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## **Making Governance Work for Small Communities: Increased Governance Legitimacy through Efficient Local Decentralisation**

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# Making Governance Work for Small Communities:

Increased Governance Legitimacy through Efficient Local Decentralisation

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Advanced MSc International Relations and Diplomacy

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## **Abstract**

This thesis considers the effect of decentralisation within the local level, on the legitimacy of governance. From the literature, it becomes clear that factors like community cohesion and partisan identity are relevant in several related processes, but also that the exact relationship of interest has not been researched sufficiently yet. These factors are therefore treated as conjectures and investigated in a two-phased research design. The exploratory first phase develops a hypothetical causal mechanism based on interviews in the single-case study of the EMD Bítém. It shows a positive relationship between local decentralisation and governance legitimacy, mediated by more direct control and moderated by governance efficiency and community cohesion. In absence of appropriate quantitative data, the explanatory second phase tests this mechanism in an intermediate-N systematic comparison of most different cases. It finds confirmation for the hypothesis in new contexts, especially for the direct control and governance efficiency factors, but still lacks internal validity, for which it develops a quantitative research design. The study concludes that, especially in specific rural contexts, local decentralisation can indeed be employed to make governance systems more legitimate.

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Cover image: Lourdes Domenech Mauri, Mayor-President of the EMD Bítém, speaking at an official event of the EMD in the village's community event venue, marking the national day of Catalonia. Photo by EMD Bítém (2023) on Facebook, obtained with permission.

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## **1. Introduction**

The contemporary global reality of International Relations is witnessing two contradicting dynamics: a wish for stronger global governance and a desire for more local self-determination. The global challenges of our time, that transcend traditional nation-state boundaries, are driving increasing calls to reform and strengthen existing systems of global governance (Tallberg et al., 2023). Simultaneously, centralised forms of governance, it being at the national or supranational level, seem to be contested more and more, with citizens being less engaged and calling increasingly for independence and self-governance (Gerring & Veenendaal, 2020, pp. 366-370). Together, these dynamics raise questions regarding the most appropriate system of governance. There, local decentralisation provides a promising way forward as it, in many cases, appears to be a very intuitive unification of the beforementioned contradicting dynamics.

As under regular decentralisation, local decentralisation sees the delegation of institutional, policy and fiscal governance competencies to actors closer to the citizens (Dardanelli, 2021, pp. 13-15; Lago, 2021, pp. 1-2), but then taking place within the local context. The present thesis aims to find out what the effect of this delegation – from municipalities to smaller communities in villages or neighbourhoods – is, on the citizen's belief that "the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society" (Lipset, 1960, p. 77). It thus asks:

**What is the effect of local decentralisation on the legitimacy of governance?**

The study's first objective is exploratory in nature: it aims to determine the existence and dynamics of a possible relationship between local decentralisation and governance legitimacy, through the revelatory case of the EMD Bítım, a semi-autonomous village and municipality in Catalonia, Spain. There, the study develops and tests various conjectures to identify a solid and comprehensive causal mechanism. The second objective of the study is explanatory in nature: it aims to test the hypothesised causal mechanism against a wider variety of empirical observations to make the step towards broader theory development with strong validity.

As a result, the analysis is largely positivist in nature by discovering patterns in the data that allow for generalisation regarding the relationship between local decentralisation and legitimacy (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 5). Its insights will contribute to a better understanding of the intuitiveness of flexible local governance, as an alternative form of societal organisation, in response to the global calls for both global governance and local self-determination.



## **2. Literature Review**

When looking into existing knowledge on local decentralisation and governance legitimacy, it is crucial to first define the meaning of both concepts within the purpose of this study. For legitimacy, this requires making a choice for the most suitable definition out of the existing ones in political science. For local decentralisation, it requires the extrapolation of definitions and highlighting the diversity in concept implementations. Using these definitions, it is possible to identify empirical case literature that implicitly describes the dynamics and outcomes of local decentralisation. Subsequently, these dynamics can be seen reflected in more theoretical literature on the related concepts of municipal decentralisation and the decentralisation theorem. Finally, literature on the concept of subsidiarity can help to bring the different insights together, but also shows that solid theorisation on the relationship between local decentralisation and governance legitimacy, as specifically conceptualised here, is still lacking.

