

Decentralization And Local Food Governance: A Multilevel Framework with Comparative Evidence from Selected Developing Economies

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Abstract

Decentralization has become one of the main governance reforms through which developing economies try to make food security policy more responsive to local conditions. The reform promise is straightforward: subnational governments and community institutions may know local agroecological conditions, household vulnerability, market constraints, and social exclusion better than central ministries. Yet decentralization can also reproduce weak service delivery when authority is transferred without finance, staff, data systems, accountability, or coordination. This chapter argues that local food governance should be assessed as a design problem rather than as a general reform ideal. Effective devolution links clear functional assignments, predictable finance, capable local administration, public participation, and national standards. The chapter develops a multilevel framework for food governance, compares fiscal and institutional patterns in selected developing economies, and uses case boxes from Pakistan, India, Brazil, Kenya, Indonesia, and Ethiopia. It concludes that decentralized governance can strengthen inclusion and responsiveness, but only when local discretion is embedded in transparent institutions and coherent intergovernmental systems.

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1. Introduction

Food security policy in developing economies is increasingly a question of governance. National governments still set the broad legal and fiscal architecture for agriculture, nutrition, trade, safety nets, public procurement, and food quality. However, many of the decisions that determine whether those policies reach households are made closer to the ground: district officers classify beneficiaries, extension workers advise farmers, municipal authorities manage markets, school committees monitor meals, local councils allocate small infrastructure budgets, and community organizations decide whether the poorest households are heard. The apparent simplicity of the decentralization idea masks a difficult institutional task. Local food governance must connect national commitments with local delivery without creating fragmented authority, fiscal stress, or exclusion.

The analytical point of departure for this chapter is that decentralization is neither a cure for state failure nor a cause of failure by itself. It is a set of institutional arrangements that changes who has authority, who pays, who implements, who monitors, and who can make claims on the state. Fiscal federalism theory suggests that locally tailored public goods may be supplied more effectively when local governments have information about preferences and costs (Oates, 1972, 1999; Tiebout, 1956). Public administration and political economy research, however, warns that local institutions can be captured by elites, starved of funds, or forced to implement centrally designed programs without real discretion (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006; Mansuri & Rao, 2013; World Bank, 2003). Food security makes these tensions sharper because food policy involves production, purchasing power, nutrition, public health, gender relations, land, water, markets, climate risk, and social protection.

The chapter develops a governance framework for judging when and how decentralization can improve food security results. The argument has four parts. First, decentralization can strengthen local responsiveness when authority is matched with finance and administrative capacity. Second, participation improves policy only when communities can influence priorities and hold officials to account, not when participation is limited to consultation. Third, local food governance needs national coordination because food markets, price shocks, climate hazards, and nutrition standards cross local boundaries. Fourth, decentralized reform should be assessed through its effects on inclusion, service quality, resilience, and rights-based access, not only through formal legal transfer of powers.

The chapter proceeds as follows. Section 2 defines decentralization and local food governance. Section 3 develops a conceptual framework linking devolution to food security results. Section 4 examines key policy domains in which local governance matters. Section 5 discusses risks and design safeguards. Section 6 presents comparative evidence from selected countries. Section 7 draws policy lessons for governments and development partners. The chapter uses tables and figures as original synthesis tools, while one figure uses reproducible subnational finance data from the World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment.

2. Concepts: decentralization and local food governance

Decentralization refers to the transfer of authority, resources, responsibilities, or political decision-making from central government to subnational units. The receiving units may be elected provincial, state, district, county, municipal, village, or community institutions. The literature distinguishes among administrative decentralization, fiscal decentralization, political decentralization, and deconcentration. The distinction is important because a reform that moves staff to districts but leaves budget control in the capital is different from a reform that gives elected local governments authority over budget priorities. Decentralization can also occur inside line ministries through field offices, or outside line ministries through autonomous local governments.

Table 5.1. Forms of Decentralization and Food Governance Implications

Form	Core meaning	Food governance examples	Main caution
Administrative decentralization	Transfer of implementation tasks, staff, or field operations to subnational offices.	Extension services, disease surveillance, market inspection, nutrition outreach.	May improve reach, but local offices may still lack discretion over priorities or budgets.
Fiscal decentralization	Transfer of revenue powers, expenditure responsibilities, grants, borrowing rules, or fiscal discretion.	District food-security plans, feeder roads, storage, local procurement, municipal markets.	Unfunded mandates can weaken delivery and create blame shifting.
Political decentralization	Authority of elected subnational governments and councils to set priorities and answer to citizens.	County agriculture budgets, local food councils, public hearings, school meal oversight.	Accountability depends on credible elections, information, and inclusion of marginalized groups.
Functional decentralization	Assignment of specific food system functions to the level best suited to deliver them.	National food standards, provincial procurement, district targeting, village grievance systems.	Poor assignment creates overlaps, gaps, and conflict across levels.
Deconcentration	Central ministries place staff in local offices but retain policy and finance control.	Local field officers implement national programs.	Useful for administrative reach, but weak for local priority setting.

Note. Prepared by the authors from fiscal federalism, service-delivery, and participation literature, including Oates (1972, 1999), Ahmad *et al.* (2005), Faguet (2014), and Mansuri and Rao (2013).

