

Conflicts Among Councillors in the Local Government Authorities: A Tale of Msalala District Council

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Abstract

This paper focused on conflicts among councillors in Tanzania's Local Government Authorities, where qualitative approaches were employed in data collection and analysis. The study focused on understanding the causes and effects of conflicts in the Local Government Authorities where Msalala District Council in Shinyanga Region was used as a case study. A sample of 22 participants was interviewed through mobile calls. Various local government documents, including the minutes of meetings and reports, were reviewed. The study found three types of conflicts at Msalala District Council. The conflict between the elected councillors themselves, conflicts between the District Council Chairperson and other councillors and conflicts between elected (Ward) councillors and special seat councillors. It was further found that the conflicts were contributed by the low level of education among councillors, personal interest and selfishness, poor communication, conflicting roles and unequal distribution of resources. The study found that the conflicts among the councillors affected the implementation of projects in the council, reduced the



morale of the special seat councillors and increased unnecessary costs to the council. Different mechanisms have been adopted to resolve conflicts, like collective bargaining and cooperativeness, which are emphasized for the growth of local government authorities, and this reduces the rate of biased decisions. This study recommends training for councillors immediately after being elected to provide awareness of their roles and duties in the local government authority.

Keywords: Councillors conflicts, Causes of conflicts, Conflicts in the council, Councillors' role

Introduction

Conflict in society is an inevitable social behaviour. This is an outcome of behaviour of human life such that whenever there is interaction, the likelihood of conflict is high (Hollander, 2022). Conflict can be explained as the behaviour of a person or group intended to inhibit the attainment of goals by another person or group (Nylehm, 2001; Etim, 2023). Conflict is an inevitable aspect of work teams as long as organizations continue to enjoy teamwork, conflicts cannot be avoided (Shilingi, 2017; Marque, 2010).

Conflict expresses hostility, negative attitudes, antagonism, aggression, rivalry and misunderstanding (Robbins, 2005; United Republic of Tanzania, 2019). Conflict is also perceived as organizational politics that involves individual and group interaction (Viswesvavan, 2005; Marque, 2010). It is associated with a situation that involves contradictory interests between two opposing groups (Etim, 2023). Conflict can be defined as a divergence between two or more parts, with each part is trying to gain acceptance of its view over others (United Republic of Tanzania, 2008; United Republic of Tanzania, 2019; Robbins, 2005; Killian, 2017; Etim, 2023).

Studies have found the presence of conflict in the local government authorities where the common prevailing conflict in local government authorities is politico-administrative conflict (Viswesvavan, 2005; Marque, 2010). This is a conflict between politicians, mainly councillors and administrators working in the Local Government Authorities. There are also conflicts among councillors themselves. Conflicts among councillors in local government are inevitable as long as each councillor has different priorities and strives to achieve their political promises in their respective areas of jurisdiction (Hollander, 2022; Swai, 2016; Shilingi, 2017). There are three types of councillors in Tanzania. Councillors elected to represent the ward, councillors appointed through a special seat programme to represent women and members of the parliament residing in the district (Swai & Zeegers, 2023). The councillors are political representatives who participate in decision-making and are given



the power to oversee issues in the council (Bank, 2005; Viswesvavan, 2005; Swai & Zeegers, 2023). These functions can be performed for five years, a political tenure for councillors, though there is room for councillors to regain another term (United Republic of Tanzania, 2008; Swai, 2017; Nylehm, 2001; United Republic of Tanzania, 2019; Shilingi, 2017).

Conflicts among councillors arise when conflict emanates between councillors, especially when it comes to sharing of meagre resources allotted to their respective wards (Bank, 2005; Swai & Zeegers, 2023). Local government authorities in Tanzania experience conflicts among elected councillors, special seat councillors and bureaucrats (Swai & Zeegers, 2023; United Republic of Tanzania, 2008; United Republic of Tanzania, 2023; Swai, 2016). Efforts to manage conflicts have been made where various bylaws and guidelines like the Employment and Labor Relations Act, 2004, and Public Service Act, 2009 were developed to guide the actions between the main actors in the local government and beyond, but conflicts persist due to human varieties (Shilingi, 2017; Bank, 2005; United Republic of Tanzania, 2019; Swai & Zeegers, 2023).