### **2.1. Defining Local Decentralisation and Governance Legitimacy**

Much-conceptualised in the political science field, legitimacy is generally understood as a two-way dynamic: a political system's ability to justify its exercise of authority, and citizens' faith in a political system (Peter, 2023). It thus refers to the governing power's justification of its authority, but also its citizens' acceptance of this authority (Grant, 2018). These justification, faith, or acceptance elements can arguably be derived from many different socio-political factors such as tradition, leadership charisma, and legal construction, but also citizen consent and participation (Peter, 2023). Considering that, as described above, the relevant contribution of this study relates to the intuitiveness of governance forms, the elements of faith in, and acceptance of, the governance system deserve most attention here. Consequently, the classic words of Seymour Martin Lipset (1960, p. 77) accurately describe the intended definition: "legitimacy involves the capacity of the [political] system to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society". This interpretation unites much related terms such as trust and confidence in administration, as well as citizen's connection with governance in terms of association and identification with it.

Local decentralisation is a term coined here based on the broader concept of decentralisation, which is generally seen as the transfer of governance capacity to lower levels of government (Dardanelli, 2021; Lago, 2021). This transfer can take different shapes, but most commonly involves institutional, policy and fiscal elements. It can be both vertical (across levels of government) and horizontal (within a level of government) in nature (Dardanelli, 2021). Important elements that indicate the presence of decentralisation are citizen representation

through election of the sub-level, the sub-level's ability to legislate and administrate, and the sub-level's ability to control revenue and expenditure (Dardanelli, 2021, pp. 13-15; Lago, 2021, pp. 1-2). Local decentralisation can then be identified through the presence of one or more of these phenomena within the local level, for example the transfer of governance competencies from a municipality to decentral governments of towns or villages. In this regard, it encompasses and shares many characteristics with processes like municipal decentralisation, suburbanisation, and local government fragmentation, of which many applications exist in different societies (Hlepas et al., 2018). Taken together, it remains a puzzle whether local decentralised forms of governance are truly so intuitive and legitimate, now that so many starkly differing forms appear to be present while moral social-political support remains strong.

## **2.2. Empirical Effects of Local Decentralisation**

Empirical literature on local decentralisation is available, though it often more implicitly than explicitly describes the concept. There, an overarching interest is visible in the outcomes of the governance structures in terms of efficiency and intuitiveness effects (Bellinger, 2022; Navarro & Pano, 2018; Rothenberg, 1970). A smaller portion of this literature additionally focusses on categorising the various types of structures themselves and the motivating factors driving their development (Kopric, 2012; Vel & Bedner, 2015). Clear is that local decentralisation has been a subject study of across time (Bellinger, 2022; Rothenberg, 1970), showcasing its continued relevance for research and society. In face of new and continuous governance challenges, many of these studies give reason for optimism when it comes to intuitiveness and the related concept of legitimacy, but much debate remains (Bellinger, 2022; Navarro & Pano, 2018).

When it comes to the efficiency of local decentralisation, positions often depend on how the concept is defined. For the case of India for example, research claims that local decentralised structures could potentially lead to a decrease in infant mortality rates. There, comparative statistics show that more decentralised areas accounted for lower mortality rates, confirming the idea that local administration is more effective (Bellinger, 2022). In the context of the United States however, a long-standing argument has been that local decentralisation produces sub-optimal outcomes in terms of economic efficiency as jurisdictions become too small and homogenous (Rothenberg, 1970, p. 63). Rationally, neither the health- nor the economic-based quantitative argument fully captures the reality of the situation here, even though much of the public administration-oriented literature seems to support the impression of more efficient governance (e.g. Navarro & Pano, 2018).



Less contested is the idea of intuitiveness of local decentralised governance, which in turn relates to legitimacy. There, with its roots often deep in societal organisation, local decentralised governance seems to create a very intuitive form of community-based administration. In the specific case of Indonesia for example, a recent convergence of innovations in law and society made it possible for village communities to return to traditional customary governance structures (Vel & Bedner, 2015). It appears that even though these local decentralised governance arrangements can differ greatly in origin and legal development from case to case (Kopric, 2012), they are often more adaptable to the needs of the local situation (Navarro & Pano, 2018; Vel & Bedner, 2015). Overall, community-based governance might be coming forward across many cases as an intuitive solution for local governance challenges (Bellinger, 2022; Navarro & Pano, 2018; Vel & Bedner, 2015), but more work remains to be done in structurally examining its exact relationship with legitimacy.