Local food governance refers to the rules, organizations, financing arrangements, and participation mechanisms through which local actors shape food availability, access, utilization, stability, agency, and sustainability. This definition extends the conventional four-pillar food security framework by incorporating agency and sustainability, following the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE, 2020). In practice, local food governance includes district agricultural plans, local procurement, market management, land and water governance, school meals, local health and nutrition platforms, disaster

preparedness, and community feedback systems. The scope is wider than agriculture because food security is not produced by farms alone.

The policy relevance of Table 5.1 is that each form of decentralization answers a different question. Administrative decentralization asks where state employees work. Fiscal decentralization asks who pays and who can reallocate resources. Political decentralization asks who decides and who is answerable to citizens. Functional decentralization asks which level of government should carry each responsibility. Good food governance requires all four questions to be answered together. A district cannot deliver nutrition services when it controls neither staff nor funds. A municipality cannot regulate food markets when it lacks legal authority over market committees. A village committee cannot monitor school feeding when meal budgets, menus, and supplier selection are opaque.

Table 5.2. Assignment of Food Security Functions Across Levels of Government

Level	Functions suited to that level	Reason for assignment
National	Food rights, national food reserves, trade policy, food quality and safety standards, macro-fiscal rules, national data architecture.	Cross-border price shocks, national equity standards, and large safety-net financing require central coordination.
Provincial or state	Program adaptation, co-financing, procurement systems, extension systems, regional climate and water plans, supervision of districts.	This level often has the scale to manage staff systems and procurement while still adapting to agroecological zones.
District or county	Integrated food-security plans, local targeting, nutrition coordination, market infrastructure, early warning, public works planning.	Districts and counties can coordinate agriculture, health, roads, markets, and welfare more directly.
Municipal or village	Market sanitation, local roads, storage sites, fair-price shop oversight, school meal committees, grievance intake, beneficiary verification.	Frontline bodies can identify exclusion and leakage but require safeguards against capture.
Community organizations	Farmer groups, women groups, social audits, water user associations, local food councils, producer cooperatives.	Community institutions generate local knowledge and scrutiny but need inclusive design and protection from elite control.

Note. Prepared by the authors. The allocation follows subsidiarity, scale economies, externalities, and rights-based accountability principles.



Figure 5.1. Conceptual Framework Linking Decentralization to Food Security Results

Note. Prepared by the authors. The figure treats fiscal transfers, authority, capacity, participation, accountability, and intergovernmental coordination as joint conditions.

3. Why decentralization can improve food governance

The strongest argument for decentralized food governance is informational. Food insecurity is local in its lived form even when its drivers are national or global. In one district, hunger may reflect drought and livestock disease. In another, it may reflect landlessness, debt, or the seasonal absence of wage work. In a city, the binding constraint may be food price inflation, unsafe markets, poor transport, or rental costs that crowd out food spending. Central ministries rarely observe these conditions with enough speed or detail. Local institutions can convert proximity into better targeting and program adaptation when they have authority to act.

Responsiveness also matters because food insecurity can change quickly. Floods, droughts, pest outbreaks, conflict, fuel-price shocks, and local market disruptions can alter household food access within weeks. Local governments and community institutions can support early warning through market price reporting, crop condition monitoring, nutrition screening, and grievance signals. When this information is connected to pre-agreed financing and program triggers, decentralized systems can shorten the distance between signal and response. Without those triggers, local observation may simply create a record of distress that no one is funded to address.

Participation is a second potential advantage. Local food governance can create spaces where smallholders, tenant farmers, pastoralists, fishers, women, traders, landless laborers, consumers, and nutrition workers shape priorities. This matters because food policy often favors visible production targets and politically organized producer groups, while the food access needs of women, migrants, informal workers, and remote households receive less attention. Participatory budgeting, school meal committees, food councils, social audits, and public hearings can widen the agenda. Yet participation must be judged by influence, not attendance. Mansuri and Rao (2013) show that induced participation has mixed performance and depends heavily on context, facilitation, and learning-by-doing.

Table 5.3. Opportunities and Risks of Local Food Governance

Opportunity	Food-security value	Governance risk	Design safeguard
Local information	Better recognition of seasonal hunger, livelihood risks, prices, and social exclusion.	Information can be manipulated by local elites.	Public criteria, transparent beneficiary lists, appeal channels, and third-party checks.
Participation	Local actors can influence planning, procurement, school meals, and market priorities.	Participation may become symbolic or dominated by powerful groups.	Representative rules, women-led spaces, independent facilitation, and feedback reports.
Responsiveness	Local authorities can respond faster to shocks and market disruption.	No response occurs if authority is devolved without funds or contingency rules.	Emergency grants, shock triggers, and local contingency plans.
Service integration	Agriculture, health, nutrition, roads, water, and welfare can be coordinated locally.	Mandate overlap may create confusion and delay.	Joint planning committees and clear functional assignment.
Accountability	Citizens can monitor nearby providers, shops, markets, and committees.	Local politics can protect poor performers.	Social audits, open contracting, scorecards, and independent grievance redress.