Several studies (Shilingi, 2017; Swai, 2016; Swai & Zeegers, 2023; Bank, 2005; Viswesvavan, 2005; Hollander, 2022; Viswesvavan, 2005; Marque, 2010; Nylehm, 2001; Etim, 2023) investigated on the challenges experienced by the special seat councillors in decision making and conflict management among councillors and administrators. The focus of this study is to examine the causes and effects of conflict among the councillors themselves. The Msalala District Council was used as a case. The councillors struggle to ensure their political promises are fulfilled while the resources to facilitate the same are always scarce. This calls for potential conflicts among the councillors. Many studies, such as Venugopal, 2010; Swai, 2016; and Shilingi, 2017 have focused on the conflicts between politicians and bureaucrats, but there is no study that has examined the conflicts among the councillors themselves.

The Dual Concern Theory

Dual Concern Theory was adopted for this study. The theory was developed by Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann (1970's). The theory emphasized that the conflict is a function of high or low concern for the "self" collective with the presence of high or low concern for "others". The theory has two assumptions: assertiveness and cooperativeness in decision making that reduces or minimize conflicts and consequences that may be caused by the presence of conflicts. High concern for self and low concern for others this reveals the use of force to ensure what you think is right to be imposed without considering the others' opinions. Unfortunately, the forcing includes the use of threats, winning advices, and positional commitments. The low concern for self and the high concern for others entails high considerations of others priorities than defending what someone believe. It



includes independent concessions, unconditional assurances, and subscription help (Venugopal, 2010; Nylehm, 2001; Robbins, 2005).

The theory is useful in this study because it relates to councillors' conflict in the sense that, sometimes, concerns for self tend to be higher when compared to concerns for others. This may happen during the allocation of resources in the council. Councillors may have a deep concern for themselves, try to pull resources towards their wards and forget about others in the council. If this happens, it results in the unequal and unfair distribution of resources in the council, hence fuelling conflict among councillors. Furthermore, the elected councillors consider the special seat councillors unsuitable prospective candidates for standing committees' chairpersons, arguing that they do not have wards to represent. In turn, this makes special-seat councillors consider themselves undermined and marginalized and, therefore, fuels conflicts among elected councillors and special-seat councillors. Despite the alarming cry of the special seat councillors concerning their mistreatment, the legal instruments are silent about this contention.

Methodology of the study

The research methodology is overreaching the whole process, procedures, and techniques that have been used to collect and analyse the data. The study area was the Msalala District Council, one of the six (6) Councils in the Shinyanga Region. Msalala district council was purposely selected because it is one of the newly established local government authorities and, therefore, has many decisions to make, which may attract conflicts. The targeted populations of the study involved councillors of Msalala District Council, the District Executive Director, heads of division, Ward executives, influential people, and heads of sections and units. The study employed 26 participants who were purposively selected. The participants include the District Executive Director, the Council Chairperson, councillors, heads of division, heads of sections and units, Ward Executives officers and influential people.

The study used a qualitative approach to explore the causes and effects of conflict among councillors in the local government authorities. The data was collected using interviews and documentary reviews. The respondents were interviewed by telephone from April to June 2022. Before the interview, participants were consulted for appointments, and then the interviews were conducted for each participant depending on the agreed schedule. The interviews aimed to explore the type of conflicts, the causes and the participants' experiences. Therefore, narrative analysis was used to analyse the interviews to understand the participants' individual experiences of the conflict among councillors. In addition, documentary review was also conducted where documents such as the minutes of the meetings and council reports were reviewed. Content analysis was used to analyse



the documents, and the major themes revolved around the causes and effects of conflicts among councillors in Msalala District Council.