### **2.3. Municipal Decentralisation and Legitimacy**

In more theoretical literature, little knowledge exists on the effects of local decentralisation. Theorisation around its relationship with governance legitimacy thus needs to come from knowledge about the effects of related processes. Especially in light of United States urban planning, municipal decentralisation has received much attention, as it brings together recurring desires for both federalism and centrality of the neighbourhood community (Schmandt, 1972, p. 572). This specialised literature draws upon the same decentralisation rationale from administrative, psychological, sociological and political perspectives, but generally focusses on legitimacy through effectiveness (Schmandt, 1972, p. 576). There is a multitude of perspectives here, with a lively debate existing around the right size and shape of communities and their government. It is often argued that decentralising to too small and homogeneous jurisdictions might produce sub-optimal outcomes, again in terms of efficiency (Rothenberg, 1970, p. 63).

Politically speaking, the effects of municipal decentralisation are equally not just positive, as decentralised forms of self-governance in neighbourhoods might highlight differences and thus increase friction and segregation in urban societies. However, a majority of accounts is optimistic and once more highlights the general positive perception and almost intuitive appreciation of decentralisation by citizens (Schmandt, 1972, p. 578). This is not to say that the intuitiveness of decentralisation is empirically justified. In reality, faith in decentralisation in many cases is more of a matter of perception (Treisman, 2007). This focus on citizen perception provides a good starting point for inquiry about the understudied legitimacy of local decentralisation to towns and villages within a municipality.

## **2.4. The Decentralisation Theorem**

The most appropriate form of decentralisation has equally been studied the elaborate body of literature within the fields of Political Science and Public Administration, which might shine a light on governance legitimacy as well. One of the most prominent and relevant constructs in this regard, is the so-called decentralisation theorem, developed originally by Oates (1972) in the context of research on fiscal federalism. The core argument of this theorem holds that policy-making should be decentralised as much as possible to optimally adjust for the local situation. There, centralisation should only take place when this is required to regulate policy-making in issue areas where local jurisdictions would otherwise overlap (Oates, 1972). The fiscal policy logic behind the theorem is that decentralisation would ensure better local financial services in terms of citizen preferences, efficiency and accountability of the budget, which all seem to lead to more legitimacy. According to the logic, it is then only necessary to centralise to a higher level of government when the local level is no longer capable of delivering these services (Oates, 1972).

Even within its original realm of fiscal economics, the decentralisation theorem has not remained without criticism. Specifically, moving elements such as the mobility of citizens and their households can interfere with the jurisdiction logic of the theory (Bloch & Zenginobuz, 2015). Equally, from a rational economic perspective it is suggested that the efficiency aspect of the theory only holds under very exact jurisdictional spill-over quantities (Greco, 2003; Koethenbuerger, 2007). Also from a more practical perspective, it can be said that decentralisation where possible is maybe more effective, but also worsens accountability and clientelism, as citizens' relationships with the governing actors become more personalistic (Abraham, 2014; Gerring & Veenendaal, 2020). Together, Oates' (1972) decentralisation theorem, and the debate that it sparked, seem to support increased governance legitimacy through effectiveness under local decentralisation. Important there is that the system must be flexible enough to allow for centralisation, if required by the circumstances at hand.

## **2.5. Subsidiarity**

In their core, municipal decentralisation, and in particular the decentralisation theorem, rest on a very powerful construct: subsidiarity. This idea, that centralised authority should only exist to complement existing decentralised governance in tasks it cannot perform, is a central element of many (semi-)federal and supranational systems (Follesdal, 1998). Here again, the consequences for governance legitimacy depend strongly on whether it is interpreted in terms of liberty, efficiency, or justice objectives. A different focus on any of these can lead to

substantially different outcomes in terms of the polity's overall performance, and the legitimacy of a specific distribution of authority among the various government levels (Follesdal, 1998).

One of the concept's main legitimacy criticisms relates to transaction cost. The construct of keeping authority as locally as possible, often overlooks the costs in terms of efficiency associated with local bureaucratic organisation (Breton, 2006, p. 87). Nonetheless, the subsidiarity principle appears to be finding application in many decentralised, federalist, and supranational entities. Especially in the European context, subsidiarity seems intuitive from a large variety of standpoints (Follesdal, 1998) and is even enshrined in the European Charter of Local Self-Government (Council of Europe, 1985, art. 4.3). This widely-shared support makes pleads in favour of increased legitimacy under decentralisation when subsidiarity is included. However, it still leaves a gap when it comes to exactly this legitimacy of decentralisation, but then at the local level.

