenomena are inherently multi-scalar, context-dependent, and analytically complex (Faguet, 2014; Kosec & Mogues, 2016). To develop a conceptually integrated and spatially grounded understanding of governance reforms and rural transformation processes the study systematically reviews and interprets existing scholarly literature. The design is guided by two research questions:

1. In what ways does decentralization influence the spatial distribution and accessibility of rural public services?
2. How are rural economic geographies being reshaped by globalization and agro-industrial restructuring?

Study Selection Criteria and Screening Process

To ensure analytical rigor and scholarly reliability, the review is based on ten carefully selected peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2014 and 2023.

Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included based on the following criteria:

1. **Topical relevance**
 - Explicit focus on decentralization, rural governance, service delivery, globalization, or agro-industrial transformation.
 - Direct engagement with spatial, territorial, or geographical dimensions.
2. **Scholarly quality**
 - Published in peer-reviewed journals with established academic credibility in geography, development studies, or public administration
3. **Temporal scope**
 - Primarily published between 2014–2023 to capture recent theoretical and empirical developments.
4. **Geographical scope**
 - Empirical studies focusing on Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where decentralization and rural transformation processes are most pronounced.

5. Methodological transparency

- Studies employing clearly defined methodologies such as quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods, enabling critical comparison and synthesis.

Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded if they: focused purely on urban governance without rural relevance, lacked explicit spatial or geographical analysis, were policy briefs, reports, or non-peer-reviewed sources and if failed to provide sufficient methodological detail.

Screening Procedure

- 1) **Title and Abstract Screening** : Initial identification of relevant studies based on keywords
- 2) **Full-Text Review**: Articles were assessed for conceptual depth, empirical rigor, and relevance to the research questions.
- 3) **Final Selection and Validation**: Ten studies were selected based on their contribution to both theoretical advancement and empirical evidence, ensuring representation across governance and rural economic transformation themes.

Analytical and Theoretical Framework

The study integrates four complementary theoretical perspectives:

(i) Political Geography and Decentralization Theory

Decentralization is interpreted as a territorial redistribution of authority and fiscal resources across governance scales. Political economy frameworks were applied to examine how institutional capacity, accountability structures, and fiscal autonomy shape spatial service outcomes (Rondinelli *et al.*, 1989; Faguet, 2014).

(ii) Spatial Accessibility and Service Delivery Models

Concepts of spatial equity and accessibility were employed to analyze how decentralization affects the geographic distribution of public services such as healthcare, education, and agricultural extension (Kosec & Mogues, 2016).

(iii) Rural Economic Geography and Globalization Theory

Rural transformation was analyzed through multi-scalar globalization frameworks, emphasizing the reconstitution of rural spaces through global integration and hybrid economic forms (Woods, 2007, 2011).

(iv) Agro-Industrialization and Global Value Chain Approaches

Global value chain theory and agro-industrial transition models were used to interpret structural changes in agricultural production, processing networks, and rural industrial clustering (Reardon & Barrett, 2000; Reardon *et al.*, 2009).

Data Analysis: Coding and Thematic Synthesis

To ensure methodological transparency and analytical depth, the study employed a systematic thematic synthesis approach, combining inductive and deductive coding techniques.

Coding Procedure

The analysis followed a three-stage coding process:

- i. **Open Coding (Inductive Phase):** Initial reading of selected articles to identify emergent concepts and patterns where codes were generated without pre-imposed categories, capturing key themes such as: spatial inequality, fiscal autonomy, service accessibility, global value chains and rural–urban linkages.
- ii. **Axial Coding (Analytical Structuring):** Related codes were grouped into broader conceptual categories, including: governance and institutional capacity, spatial distribution of services, economic restructuring and market integration and Socio-spatial differentiation.
- iii. **Selective Coding (Synthesis and Integration):** Core themes were refined and integrated into overarching analytical dimensions aligned with the research questions; spatial impacts of decentralization and transformation of rural economic geography.

Thematic Synthesis

To enable the construction of a coherent analytical narrative, linking decentralization and globalization as interconnected drivers of spatial change, a thematic synthesis was conducted. It aided to: Identify recurring patterns and divergences across studies, compare findings across different geographical contexts and develop higher-order analytical themes.

Reliability and Validity Considerations

To enhance rigor and credibility: triangulation was achieved by integrating studies from multiple regions and methodological approaches; conceptual validation was ensured through alignment with established theoretical frameworks and transparency was maintained through explicit documentation of selection and coding procedures. Despite, the study limitation by its reliance on secondary data, the systematic and theory-driven approach ensures robust analytical generalization and conceptual depth.