Conflicts Among the Councillors at Msalala DC

The section explains forms of conflicts among the councillors at Msalala District Council, the causes of such conflicts and their effects on the Council. The findings show the existence of three forms of conflicts among councillors in Msalala District Council, which are conflicts between elected councillors, conflicts between elected councillors and council chairperson and conflicts between elected councillors and special seat councillors. This excludes the possible conflicts that emanate from the Politico-Administrative relations and their associated factors.

- *The Conflicts between Elected Councillors*

This is a conflict between elected councillors themselves. The conflict between the elected councillors of various wards in the council was among the conflicts mentioned by the participants during the interviews. The elected councillors are elected from the ward by the voters in the ward, and they are the representative of the ward, who chairs the Ward Development Committee (WDC) meetings in the ward (Swai, 2016). The WDC is charged with the administrative and financial affairs of the ward (Etim, 2023). The elected councillors are also the members of the standing committees in the council. The elected councillors bring issues from the ward to the council, where they are discussed and deliberated in the committees and channelled to the full council (the highest organ in the council) for final decisions. According to the Local Government Act of 1982 and the council standing orders, each councillor has the same rights when making council decisions. The elected councillors have the right to engage in various debates during the decision-making and have the right to vote for or against a proposal (United Republic of Tanzania, 1982). If elected councillor wants to succeed in getting their things done, they must apply lobbying techniques to ensure they are supported by fellow councillors in the committee and full council meetings. The councillor contributes to debate and struggles to ensure the issues from his/her ward are included in the agenda of the meeting. The councillors' efforts and influence determine the influence in the decision making (Venugopal, 2010; Swai, 2016). Given the functions, positions and powers of the elected councillors, the conflicts among these councillors are likely to occur at the council level, specifically during the meetings in the committee and full council when discussing and making decisions on development activities to be implemented in the council.

- *The Conflicts Between Elected Councillors and Council Chairpersons*

Another form of conflict at Msalala District Council is the conflict between some councillors and the council chairperson. The councillors who opposed the proposal to construct the administrative block at Ntobo conflicted with the Council Chairperson. The council



Chairperson wanted all councillors to support him, but it was not as he wished, causing a rupture between the councillors and the chairperson. This was clarified by one of the participants;

“My friend, we were elected to bring development, not to quarrel. The conflict between us and the previous district council chairperson was because of the location of the council headquarters, which he wanted to build in his ward. We opposed it because even our voters want to be serviced nearby. He decided to take the matter to the court, but he withdrew the case from the court later” (Participant 6, 2022).

The quote suggests the personal interest of the council chairperson that he/she wanted the administrative block to be constructed in his ward. This was found by other scholars that the personal interests of someone affect others; this is directly linked with the fight over the limited resources available where the councillors are fighting for re-election (Killian, 2017; United Republic of Tanzania, 2019; Cornforth 2003; Swai & Zeegers, 2023). It was expected for a clever chairperson to decide in favour of the majority to ensure re-election in the seat of the council chairperson, but this was not the case. When the councillors and the council chairperson conflict, the possibility of making decisions is complicated, and if the council cannot make decisions, then the development activities are likely to cease (Killian, 2017; Shilingi, 2017; Robbins, 2005; Hollander, 2022). Likewise, this was observed at Msalala District Council during the tension on where the administrative block should be constructed. The council chairperson was not re-elected during the re-election of the council chairperson due to the division of the district into two districts.