All in all, by conceptualising local decentralisation and governance legitimacy, both empirical and more theoretical literature on the topic is identified, which points towards a lack of academic understanding of the relationship between the two main variables of interest. There, it is important to note that local decentralisation concerns the devolution of competencies to communities within the local level, and governance legitimacy the citizens' perception of institutional appropriateness. Empirical examples of these concepts' interaction show that the efficiency of local decentralised governance can differ across cases, but it tends to be more intuitive and thus possibly more legitimate. More theoretical literature seems to affirm this perspective on intuitiveness for cases of municipal decentralisation, but also re-emphasises the central role of citizen perspectives. Especially influential are the insights from the decentralisation theorem and from subsidiarity, which appear to indicate that efficiency, accountability, and therefore maybe even legitimacy, are highest when competencies are only centralised when strictly necessary. Together, these studies give the impression that governance legitimacy is higher under local decentralisation, but an investigation specific to this relationship and its mechanism is still lacking from the literature.

### **3. Hypothesis, Conjectures, and Theoretical Framework**

Based on the literature described above, no clear-cut prognoses are easily available for the relationship between local decentralisation and governance legitimacy. In reality, much depends on the employed definitions and context related to these variables. Preliminary insights on the dynamics of community-level governance do allow to say that multiple norms and

processes are relevant for the construction of legitimacy (Connelly, 2011). It is therefore unlikely that local decentralisation is by itself sufficient to make governance more legitimate. However, based on the insights from subsidiarity described above, adaptability appears to play an important role. Legitimacy, especially when indicated through effectiveness, increases with decentralisation when well-adapted to the situation: taking decentralisation as the base-line, but flexibly allowing for specific centralisation when suitable for coordination or feasibility of policy and services (Follesdal, 1998; Oates, 1972).

The hypothesised positive relationship finds confirmation in more political perception-based definitions of legitimacy. There, it can equally be said that decentralised governance seems to result in less contestation, as it decreases fractionalisation and turnover in the political system (Gerring & Veenendaal, 2020, pp. 184-212). In reverse logic, decentralised systems likely receive more acceptance and would thus see more governance legitimacy. Nonetheless, for local decentralisation and the legitimacy of the specific governance system that it creates, these dynamics need to be explored in more detail, as the role of several related concepts is still unclear. The conjectured influence of these related variables - cohesion, partisan identity, and political-economic dynamics - is discussed below. Subsequently, a framework for identification and structural comparison of local decentralisation systems is composed and presented.

### **3.1. The Role of Cohesion**

First, the social cohesion of the local community in which decentralisation is taking place, is a recurring factor of importance in the literature. Large-N comparative investigation in of the phenomenon finds that smaller-scale governance appears to lead to more cohesion within the governed unit (Gerring & Veenendaal, 2020). The logic there is that decentralisation makes for smaller governed communities that are often less heterogeneous and more connected (Gerring & Veenendaal, 2020, pp. 65-82). Equally describing a positive influence, Putnam's (1994) comparative study of decentralisation in Italian regions, finds that decentralised governance in areas with much social and civic engagement can lead to better performance and legitimacy of institutions. Based on these theoretical insights, it thus seems like local decentralisation and cohesion are part of a mutually reinforcing positive dynamic, which also positively impacts legitimacy. It is therefore important to further consider cohesion as a factor under local decentralisation, including the way it interacts with the legitimacy of the governance system. Even though measurable through elements like community activities and initiatives, cohesion for the current intuitiveness-centred research, is best studied through citizens' perception.

### **3.2. The Role of Partisan Identity**

The second factor of importance relates to partisan identity. There, governments and administrative entities are said to rather frequently change in size as they are shaped by partisan motivations of the population and political elites (Gerring & Veenendaal, 2020, p. 366). It is thus likely that partisan identities affect decentralisation, but rationally, it can also affect legitimacy. In that case, citizens can regard the decentralised system as more or less legitimate because of partisan affiliation and thus their attitude towards the implementing government. This makes partisan identity a possible confounding variable in the relationship, which is why its influence on the other variables, also under local decentralisation, should be clearly determined. At first sight, this information might be easy to obtain through political affiliation. However, with the longitudinal aspect of decentralisation, it is equally important to obtain data on how this affiliation has changed over time.