FINDINGS

Spatial Impacts of Decentralization on Rural Service Delivery

Recent empirical and theoretical research confirms that decentralization constitutes a significant spatial restructuring of governance, with measurable implications for rural service delivery. By transferring fiscal, administrative, and political authority from central to sub-national governments, decentralization alters the territorial configuration of decision-making power and resource allocation (Faguet, 2014). This re-scaling of governance is particularly consequential in rural areas, historically characterized by administrative marginality and limited state presence.

Spatial Accessibility and Local Responsiveness

Empirical evidence indicates that decentralization enhances spatial accessibility of services where local governments possess adequate fiscal and administrative capacity. Localized governance improves alignment between service provision and community needs, particularly in healthcare, education, and agricultural extension (Kosec & Mogues, 2016).

Case Study: Kenya's Devolution (Post-2010 Constitution)

Kenya provides a compelling empirical illustration. Following the 2010 constitutional reforms, the establishment of 47 county governments significantly improved spatial access to healthcare services. Previously underserved rural counties such as Turkana and Mandera experienced increased investment in health infrastructure, recruitment of medical personnel, and expansion of primary healthcare facilities (Kate, 2023). However, these improvements were uneven. Counties with stronger fiscal management and institutional capacity such as Kiambu and Nakuru achieved better service outcomes compared to resource-constrained counties. This demonstrates that decentralization enhances spatial accessibility conditionally, rather than universally. This

disparity underscores a critical insight: decentralization redistributes opportunities for development but does not equalize them. Instead, it amplifies existing institutional and fiscal differences across territories.

Spatial Inequality and Territorial Fragmentation

Despite these improvements, decentralization frequently produces uneven spatial outcomes. Sub-national regions with stronger tax bases, better infrastructure, and higher administrative capacity often translate devolved authority into superior service provision, whereas poorer rural jurisdictions struggle to mobilize adequate resources (Rodríguez-Pose & Gill, 2003). In Kenya, disparities in county revenue generation and governance capacity have produced uneven development trajectories, with some counties advancing rapidly while others remain marginalized (Otieno, 2023). This reflects broader patterns observed globally, where decentralization without robust equalization mechanisms exacerbates territorial divergence.

Institutional Capacity and Multi-Level Governance

Institutional quality remains the most critical determinant of decentralization outcomes. Effective service delivery depends on transparent budgeting, participatory governance, and coherent intergovernmental coordination (Faguet, 2014). Weak institutions, by contrast, facilitate elite capture and inefficient resource allocation. The Kenyan case highlights the importance of multi-level governance: while counties manage service delivery, national government transfers and policy frameworks continue to shape local outcomes. This underscores the inherently multi-scalar nature of decentralization.

Sectoral Variations in Spatial Outcomes

The spatial impact of decentralization varies across sectors. Services closely aligned with local territorial knowledge such as agricultural extension and feeder road maintenance tend to exhibit stronger improvements under decentralized regimes (Kosec & Mogues, 2016). These sectors benefit from localized information and community participation. In contrast, sectors requiring centralized capital investment, technical standardization, or national oversight such as water supply systems and specialized healthcare services show more uneven spatial outcomes; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2023). This sectoral differentiation reflects issues of scale compatibility; wherein certain services are better suited to local governance scales than others.

Rural Economic Geography under Globalization and Agro-Industrial Transformation

Integration into Global Value Chains

Rural economies are increasingly integrated into global agri-food systems, with production organized through vertically coordinated supply chains linking local producers to multinational corporations (Reardon & Barrett, 2000). Recent studies demonstrate that participation in global value chains (GVCs) can enhance rural incomes, stimulate productivity growth, and facilitate technological upgrading (Antràs, 2020). However, benefits are unevenly distributed. Larger commercial producers are often better positioned to meet quality standards and capital requirements, whereas smallholders face exclusion risks due to limited assets and market access (Reardon *et al.*, 2009). Consequently, globalization reconfigures rural spaces into differentiated zones of integration and marginalization.

Agro-Industrial Transformation: Evidence from Kenya

Kenya's horticulture and tea sectors illustrate agro-industrial transformation. Regions such as Naivasha and Kericho have become globally integrated agro-export zones, characterized by: contract farming systems, agro-processing industries and strong links to international markets. These regions have experienced economic growth, employment diversification, and infrastructural development. However, smallholder farmers often remain dependent on large agribusiness firms, reflecting asymmetrical power relations within global production networks. This reflects a broader pattern of dualistic rural development, where globally integrated zones coexist with marginalized subsistence regions reinforcing rather than resolving spatial inequalities.