- *Conflicts Between Elected Councillors and Special Seats Councillors*

The selection of the special-seat candidates in Tanzania differs from those who represent the wards, which has consequences for the relationship between these councillors and their constituency (Swai & Zeegers, 2023). Whereas the selection and election process of elected councillors forges a clear link between the councillors and the ward, the special-seat councillors' link with the constituency, the women in the division, is lacking (Swai, 2016). The special seat councillors claim to represent women in the division, but their influence on the selection and appointment of these representatives is limited (Robbins, 2005; United Republic of Tanzania, 2019). The special-seat councillors do not have the same position as the elected councillors in the ward (Swai & Zeegers, 2023). For example, while the elected councillors are tasked to mobilize the planning process through the Opportunity and Obstacles to development (O&OD) in the village and ward as a whole, the special-seat councillors do not have these roles (Venugopal, 2010; Etim, 2023). The study found that the conflict is facilitated by the fear of losing their political office where the special seats are prevented by the elected councillors from accessing the ward and various



interest groups like Community Organizations and Youth groups. This was clarified during the interview, where one of the special seat councillors responded that;

“Brother, being a special seat councillor is sometimes a headache. We face many challenges when executing our responsibilities because our political part demands a report on some of the activities conducted, but when you go to the field, the elected councillors do not want us to meet with their voters without their presence. So, if you want to meet with women groups, you will have to consult the respective councillor first and sometimes, we quarrel because they do not want us in their areas” (Participant 5, 2022).

Another participant clarified that;

“We, as special seat councillors, sometimes fail to speak of some challenges found in various wards because if you speak of a ward with elected councillors, hostility can be created. So, we only speak when the respective elected councillor seeks assistance. The special seat councillors represent the division, and thus we can speak of the whole division, but we are prevented from doing that” (Participant 14, 2022).

This implies that the elected councillors protect their positions in the ward due to fear of losing their political office. The process of protecting their ward creates conflicts with the special seat councillors. The conflicts were also seen in the leadership positions of various standing committees in the ward and council. The special seat councillors are restricted from contesting any leadership position with the argument that they do not have wards to represent and, therefore, are not suitable for the position, as explained by one of the councillors who responded that;

“Have you ever welcomed a guest at your home, and then he/she becomes a father or mother of your own home? It is quietly impossible to let the special seat councillors become the chairpersons of the standing committees because the elected ones are many and they have high leadership capability that is why they contested in their respective wards and win the election” (Participant 8, 2022).

Quite often, the special seat councillors act as Ward Development Committee (WDC) chairperson if the respective elected councillors are not available (Swai, 2016; Etim, 2023; Hollander, 2022; United Republic of Tanzania, 2019; Swai & Zeegers, 2023). The case is quite different for the Msalala District Council. The elected councillors do not want the special seat councillors to attend the WDC meetings for fear of being challenged in the meeting. The elected councillors have been using various techniques, including delays in sharing the meeting notice. The Msalala DC case is one of the extreme cases found



regarding the prevention of the special seat councillors acting as representatives. There have been cases where the elected councillor delegated the power of being an acting chairperson of the WDC meeting to one of the Village Chairpersons and not the special seat councillor (Marque, 2010; Hollander, 2022; Etim, 2023; Killian 2017; Robbins, 2005; United Republic of Tanzania, 2019). This indicates a lack of trust at the highest level, and therefore, the possibility of conflicts is also high.

The conflicts among the councillors have affected the implementation of development activities at Msalala DC. The councillors spent most of their time addressing the misunderstandings and delayed the decisions for other development projects. The administration block is not yet completed to date, which increase unnecessary cost to the council. Excluding the special seat councillors in WDC and leadership positions in the standing committees of the council narrowed the possibility of including women's issues in the decisions (Shilingi, 2017; Killian, 2017; Etim, 2023). There is no regulation which prohibits special seat councillors from being elected as chairpersons of standing committees, but the practice, as indicated in various studies, indicates that they are not elected in those positions (Swai, 2017; Etim, 2023; Marque, 2010; Robbins, 2005; Cornforth, 2003; United Republic of Tanzania, 2008). This can lead to low morale, especially for the special seat councillors to contribute to the council's development.

Causes of the Conflicts

This section seeks to answer the question of what are the factors that have led to conflicts among councillors. This excludes the possible conflicts that emanate from the Politico-Administrative relations and their associated factors. The findings from this study show various conflicts and their causes at Msalala District Council, as clarified below.