### **3.3. The Role of Societal Transformations**

Third, as the elaborate body of literature above, on decentralisation and efficiency, already illustrates, the (local) devolution of competencies can sometimes take place out of political motivations. In democratic contexts, parties can aim to secure more support through individual local constituencies that they could secure centrally, while in authoritarian contexts it could provide opportunities to co-opt elites (Lago, 2021). In general however, it is attractive cause it tends to improve macro-economic outcomes (Lago, 2021, pp. 5-6). Especially these latter political-economic interplays, that focus on increasing efficiency and control by identifying local needs and objectives, are often named as primary causes for local decentralisation, both vertically and horizontally (Cuadrado Ballesteros et al., 2013, pp. 54-55). When studying decentralisation at the local level, it is thus crucial to enquire, through literature and citizen experience, about the wider political-economic context in which it is taking place, and the consequences this has for the relationship.

### **3.4. A Typology of Multilevel Governance**

In terms of frameworks that could help understand the dynamics of decentralisation at the local level, the literature on multi-level governance provides outcome. It distinguishes two types: one based on human community and one based on task area (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). The former type comes closest to the local decentralisation considered by this study, as it concerns a governance mode (referred to by its jurisdiction) of general purpose. This indicates that it performs many functions and responds to its own an exclusive group of constituents. The latter type however, provides an interesting alternative for comparison as it concerns specialised

jurisdictions, each performing a specific function for a shared group of constituents (Hooghe & Marks, 2003, pp. 7-8; Kopric, 2012). Additionally, it needs to be recognised that governance units can have vertical as well as horizontal interactions separate of each other (Zürn, 2020). Both classifications are useful to understand governance legitimacy better. They help to identify the relationship between constituents and government under each studied form of local decentralisation, as opposed that relationship under other (de)centralised forms of governance.

### **3.5. Continuums of Decentralised Governance**

As mentioned above, decentralisation is a powerful logic that influences a wide variety of governance systems around the world. A good way to think about the large differences between these systems, is to make comparisons in terms of choices and continuums, as proposed by Kopric (2012). There, the trade-offs identified in decentralised governance relate to: 1) local units having one or multiple functions, 2) combining the governance forms of local units or not for organisational feasibility, and 3) the size local units should take (Kopric, 2012). As a result, four continuums can be distinguished: 1) large versus small units, 2) fragmented versus consolidated governance, 3) privatisation versus etatisation policy, and 4) centralised versus decentralised governance (Kopric, 2012). The criteria of these typologies have been recognised as valuable since they allow for standardisation and comparison across highly diverse cases (Page & Goldsmith, 1985), which is often true for instances of local decentralisation.

### **3.6. Framework: Multilevel and Continuums Combined**

Combining and adapting the insights from Kopric's (2012) continuums of decentralised governance with Hooghe & Marks' (2003) multilevel governance typology, provides a solid foundation for the investigation of local decentralisation and governance legitimacy. Together, they allow for the variety of locally decentralised governance systems present, to be classified for more structural comparison. However, not all elements of both classifications are relevant for the analysis of decentralisation at the local level, which is why three continuums are selected (figure 1). From Hooghe and Marks (2003), the most important aspect is the typology of jurisdiction as human community or task area, as described above. From Kopric (2012) and Zürn (2020), the continuum of horizontality is taken, differentiating between fragmented (many actors involved) versus consolidated (only the main government actor involved) governance on both ends of the spectrum. Finally, from the remainder of Kopric' (2012) continuums, privatisation is selected, placing complete privatisation of governance tasks at one end, and complete etatisation at the other end of the spectrum. The placement of a specific case on each of these continuums can be determined through academic articles, government documents, and



descriptions by officials. Finally, the extent of local decentralisation in a case can be determined by assessing the number of competency categories – institutional, policy, and fiscal, as defined by Dardanelli (2021) – delegated to the sub-municipal level.

<b>Horizontality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fragmented (many governance actors)</li> <li>• Consolidated (one governance actor)</li> </ul>
<b>Jurisdiction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human community (general purpose)</li> <li>• Task area (specialised purpose)</li> </ul>
<b>Privatisation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Privatised (governance tasks by private)</li> <li>• Etatisised (governance tasks by government)</li> </ul>

Figure 1: continuum framework for the identification and structural comparison of local decentralisation systems, based on Hooghe and Marks (2003) and Kopric (2012).

## **4. Research Design**

The way in which decentralisation influences governance legitimacy within the local level, is studied through a two-phased research design. Because of this study's specific empirical origin, the first part of the research explores the internal validity of the relationship's dynamics in one single revelatory case. The development of a hypothetical causal mechanism for the relationship there, is the first objective of the study, which makes this phase crucial to the core of the research. Subsequently, the second phase strengthens internal and investigates external validity for the relationship, through a systematic comparison of multiple cases. Below, the two phases are described in further detail.