Note. Prepared by the authors from Faguet (2014), Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006), Mansuri and Rao (2013), and the World Development Report 2004 (World Bank, 2003).

Accountability is the third argument. When beneficiaries know who is responsible for delivery, and when they can complain, vote, organize, or audit, local institutions may reduce leakage and improve service quality. Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006) argue that the accountability advantage of decentralization depends on the balance between better local information and greater risk of local elite capture. The same logic applies to food governance. A local committee may know which households are hungry, but it may also favor relatives, caste networks, party supporters, large farmers, or better-connected traders. The institutional design question is how to preserve local information while constraining local favoritism.

A fourth advantage is policy integration. Food security problems rarely fit one ministry. A malnourished child may need household income support, maternal health care, clean water, affordable diverse foods, and reliable local transport. A climate-stressed farming household may need water management, extension, insurance, market access, public works, and a safety net during the lean season. District or county planning can combine these functions more easily than vertically organized national departments, provided it has authority over local coordination and access to timely data.

4. Main policy domains for decentralized food governance

Decentralization has the greatest food-security relevance where local knowledge, repeated contact with beneficiaries, or coordination across sectors is important. The following domains are especially suited to subnational roles, though not all functions should be fully devolved.

4.1. Extension, advisory services, and farmer support

Extension is a natural site for decentralization because crop choices, water constraints, pest pressures, seed suitability, livestock systems, and social barriers differ by place. Local extension officers can tailor advice and connect farmers with inputs, credit, climate information, and markets. Yet extension is prone to uneven quality when local governments lack technical staff or when recruitment is politicized. National and provincial systems should retain standards for training, professional certification, data reporting, and research-extension linkages. Local discretion should focus on prioritizing needs, farmer group engagement, and delivery adaptation.

4.2. Local procurement, school feeding, and short supply chains

Public procurement can connect food access with local farm income. School feeding, hospitals, and public institutions can buy from smallholders and cooperatives when procurement rules are designed for scale-appropriate suppliers. Brazil's National School Feeding Program offers a widely cited example because Law No. 11,947 established a minimum share of federal school feeding resources for direct purchase from family farming (Sidaner *et al.*, 2013; Silva *et al.*, 2023). The lesson is not that every country should copy Brazil, but that local procurement works best when national rules, municipal implementation, nutrition standards, farmer organization, and social oversight are joined.

Box 5.1 Brazil: school feeding, family farming, and municipal implementation

Brazil's PNAE shows how a national framework can create local food governance. The federal rule requires at least 30 percent of school feeding resources to be used for direct purchases from family farmers, with priority for local and socially targeted producers. Municipalities implement procurement, school menus, and delivery, while school feeding councils provide local oversight. Sidaner *et al.* (2013) frame PNAE as an integrated food and nutrition security program. Silva *et al.* (2023) show that the rule requires mediation among municipal authorities, schools, farmers, cooperatives, nutritionists, and councils.

The policy lesson is that local procurement requires more than a local purchase target. It needs supplier organization, menu planning, payment reliability, product quality control, transport, and transparent contracting. Local governments can create demand for family farming, but national standards and financing help protect nutrition goals and fiscal continuity.

4.3. Food price monitoring and market management

Local authorities often manage wholesale and retail markets, market fees, sanitation, storage sites, and local transport bottlenecks. These functions can influence consumer prices and food safety. Local price monitoring can also feed early warning systems. A decentralized price-monitoring arrangement should define who collects prices, how often, which commodities are covered, how data are validated, and which response rules are triggered. Local data becomes valuable only when they are comparable across markets and connected to national or provincial response capacity.

4.4. Nutrition, health, and social protection

Nutrition programs require local targeting and repeated contact with households. Growth monitoring, maternal counseling, school meals, water and sanitation, health outreach, and social protection all depend on frontline workers and local institutions. The risk is that local targeting can be captured or biased against socially marginal groups. Transparent criteria, appeal systems, and oversight beyond the village are therefore central. Ethiopia’s Productive Safety Net Program shows both the promise and difficulty of local targeting in food-insecure areas, as discussed below.

Box 5.2 Ethiopia: PSNP and local targeting

Ethiopia’s Productive Safety Net Program is among the most studied safety-net programs in Africa. Gilligan *et al.* (2009) assess PSNP as the largest social protection program in Sub-Saharan Africa outside South Africa at that time. Targeting and implementation involve *woreda* and *kebele* structures, food-security task forces, and community processes. Sharp *et al.* (2006) found that the 2006 targeting process became more community driven and transparent than the earlier cycle, with *woreda* and *kebele* food security task forces and community meetings. The Ethiopian case shows that local targeting can identify chronic food insecurity, but it also requires clear criteria, transfer reliability, public works planning, and capacity support. Gilligan *et al.* (2009) found limited average effects where transfers fell below planned levels, while larger effects appeared for households receiving more complete transfers. This points to a broader decentralization lesson: local targeting cannot compensate for inadequate transfer size, payment delay, or weak program finance.

4.5. Land, water, fisheries, and natural resource governance

Food security depends on tenure and resource access. Local governments and customary institutions often influence land-use planning, water allocation, grazing access, fisheries rules, and dispute resolution. The FAO Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure set principles for responsible governance of land, fisheries, and forests in the context of national food security (FAO, 2012).