- *Personal Interest*

Personal interest is the main source of conflict in Msalala District Council. Person interest entails the behaviour of the council to put his or her individual/self-concerns as the priority in making decisions. The conflict was attributed to a misunderstanding on the place to construct the council headquarters administration block. The councillors were divided during the discussion on where the administrative block should be constructed. While some councillors proposed constructing the building at Ntobo, which is near Segese, others proposed the building be at Busangi. Ntobo Ward is near Segese, which is located near the main road to Geita, which was mentioned by the councillors to be too far; to access it, one must pass by Kahama Municipal Council. On the other hand, the councillors who suggested Busangi defended that, the area is the centre for all 18 wards at Msalala District Council, and that would enable citizens to access the council services easily. Although Ntobo seems far from the centre, the majority of the councillors supported the administration block to

be constructed in the ward which led to disagreement among the councillors, as clarified by one of the interviewed councillors that;

“My friends, frankly speaking, these councillors who are from nearby Ntobo want our voters from the other sides of the council to suffocate while seeking government services. The headquarter administration block can't be built in Ntobo of which it will disturb us, our voters and even the public civil servants. We'll have to pass by Kahama Municipal Council to Msalala District Council, which is very expensive in fare and time-wasting. Again, the place where the administration block was planned to be built, during the rainy season, the construction will have to stop as the vehicles carrying building materials won't be able to pass, and that is the reason behind the failure to complete the project on time” (Participant 1, 2022).

Despite the location challenges, including the complication of accessing the council headquarters, the decision to construct the administration block at Ntobo was still supported by most of the councillors. The construction of the administration block took more than a decade to be completed despite several negotiations and court interventions to address the misunderstanding. The former Msalala District Council chairperson was later removed from his position after the division of the Council, which formed another council, Ushetu District Council. The newly elected council chairperson revised the decisions to build the council administration block at Ntobo with the clarification that the initial decision was to construct the building at Busangi, and therefore, the revised decision to construct at Ntobo was null and void. One of the councillors interviewed clarified that he had also taken the matter to the court, but later on, he decided to withdraw the case for the council's interest. The councillor explained that;

“My son, if I decided to continue with the council administration block conflict, it would go far, and that is why when the Regional Commissioner intervened, we decided to resolve the matter, but later on, she was removed from the position. She directed the administration block be built in Busangi, which is the centre for all Msalala District Council wards, but when she removed the position, the acting Regional Commissioner revoked the decision and directed the administration block be built in Ntobo. I decided to take the matter to court, but later on, I decided to withdraw it from the court so that we can go on with other issues rather than fighting for the same thing” (Participant 2, 2022).

A member of the Parliament representing the constituency is a councillor when he/she is in the council, and they seem to have more influence than other councillors. The member of the parliament representing Msalala was among the councillors involved in the decision, as clarified by one of the participants during the interviews;



“Yes, of course, the Council administration block was supposed to be built at Busangi, which is at the centre for all 18 wards, but some of the councillors, including the influential one, opposed the proposal. This has led to huge conflicts to the extent that the implementation of development projects was delayed due to the misunderstandings among the councillors” (Participant 3, 2022).

Another informant recommended that;

Exactly; the headquarters office was supposed to be placed in Busangi as a central part to all wards, where we expected that each ward could easily reach the office without any difficulty. Unfortunately, our expectations were not met. This resulted in biased decisions and continued stiff competition among councillors (Participant 19, 2022).

This implies that the personal interest of some councillors, including the council chairperson, contributed to the delay in the completion of the construction project, as clarified in the quotations. The conflicts have also contributed to additional costs of the project and, therefore, affected the completion of the project.

- *Resource Distributions*

The study found the struggle among the councillors to acquire council resources, which was also found to be scarce. The councillors fight in the meeting to ensure their wards appear on the list of projects to be implemented by the council. The conflict was attributed by the inadequate allocation of resources and competition for future elections as confirmed by one of the heads of the division who clarified that;

“The resources are distributed to the wards according to the available statistics in the council. For example, a ward with one primary school cannot be given resources equally with a ward with five primary schools. But the councillors do not understand this” (Participant 4, 2022).