### **4.1. Phase 1: Exploratory Research: Single-Case Study**

As mentioned before, the research originates from one specific empirical observation: local decentralisation in the municipality of Tortosa, Catalonia, Spain. The delegation of some governance competencies from the municipality of Tortosa to the village of Bítem, appears to increase the governance legitimacy perceived by its citizens. This case is expected to be revelatory of the dynamics between the variables and can therefore be used to develop a hypothetical causal mechanism about the possible relationship (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 235). Ideally, this would involve comparing the level and mechanism of legitimacy under the past centralised system and the current local decentralised system. However, this data does not exist for either of the systems and has to be collected, partly with a retrospective element.

Instead of retrieving this data from all citizens in both systems simultaneously, the research therefore focusses on citizens that have experienced both, comparing their perceptions of the two systems while accounting for parallel personal and contextual developments.

Regarding data collection, all aspects of the relationship deserve attention. There, the presence and interaction of the dependent and independent variables, as well as of other variables that could possibly impact the relationship, need to be determined. Data pertaining to the presence and extent of local decentralisation, as well as to structural alternative explanations, is obtained from government documents, academic descriptions and interviews with government officials, complemented by interviews with citizens, all of which are available through personal networks. Data determining the level of legitimacy and the factors leading to it, depends highly on citizen perception and is therefore collected through interviews with inhabitants of Bítém.

The respondents are accessed through personal connections, as well as in social gatherings and public spaces of the village. For this phase of causal mechanism exploration, interviews with citizens should not be rigid. Instead, it is better suited to work in a semi-structured set-up with a general set of questions (appendix 1.2), from which is diverted if necessary to gain a better understanding (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 313). As visible in the appendix, the grounding questions are each asking about one variable of either the main relationship, or a conjecture of the causal mechanism. In the interview with the mayor/president of the EMD Bítém, questions are a bit more structured (appendix 1.3) as more specific details are necessary to obtain.

Analysing the data of the first phase is rather straightforward in nature. Textual data, such as official documents, is described, paraphrased, or quoted on specific elements. These are the ones relevant to understanding the presence of local decentralisation and confounding variables, falsifiable by the definitions of these concepts described. Interview data, like recordings and transcripts, is compared, equally through direct description, paraphrasing or quoting, to identify general patterns about the mechanism behind governance legitimacy. In terms of limitations, the exploratory phase is very small in empirical scope and therefore insufficient to develop theory on the investigated relationship by itself. There, the data gathered from interviews and official documents is used to investigate the internal validity of the various conjectures for the causal mechanism, but is not rich enough to allow for the building of solid theory.

#### **4.2. Phase 2: Explanatory Research: Systematic Comparison**

Investigating external validity for the hypothesised causal mechanism in the second phase, requires a systematic comparison of multiple cases. The selection of these cases is largely

determined by practical constraints. Ideally, the study would consider quantitative data on governance legitimacy, as well as on mediating and confounding variables, from all cases of local decentralised governance. This data could be compared to all cases of local centralised governance, to allow for the broadest possible generalisation. However, such specific and concrete data is not available. More feasibly, qualitative data from existing academic case studies on the consequences of centralisation and decentralisation is analysed and systematically compared.

With these cases, the research essentially takes a simplified most different systems approach. There, the aim is to select cases of local decentralisation with highly different contexts and investigate if the same causal mechanism, leading to governance legitimacy, can be found. Importantly, and in contrast to the ideal design of quantitative nature, the main independent variable does not vary in this set-up, which has important implications in terms of potential biases. As with most qualitative designs, the narrow case selection strongly limits its external validity (Halperin & Heath, 2020, pp. 240-255). This design therefore aims for an intermediate-N set-up which at least allows to investigate the same relationship in different environments. However, it will still not cover the counterfactual instances in which local decentralisation did not take place, as well as the effects that this in turn has on the legitimacy of governance.

Regarding data collection, information about the perceptions of citizens on legitimacy and the various hypothesised causal mechanism variables are the most important. However, data on dynamics of decentralisation and contextual factors is equally necessary for the research. In the systematic comparison, cases are therefore sampled purposefully, to ensure a widest possible sample variation, but once again limited by the available case-studies. The roles of variables of interest are identified in existing qualitative case studies that have been conducted on the various forms of local decentralisation (such as Faguet, 2006, Mehra, 2013, Navarro and Pano, 2018, and Rosenblatt et al., 2015). This allows to obtain data on alternative causal mechanisms. In terms of analysis, the right application of the theoretical framework and variable conceptualisations is crucial. In the intermediate-N sample from existing qualitative studies, descriptions of the variables above are therefore utilised to quote or describe the role of specific factors in each case. Systematically summarising, comparing and contrasting these outcomes then allows to understand the likelihood of the causal mechanism being similar in different contexts.