Figure 5.2. Multilevel Food Governance Architecture
Note. Prepared by the authors. Arrows indicate that authority and accountability move in both directions: downward through mandates and finance, upward through reporting, feedback, and claims.

Local institutions can make tenure governance more accessible, but they can also entrench exclusion if women, tenants, pastoralists, Indigenous communities, fishers, and migrants lack voice. National rights protections and accessible dispute resolution are therefore necessary complements to local authority.

5. Risks and failure mechanisms

The food security case for decentralization is strong but conditional. Many reforms fail not because local governance is a poor idea, but because transfer of responsibility is not matched by clear authority, finance, capacity, and accountability. The most common failure mechanisms are unfunded mandates, elite capture, uneven local capacity, fragmented policy, exclusion, and weak data.

5.1. Unfunded mandates

Unfunded mandates arise when local governments become responsible for agriculture, nutrition, social protection, or market infrastructure without predictable resources. This problem is common in developing economies where central governments retain revenue while assigning expenditure responsibilities downward. Local officials then ration services, delay payments, depend on donor projects, or shift blame upward. Formula-based transfers, minimum service grants, contingency finance, and clear reporting rules reduce this risk. Fiscal decentralization must therefore be assessed by spending discretion and revenue predictability, not merely by the number of functions assigned locally.

5.2. Elite capture and local patronage

Elite capture is a central concern in local food governance. Procurement contracts, beneficiary lists, land-use decisions, irrigation allocation, and public works sites can generate local rents. Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006) emphasize that decentralization can increase accountability or capture depending on local political structure and information conditions. Food programs are especially exposed because targeting decisions and procurement contracts often involve repeated local relationships. Safeguards include public disclosure, conflict-of-interest rules, open beneficiary lists, independent audit, rotating committee membership, civil society monitoring, and appeal mechanisms outside the village.

5.3. Uneven capacity across territories

Decentralization can widen territorial inequality when richer or better-administered localities use new authority more effectively than poorer areas. Wealthier districts may have stronger tax bases, better staff, more internet access, better roads, and more organized producer groups. Poorer districts may face higher need but lower capacity. Equalization transfers, capacity grants, shared technical services, and provincial or national support teams are necessary to prevent decentralization from becoming a mechanism for unequal service quality.

5.4. Fragmentation and policy incoherence

Food security requires coherence across markets, trade, agriculture, health, climate, and welfare. Fragmentation appears when local discretion creates incompatible data systems, procurement standards, beneficiary lists, and emergency procedures. Central governments can prevent fragmentation without recentralizing all decisions by setting minimum standards, data protocols, transfer rules, and shared performance metrics. The objective is guided flexibility: national equity and safety standards with enough local room to adapt delivery.

5.5. Exclusion and weak representation

Local participation does not automatically include those most affected by food insecurity. Women may be formally present but unable to speak freely. Landless workers, minority groups, informal traders, pastoralists, and migrants may be outside formal village institutions. Local food councils and committees should therefore use explicit inclusion rules, safe meeting formats, accessible language, childcare support where relevant, and



Figure 5.3. Local Governance Risk Pathways and Design Responses
Note. Prepared by the authors from the governance and participation literature. The figure should be read as a diagnostic checklist for program design.

6. Comparative evidence from selected developing economies

The empirical record on decentralization and food security is mixed because countries decentralize different functions under different political and fiscal conditions. A useful comparison should therefore separate the formal structure of government from fiscal scope and from program design. Table 5.4 uses selected countries that represent contrasting governance settings. The fiscal data come from SNG-WOFI country profiles, which provide comparable information on subnational government finance. The table does not claim that higher subnational expenditure automatically improves food security. It shows the fiscal space within which local food governance may operate.