Another interviewed respondent added that;

Indeed, the resources are scarce relating to the demand of the people. Each ward councillor struggles to ensure his or her people's demands are realized. No one can allow another councillor to acquire more resources compared to the other one. The fair distributions and common understanding were supposed to be given to the councillors before distributing the national cake. (Participant 21, 2022).

This implies that the elected councillors struggle to ensure they fulfil the promises in their wards to increase the possibilities for re-election. With limited resources in the council, where each councillor cannot fulfil their promises, conflict is unavoidable. Some of the councillors claimed that there is no equality in allocating resources in various wards; influential councillors are likely to receive more than other councillors.

- *Low level of Education*

The trend of councillors to acquire education and further training is higher due to the changes and development of science and technology (Etim, 2023; Killian, 2017; Hollander, 2022). The study found that the profile of councillors at Msalala DC is low, where most councillors, 20 out of 26, had a Standard seven education level. The level of education may imply the level of analysis of the councillors when making decisions. If 77% of the councillors have primary education, then the level of the analysis of the council is likely to be low, as clarified by one of the influential persons who claimed that,

“Because of the low level of education, councillors decided to build an administration block at Ntobo, which is quite far from other wards like Isaka, Jana, Mwaluguru, Mwakata and even Mwanase. The councillors have not thought of the time taken to travel from these wards towards the council headquarters for government services. They haven’t thought of the time and resources that will be used by the employees from those wards to and from the council headquarters during the official meetings with the Council Director.” (Participant 15, 2022).

This quotation implies that the councillors did not consider the cost and benefit of their decision to construct the headquarters office. Apart from personal interests, the capacity of the councillors attributed by the level of education could be among the reasons.

- *Techniques Used to Resolve Conflicts at Msalala DC*

The study also investigated techniques used by Msalala District Council to resolve conflicts among councillors themselves. There are two main techniques used to solve conflict in Msalala District Council. The techniques include meetings and information sharing among the councillors. according to the interviewed participants, these techniques have reduced the conflict to some extent, but have not yet completely solved the problem.

Meetings as a way to solve conflict. This was done when the conflicting groups are brought together for dispute settlement. This technique was mainly used for the councillors who are from the ruling party, where all the councillors were invited to the meeting to discuss and solve the conflicts among the councillors. This technique has been used in other councils as highlighted by Swai, 2016; Killian, 2017; Etim, 2023; Hollander, 2022. The



meeting was found to be the best way to ensure the councillors address their differences and cooperate to ensure the growth of the councils.

Information sharing among the councillors was among the techniques that the participants highly emphasized to reduce misunderstanding among the conflicting groups. All councillors have the right to receive first-hand information and this should be provided equally. This includes the analysis of the council priorities that all councillors should participate to avoid rumours and misunderstanding (Etim, 2023, Venugopal, 2010).

Conclusion

The paper concludes that conflicts among councillors in local government are inevitable as long as each councillor has different ideas, views, opinions, perceptions, attitudes, and priorities, and each strives to achieve intended objectives in respective areas of jurisdiction. Conflicts have constructive and destructive parts, where one party wins and the other loses. The Msalala conflicts result in a major loss, and there is no part that has won. The conflicts at Msalala affect the implementation of projects in the council. Conflicts also reduce the morale of special seat councillors, resulting in biased decisions in society and increasing unnecessary running costs to the council. To address this, the elected and special-seat councillors should be in harmony and cooperate to benefit the group they represent and the council as a whole. Furthermore, information sharing among the councillors reduces the rate of misunderstanding among the councillors with different interests. The regulatory frameworks such as laws, policies and guidelines should state clearly the expected relationship, especially the relationship between special seats and elected councillors when exercising their roles.

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