## **5. Bítem's System of Local Decentralisation**

The village of Bítem, with about 1175 inhabitants (Institut d'Estadística de Catalunya, 2023), is located at the banks of the Ebro river, around 40 kilometres land inwards from the east coast of the Iberic Peninsula. The settlement is situated five kilometres north of Tortosa, a middle-sized city of around 34 639 inhabitants (Institut d'Estadística de Catalunya, 2023), with ancient historical origins. Traditionally, Bítem has formed part of the municipality of Tortosa, over the last decades most notably as a *pedanía*, a sub-municipal entity headed by a mayor (Real Academia Española, 2023). Between 2009 and 2011 however, the village transformed into an *entitat municipal descentralitzada (EMD)*, which translates as 'decentralised municipal entity'. This governance form, in which the village has more autonomous competencies than before, but is still connected to the city for other competencies through a *conveni* (contract of rights and responsibilities) (Departament de Governació i Administracions Públiques, 2010), appears to unite the advantages of centralisation and decentralisation in a way that is legitimate to its citizens. In this chapter and the subsequent two, the EMD Bítem is therefore analysed as a revelatory case for local decentralisation and governance legitimacy, by exploring the dynamics of the governance system, the main relationship, and the related variables.

### **5.1. Bítem under Spanish and Catalan Multi-Level Governance**

The context to Bítem's form of local decentralisation, is the far-reaching system of multi-level governance both in Spain and in its autonomous community Catalonia (Colino, 2020). The Spanish system features three levels: state, autonomous communities, and local entities. This latter category is in its turn subdivided into provinces and municipalities most notably, but also includes islands, metropolitan areas, municipal groupings, and territories above and below the municipal level (ECoR, 2019; Gobierno de España - Ministerio de Administraciones Públicas, n.d.). Logically, the EMD Bítem would thus be a sub-municipal territory in the autonomous community of Catalonia, possibly under the municipality of Tortosa, in the county of Baix Ebre, and the province of Tarragona. The Spanish system however, does not include EMDs specifically, as this is a governance form created under the Catalan system. In fact, the central government is often not aware of the special character and functioning of the EMDs. This is clearly illustrated by the visit of a state official to Bítem, as described by the president of the EMD Bítem (appendix 1.1, interview 12):

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*“The central government gave us [the EMD] budget to renovate the elderly’s social home. (...) When they came to do the paperwork afterwards, we had to explain what an EMD actually is. Of course the man from Madrid had no clue.”*

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To better understand the position of the EMD Bítem, it is therefore necessary to consider the system of multilevel governance in the autonomous community of Catalonia, which according to Spanish law has the right to define its own counties and metropolitan areas (Gobierno de España - Ministerio de Administraciones Públicas, n.d.). Importantly, outside of the provinces, municipalities, and sub-/supra-municipal territories already included through the central state system, the autonomous community also has its own provinces, or *vegueries*, and even more sub-municipal administration forms such as the EMDs (Departament de Governació i Administracions Públiques, 2010). Under the Catalan system, the EMD Bítem, which in turn actually includes a neighbourhood (*barri*) in the form of a settlement just north of it, is thus a semi-independent municipality connected to the city of Tortosa, in the county of Baix-Ebre, and in the province of Terres de l'Ebre.



Figure 2: structure of multi-level governance under the mixed Spanish/Catalan system.

In the consequential diverse landscape of governance structures (figure 2), which appears to lead to overlapping and sometimes conflicting jurisdictions (Colino, 2020; León & Jurado,

2020), the EMD Bítem seems to find itself trapped between two systems. As mentioned above, the specific Catalan local entities are often only to a limited extent considered and recognised by the central Spanish government, which makes it more difficult for them to participate in official procedures such as applications for funding (appendix 1.1, interview 12). In addition, whereas the municipalities are the same entities with the same jurisdictions under both systems, the Spanish *provincias* and Catalan *veguerías* are different entities but with similar intended jurisdictions. Arguably, the *veguerías* might have been created to replace the *provincias*, but are not operational and recognised to that extent (3Cat, 2010), yet can still cause confusion and conflict around administrative responsibilities (León & Jurado, 2020). This overlap makes that the EMD Bítem, as a semi-independent sub-municipal entity, sometimes struggles to reach, and be considered by, the different government levels.