Table 5.4. Selected-Country Indicators for Decentralization and Food Governance

Country	Main feature	devolution	Fiscal scope	Food governance relevance	Main sources
Pakistan	Federal polity with post-2010 provincial devolution under the 18th Amendment; local-government continuity varies by province.		SNG expenditure: 7.6% of GDP and 32.8% of general government expenditure in 2020.	Agriculture and rural development functions sit heavily with provinces, increasing the need for national-provincial coordination in food security, nutrition, and data systems.	SNG-WOFI Pakistan profile; Resnick & Rana, 2016; GoP, 2018.
India	Federal system with elected local bodies and strong state-level roles in food distribution, school meals, and nutrition implementation. Post-1998 decentralization placed major service functions with provinces, districts, municipalities, and villages.		SNG expenditure: 16.1% of GDP and 62.5% of public expenditure in 2018. Calculated SNG expenditure: 9.0% of GDP and 46.6% of public expenditure in 2020.	National entitlements depend on state and local delivery networks, fair-price shops, beneficiary verification, and local grievance mechanisms.	SNG-WOFI India profile; GoI NFSA portal; Shrinivas <i>et al.</i> , 2025.
Indonesia	2010 Constitution created county governments with devolved functions including agriculture, health, and local infrastructure.		County expenditure: 3.8% of GDP and 15.5% of general government expenditure in FY 2019/20.	District and village institutions influence agricultural services, local infrastructure, food reserves, and ecological screening of food projects.	SNG-WOFI Indonesia profile.
Kenya	Federal system with municipalities serving as core implementers of school feeding and local procurement rules.		SNG expenditure: 22.4% of GDP and 44.4% of public spending in FY 2020. Subnational expenditure: 7.8% of GDP and 57.1% of general government expenditure in FY 2017/18.	County authorities can link agriculture, health, nutrition, climate planning, and public participation, but counties rely heavily on transfers.	SNG-WOFI Kenya profile; FAO Kenya CPF 2022-2026.
Brazil	Federal system with regional states and woredas central to implementation of safety nets and services.		Urban SNG expenditure: 5.1% of total budgetary expenditure and < 1% of GDP in FY 2019/20.	Municipal implementation and school feeding councils anchor local procurement from family farming under PNAE.	SNG-WOFI Brazil profile; Sidaner <i>et al.</i> , 2013; Silva <i>et al.</i> , 2023.
Ethiopia	Centralized unitary system with urban local bodies and limited subnational fiscal scope.			Woreda and kebele structures are central to PSNP targeting, public works, and food-security transfers.	SNG-WOFI Ethiopia profile; Sharp <i>et al.</i> , 2006; Gilligan <i>et al.</i> , 2009.
Bangladesh				Local food governance is constrained by narrow fiscal space, though municipalities can influence markets, sanitation, and urban food access.	SNG-WOFI Bangladesh profile.

Note. Prepared by the authors using SNG-WOFI country profiles and cited country case literature. Figures are descriptive and use the latest profile year available. Bangladesh is limited to urban subnational government data in the SNG-WOFI profile.

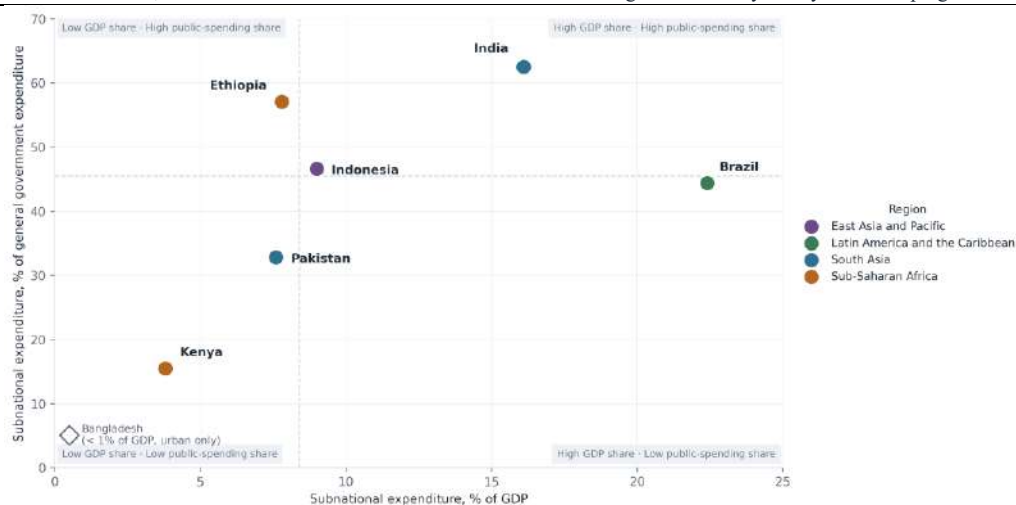


Figure 5.4. Fiscal Scope of Subnational Governments in Selected Countries

Note. Source: SNG-WOFI country profiles. Values are descriptive and do not imply a causal relationship with food security. Indonesia is calculated from the profile's provincial and regency/city/village components. Bangladesh is shown as a separate marker because the SNG-WOFI profile provides only a less-than-one-percent GDP value for urban subnational governments.

6.1. Pakistan: provincial devolution and the coordination problem

Pakistan is central to this chapter because it shows the promise and difficulty of devolution in a food-insecure developing economy. The 18th Amendment, passed in 2010, transferred major functions to provinces and altered the balance of federal and provincial authority. Resnick and Rana (2016) argue that the amendment has important implications for agriculture, rural development, and food security. The Government of Pakistan's National Food Security Policy also notes that after the amendment, provinces assumed major responsibility for agriculture and rural development, while the Ministry of National Food Security and Research was created at the federal level in 2011 (Government of Pakistan, 2018).

The reform created space for provinces to tailor agriculture, rural development, livestock, water, and nutrition interventions. It also created coordination demands. Food security needs national price monitoring, trade policy, reserves, seed and input quality standards, plant and animal health rules, and national data systems. Provincial autonomy is useful when provinces can design locally appropriate programs, but harmful when common standards, data comparability, or emergency coordination weaken. Pakistan's challenge is not to reverse devolution, but to build institutions for federal-provincial and provincial-local coordination.