Rural–Urban Interdependencies and Hybrid Spaces

Globalization has intensified rural–urban linkages, producing hybrid socio-economic landscapes characterized by circular migration, multi-local households, and diversified livelihoods (Woods, 2007). Recent analyses highlight the increasing role of small towns and secondary cities as mediating nodes in rural transformation, facilitating flows of labor, capital, and goods between rural hinterlands and global markets (OECD, 2023). This restructuring reflects a relational understanding of rural geography, where rural areas are embedded within multi-scalar economic systems rather than existing as isolated agrarian zones. The rural–urban continuum becomes central to understanding contemporary territorial development.

Socio-Spatial Differentiation and Uneven Rural Development

The cumulative effect of globalization and agro-industrial transformation is heightened socio-spatial differentiation. Regions integrated into export-oriented agriculture and agro-processing networks often experience infrastructural upgrades, rising land values, and employment diversification (Antràs, 2020). In contrast, ecologically marginal or poorly connected regions remain excluded from global accumulation circuits. This pattern aligns with classical uneven development theory, where capital selectively concentrates in territories offering comparative advantage (Rodríguez-Pose & Gill, 2003). The resulting rural landscape is characterized by dualistic structures commercially dynamic agro-industrial zones coexist alongside marginalized subsistence regions.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that decentralization and globalization are powerful, interconnected drivers of spatial transformation in rural areas. Decentralization enhances service delivery responsiveness and accessibility where supported by strong institutional capacity and fiscal autonomy. However, it simultaneously generates uneven spatial outcomes, often reinforcing territorial inequalities. Globalization and agro-industrial transformation further reshape rural economic geographies by integrating local production systems into global value chains. While this creates opportunities for economic growth and diversification, it also intensifies socio-spatial differentiation and marginalization. The Kenyan case study underscores a central conclusion: rural transformation is inherently multi-scalar, shaped by the interaction of local governance structures, national policies, and global economic forces.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthen Fiscal and Institutional Capacity through Equalization Mechanisms

In many developing countries, decentralization reforms have transferred responsibilities faster than resources. For instance, India's Panchayati Raj system and Kenya's county governments both depend heavily on intergovernmental fiscal transfers. Governments should therefore: institutionalize formula-based fiscal equalization systems that prioritize historically marginalized regions; strengthen local revenue generation while avoiding over-reliance on regressive local taxation and invest in administrative capacity-building.

Embed Spatial Equity within National Development Planning Frameworks

Spatial inequality persists because decentralization is often implemented without integrated territorial planning. In countries like India, where regional disparities between states such as Kerala vs. Bihar remain stark, policy should: align decentralization with national spatial planning strategies; prioritize lagging rural regions through targeted infrastructure and service delivery programs and integrate GIS-based spatial analysis into planning institutions to identify underserved areas. This ensures decentralization contributes to balanced territorial development rather than fragmented growth.

Strengthen Multi-Level Governance and Intergovernmental Coordination

A key limitation in both Kenya and India is weak coordination between national, regional, and local governments. Decentralization does not eliminate central authority; rather, it requires effective vertical integration. Governments should: clarify functional mandates across governance levels to reduce duplication and conflict; establish intergovernmental coordination platforms; ensure timely and predictable fiscal transfers to sub-national units. This is particularly critical for sectors such as water, health, and infrastructure, which require coordination across scales.

Promote Inclusive Agro-Industrialization through Smallholder Integration Policies

Agro-industrial transformation in developing countries often excludes smallholders due to capital, certification, and market access barriers. In contexts such as India's agrarian economy and Kenya's export-oriented agriculture: governments should support producer cooperatives and farmer organizations to enhance bargaining power; provide subsidies or technical assistance for compliance with global standards; and regulate contract farming arrangements to ensure fair pricing and risk-sharing. These measures can mitigate adverse incorporation and promote more equitable participation in global value chains.

Develop Rural-Urban Linkage Strategies and Secondary City Investments

Rural transformation increasingly depends on connections to small towns and secondary cities. In both India and Kenya, these intermediate urban centers serve as critical nodes for markets, services, and employment. Policy should: invest in transport corridors and digital infrastructure linking rural areas to secondary cities; promote agro-processing zones in peri-urban areas to stimulate local value addition; and support circular migration systems through inclusive labor and social protection policies. This approach strengthens functional rural-urban integration rather than treating rural development in isolation.

Institutionalize Spatial Monitoring and Evidence-Based Governance

A major gap in decentralization practice is the lack of real-time spatial data for decision-making. Governments should: adopt GIS-based monitoring systems to track service delivery accessibility and infrastructure distribution; Integrate spatial indicators into national statistics and planning dashboards; and encourage open data systems to enhance transparency and accountability. For instance, India's digital governance initiatives and Kenya's spatial planning frameworks provide a foundation that can be expanded into evidence-driven territorial governance systems.

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