Box 5.3 Pakistan: after the 18th Amendment

Pakistan's devolution experience shows why decentralization should be paired with coordination. The 18th Amendment transferred many social and economic functions to provinces. Agriculture and rural development became heavily provincial responsibilities, while the federal government retained roles in national coordination, external commitments, trade, standards, and food security policy. Three lessons follow. First, provincial authorities can make food policy more responsive to crop zones, water scarcity, livestock systems, and rural poverty patterns. Second, provincial food policy still requires national data and standards. Third, elected local governments are needed if provincial devolution is to reach district and village priorities. Without durable local institutions, authorities may stop at the provincial capital rather than reaching communities.

6.2. India: national entitlements and state-local delivery

India illustrates a different pattern: national food entitlements and large-scale public distribution rely on state and local delivery systems. The official National Food Security Act portal describes the Public Distribution System as a mechanism that evolved from scarcity management into an important part of the government's food economy policy (Government of India, n.d.). The National Food Security Act of 2013 created one of the largest food transfer expansions in history, affecting more than 500 million people, according to Shrinivas *et al.* (2025). This case is not simple decentralization because the entitlements are national, but implementation depends on state procurement, distribution logistics, fair-price shops, local beneficiary systems, and grievance mechanisms.

India's experience shows that decentralization may operate through a layered system rather than full local autonomy. The central state finances and regulates large food transfer programs, state governments shape implementation quality, and local institutions handle ration shops, records, monitoring, and complaints. Digital authentication and portability reforms can improve portability, but they also require safeguards for households facing biometric failure, connectivity gaps, or documentation barriers. Local food governance remains important because exclusion often occurs at the final transaction point.

6.3. Kenya: counties and integrated local planning

Kenya's 2010 Constitution created county governments with authority over functions related to agriculture, health, local infrastructure, and planning. SNG-WOFI reports that county expenditure was 3.8 percent of GDP and 15.5 percent of general government expenditure in FY 2019/20, with grants and subsidies forming a very large share of county revenue. The FAO Country Programming Framework for Kenya 2022-2026 states that agricultural functions in Kenya are devolved to county governments while national ministries and other actors continue to operate in the sector (FAO, 2023).

Kenya shows the local integration advantage of devolution. Counties can connect agriculture, health, nutrition, drought preparedness, and local infrastructure within county plans. The fiscal caution is that counties rely heavily on transfers, and delays or political disputes over intergovernmental finance can weaken implementation. County public participation requirements create a platform for food governance, but participation has to be tied to budgets and service monitoring to be effective.

Box 5.4 Kenya: counties as food-system coordinators

Kenya's county governments are well placed to connect food production, nutrition, health, and climate adaptation because many relevant functions sit near the county level. County planning can identify local food-system constraints such as poor feeder roads, weak livestock services, water stress, market sanitation, and nutrition gaps.

The main design issue is fiscal and administrative capacity. Counties need predictable transfers, own-source revenue where feasible, staff capability, procurement integrity, and intercounty coordination for issues such as pastoral mobility, watersheds, and regional markets. Public participation can strengthen local legitimacy, but only when citizen priorities are connected to budget decisions and monitoring reports.

6.4. Brazil: local procurement and social oversight

Brazil's PNAE case demonstrates how national law and local implementation can create a local food procurement architecture. Sidaner *et al.* (2013) describe PNAE as part of Brazil's wider experience in building an integrated food and nutrition security system. Silva *et al.* (2023) emphasizes the importance of municipal implementation and the 30 percent family farming procurement rule. The institutional strength of the case lies in the combination of federal finance, national nutrition and procurement rules, municipal execution, and local oversight through school feeding councils. The Brazilian lesson is that local procurement should not be treated as a purely market transaction. Smallholder participation depends on organization, transport, product standardization, payment reliability, and menu planning. Local governments

can support these conditions, but they need national fiscal continuity and technical guidance. Local procurement can be a food-security tool when it serves both consumers and producers without sacrificing nutrition standards or procurement transparency.

6.5. Indonesia: local authority and national food-security projects

Indonesia’s decentralization reforms moved substantial responsibilities to districts, municipalities, villages, and provinces. SNG-WOFI reports that regency, city, and village expenditures amounted to 6.9 percent of GDP and 35.5 percent of public expenditure in 2020, while the provincial level accounted for 2.1 percent of GDP and 11.1 percent of public expenditure. Aggregating those profile components gives 9.0 percent of GDP and 46.6 percent of public expenditure for the selected figure in this chapter.

Indonesia is useful because it shows that formal decentralization can coexist with national food-security projects that require local ecological screening and social consent. Large food-estate or land-development projects may be promoted as national food-security interventions, but local governments and communities bear many ecological, tenure, and livelihood effects. The governance lesson is that decentralized food systems need national ambition and local checks. Land suitability, water availability, forest risk, Indigenous and customary claims, labor conditions, and local market effects should be assessed before projects are approved.

6.6. Ethiopia: local implementation under a federal system

Ethiopia combines federal and local administrative structures with large food-security and safety-net programs. SNG-WOFI reports subnational expenditure at 7.8 percent of GDP in FY 2017/18, with substantial public employment and service delivery responsibilities at regional and woreda levels. PSNP demonstrates the strengths and limits of local targeting. Community and kebele structures can identify vulnerable households, but program effects also depend on transfer adequacy, payment reliability, public works quality, and national finance. Ethiopia’s experience warns against romanticizing local knowledge. Local targeting is valuable, but it does not solve underfunding or weak implementation capacity.

Table 5.5. Participation and Accountability Instruments in Local Food Governance

Instrument	How it works	Food-governance use	Design caution
Participatory budgeting	Citizens propose or prioritize budget items for local plans.	Useful for small infrastructure, market improvements, water points, and nutrition facilities.	May favor organized groups unless outreach is deliberate.
Local food councils	Multi-actor forums link producers, consumers, officials, schools, health workers, and civil society.	Can integrate food access, diet quality, procurement, and market governance.	Requires legal mandate, minutes, follow-up, and budget links.
School feeding committees	Parents, teachers, nutrition staff, and local leaders monitor meals and suppliers.	Improves scrutiny of menus, delivery, quality, and inclusion.	Needs training and protection from supplier capture.
Social audits	Public review of program lists, spending, contracts, and delivery.	Can reduce leakage in safety nets, procurement, and public works.	Requires access to records and independent facilitation.
Grievance redress	Citizens submit complaints about exclusion, quality, delays, corruption, or abuse.	Creates a route for correction beyond local gatekeepers.	Must include appeals, deadlines, and safe channels.
Digital feedback systems	Mobile, web, SMS, or call-center channels report prices, stockouts, or complaints.	Can speed monitoring and widen access.	Must not exclude households without connectivity or literacy.

Note. Prepared by the authors using participation and social accountability literature, especially Mansuri and Rao (2013) and World Bank (2003).

Table 5.6. Country Case Comparison: Decentralization and Food Governance

Country	Devolution pattern	Food-governance function	Strength	Main lesson
Pakistan	Provincial devolution after the 18th Amendment.	Agriculture and rural development became heavily provincial.	Provincial adaptation potential; federal coordination remains central.	Build federal-provincial data and planning systems; strengthen elected local governments.
India	National entitlements with strong state and local delivery.	PDS and NFSA rely on distribution networks, fair-price shops, and local records.	Large scale and rights-based entitlements can reduce deprivation when delivery works.	Protect portability and digital reform with safeguards for exclusion.
Brazil	Federal school feeding rules with municipal execution.	PNAE links school feeding with family farming procurement.	Local procurement can support diets and smallholders.	Supplier support and transparent contracting are needed.
Kenya	County governments created under the 2010 Constitution.	Agriculture, health, and infrastructure functions sit near county level.	Counties can integrate food systems and nutrition planning.	Predictable transfers and intercounty coordination are required.
Indonesia	Post-1998 decentralization to provinces, districts, cities, and villages.	Local authorities influence services, villages, infrastructure, and environmental screening.	Local knowledge can check poor project fit.	National projects need local consent, safeguards, and ecological review.
Ethiopia	Federal regions and woredas implement major safety-net functions.	PSNP relies on local targeting and public works planning.	Local targeting can identify chronic vulnerability.	Transfer adequacy and implementation capacity remain decisive.

Note. Prepared by the authors from the case literature cited in this chapter. The table is comparative synthesis, not a ranking.

7. Design principles for effectively decentralized food governance

The comparative discussion suggests that local food governance should be built around seven design principles.

7.1. Clarify functions before transferring responsibility

Governments should specify which level is responsible for policy design, finance, implementation, monitoring, and appeal. Ambiguity creates delay and blame shifting. A useful rule is to keep rights, standards, macro-fiscal stability, trade policy, food safety norms, and national data architecture at higher levels, while allowing subnational governments to adapt delivery, integrate local sectors, and manage local infrastructure. Functions should be reviewed periodically because capacity and technology change over time.

7.2. Match authority with finance

Local governments need predictable, timely, and adequate finance. Formula-based transfers should account for population, poverty, food insecurity, geography, climate exposure, and service costs. Performance grants can encourage reporting and quality improvements but should not penalize poor districts that begin with lower capacity. Contingency finance is especially important for drought, flood, conflict, and price shocks. Own-source revenue can support local accountability, but poor localities should not be asked to finance basic rights mainly from weak tax bases.

7.3. Build administrative and data capacity

Decentralization requires staff, procurement systems, financial management, monitoring, and data infrastructure. Digital systems can help track prices, beneficiaries, transfers, and complaints, but they should be interoperable and accessible. Local officials need training in nutrition-sensitive planning, climate risk, procurement, gender inclusion, and conflict-sensitive targeting. Capacity-building should be treated as a standing investment rather than a one-off workshop.

7.4. Combine participation with enforceable accountability

Participation improves food governance only when it can change decisions. Local forums should have public agendas, records, feedback obligations, and access to budgets and program lists. Social audits and grievance systems should have deadlines and appeals. Committees should include women, smallholders, tenants, landless workers, youth, traders, and marginalized communities. Accountability also requires independent oversight from audit bodies, courts, media, civil society, and higher-level agencies.

7.5. Keep national standards with local flexibility

Food rights and nutrition standards should not depend on where a household lives. National standards should define minimum entitlements, food safety, procurement integrity, eligibility rules, and data protocols. Local governments should have flexibility over delivery arrangements, menus, infrastructure priorities, outreach, language access, and partnerships. This balance prevents fragmentation while preserving responsiveness.

7.6. Use decentralization to support nutrition-sensitive food systems

Local food governance should not focus only on staple availability. Diet diversity, child and maternal nutrition, safe water, health services, and food environments require local coordination. School meals, local procurement, market sanitation, extension for nutrient-dense crops, and women-centered planning can connect agriculture with diet quality. The affordability of healthy diets and food-price monitoring should be integrated into local dashboards where data permit.

7.7. Evaluate reforms by service quality and inclusion

A country can decentralize formally without improving food security. Evaluation should ask whether households receive services more reliably, whether food access improves for vulnerable groups, whether local procurement is transparent, whether complaints are resolved, whether nutrition indicators improve, and whether local systems respond faster to shocks. These criteria are more meaningful than the legal count of devolved functions.

8. Data, indicators, and measurement agenda

Better measurement is needed because decentralization is often measured through constitutional form rather than food governance practice. A practical indicator set should include both decentralization indicators and food-system indicators. On the governance side, SNG-WOFI provides subnational expenditure, revenue, investment, debt, and functional expenditure data. The Worldwide Governance Indicators provide annual composite indicators such as government effectiveness, voice and accountability, rule of law, and control of corruption (World Bank, 2025). V-Dem provides detailed democracy measures, including variables related to local government institutions (V-Dem Institute, 2025). On the food side, FAOSTAT and FAO SDG indicators provide food and agriculture data, while SDG indicator 2.1.2 measures moderate or severe food insecurity based on the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FAO, 2026).

For future empirical work, three measurement strategies are recommended. First, build subnational panels where local government finance can be matched with district-level food insecurity, nutrition, price, and climate indicators. Second, separate fiscal scope from local accountability and administrative capacity. Third, use mixed methods: quantitative indicators can identify patterns, but case research is needed to understand whether local authority is real, whether participation affects budgets, and whether marginalized groups can use grievance systems.

The figure and data used in this chapter are intentionally descriptive. Fiscal scope is a condition for local food governance, not proof of food-security performance. A country with high subnational expenditure may still perform poorly if spending is captured or poorly coordinated. A country with lower subnational expenditure may deliver well if national programs are strong and local implementation is well supervised. The key empirical task is to identify which combinations of authority, finance, capacity, participation, and accountability produce better services and more inclusive access.

9. Policy recommendations

For national governments, the priority is to design decentralization as a system. Food security functions should be assigned through law or regulation, supported by finance, linked to data, and reviewed through performance monitoring. Central ministries should not micromanage local delivery, but they should set standards, maintain national data infrastructure, fund equalization, and coordinate responses to shocks. National food-security strategies should include an intergovernmental chapter that specifies roles for provinces, states, districts, municipalities, villages, and community institutions.

For provincial and state governments, the priority is to translate national commitments into territorially differentiated programs. Provinces and states should support districts through technical assistance, pooled procurement where useful, extension systems, nutrition-sensitive planning, and performance reporting. They should avoid retaining all authority at the provincial capital. Devolution within provinces is necessary if district and community knowledge is to shape policy.

For district, county, municipal, and village governments, the priority is to integrate food-security planning across sectors. Local plans should connect agriculture, roads, markets, water, health, nutrition, education, and social protection. Planning should use price data, vulnerability maps, beneficiary feedback, and public hearings. Local governments should publish budgets, procurement awards, beneficiary criteria, grievance statistics, and service reports in accessible formats.

For development partners, the priority is to avoid project structures that bypass local institutions while claiming to support local governance. Donor programs should strengthen public systems, finance capacity-building, support interoperable data, and fund evaluation. Pilot projects should include a credible path to scale within government budgets and rules. Donors should also support peer learning among local governments because practical implementation knowledge often travels well across similar territories.

For civil society and producer organizations, the priority is to make participation consequential. Farmer groups, women's organizations, consumer associations, and social accountability actors can monitor procurement, beneficiary selection, school meals, market conditions, and grievance systems. Their role is strongest when they have access to information, protection from retaliation, and formal channels for follow-up.

10. Closing argument

Decentralization can make food security policy more responsive, inclusive, and adaptive, but only when it is built as a coherent governance system. Local governments and community institutions bring information, proximity, and participatory possibilities that central ministries cannot replicate. Yet those advantages are fragile. Without finance, staff, data, accountability, and coordination, decentralization may shift responsibility downward while keeping real capacity elsewhere. It may also empower local elites rather than food-insecure households.

The practical lesson is to reject both extremes. Centralized food policy often misses local variation and weakens participation. Unstructured decentralization can create fragmentation and unequal service quality. The stronger path is multilevel food governance: national standards and rights, provincial and state coordination, district and county planning, municipal and village delivery, and community accountability. This arrangement treats local participation not as decoration but as part of the institutional architecture of food security.

For developing economies facing climate risk, fiscal constraint, rapid urbanization, food price instability, and persistent malnutrition, local food governance will become more important. The challenge is not simply to devolve. The challenge is to design decentralized systems that can learn, coordinate, correct errors, and protect the people most exposed to food insecurity.

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