## **5.2. Bítem's Development Into an EMD**

Whereas Catalonia as a region has a long and rich history of public administrative systems (Dowling, 2022), the relevant recent history of governance in Bítem can roughly be divided into three phases: authoritarian rule under the regime of dictator Francisco Franco, democratised governance as a *pedanía* of Tortosa, and semi-independent governance as an EMD (appendix 1.1, interview 12). Under the Francoist dictatorship, from 1936 to 1975, much of the democratisation processes of the previous decades, that had strengthened the self-governance and participation of citizens in villages like Bítem, were reversed as central authoritarian rule was imposed (Dowling, 2022, pp. 129-130). This included an intense process of national centralisation and homogenisation, by which economy, culture, and politics in Catalonia were repressed and reformed to benefit the central government (Dowling, 2022; Eade, 2022). The period of Francoist rule in Catalonia, and thus in Bítem, witnessed changing degrees of political repression, but overall did not allow for participation through decentralisation outside of the family, municipality, and union structures facilitated by the regime-controlled national movement, which had a representative in each village (Payne, 1987).

In the years following Franco's death, democratic reforms were gradually implemented under pressure from society (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2020). Real change in governance for small villages like Bítem however, came with the 1978 Spanish constitution. There, the topic of decentralisation was one of the most contentious issues for the new government elected in the first democratic elections two years before (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2020). The constitution that was agreed upon, laid out the current structure of multilevel governance (Gobierno de España - Ministerio de Administraciones Públicas, n.d.), as under the Spanish system described above.



The village of Bítem became a *pedanía*, part of Tortosa, with its own mayor, the *alcalde pedáneo*. Under this form of governance, Bítem did not elect any officials at the village level, and simply voted for the municipal administration as part of Tortosa, which in turn appointed a mayor for the *pedanía* (appendix 1.1, interview 12). Hence, with the system established through the Spanish constitution, the people of Bítem achieved democratic participation, but without election of its own officials still depended on the city to take care of village affairs, and therefore experienced little self-governance (appendix 1.1, interview 12).

This lack of self-governance of village affairs, embodied through the municipal appointment of the *alcalde pedáneo*, was for Bítem one of the main drivers behind the transformation to an EMD (appendix 1.1, interview 12). Importantly, the process to become an EMD requires an application by the responsible municipality to the central government and approval from the autonomous community. This implicates that, for the step to local decentralisation to be taken in Spain, it is important for the local community to have a good relationship with its municipality. In the case of Bítem, this relationship allowed for a referendum to take place and confirm the population's desire to be an EMD (appendix 1.1, interview 12), after which the municipality of Tortosa initiated the process on 30 September 2009 (Departament de Governació i Administracions Públiques, 2010). Throughout 2010, the decision was confirmed by the various government levels and published in their official bulletins, resulting in the EMD Bítem becoming fully operational in 2011. From this point onwards, Bítem experienced true local decentralisation, agreeing with Tortosa about the delegation of several competencies in the management of village affairs, and of course being able to vote for its own EMD president.

### **5.3. Bítem's Governance System as an EMD**

Listening to the mayor of Bítem's description (appendix 1.1, interview 12), it becomes clear that, for the village, the EMD system that emerged out of the transformation, is certainly an important step forward when it comes to the desired self-governance. The village now directly elects its own mayor (the president of the EMD) through a separate voting procedure that takes place simultaneously with the wider municipal elections. Candidates that run for this position do need to be part of a political party that is represented in the whole municipality, as they need to adhere also to a party programme that goes beyond the village itself. Equally, the results of the original voting process are now not only mixed with those of the wider municipality, but also directly determine the composition of Bítem's *junta veinal*: the village council.

Importantly, being an EMD does not mean that Bítem is fully self-governing. Even though the village now elects its own administration, it is still partially dependent on the *ajuntament*

(municipal government) of Tortosa, with the *conveni* as the backbone of the relationship. This contract outlines the details of the local decentralised governance system by stating the EMD's territorial delimitation, property rights, competencies, treasury, funding, and oversight, and is monitored by a shared evaluation commission and revised after eight years (Ajuntament de Tortosa, 2020). There are several important elements to note about the agreement.

Regarding property rights, Bitem has control over all government properties on its territory, except for patrimonial landmarks. Regarding competencies (Ajuntament de Tortosa, 2020), the EMD can independently regulate all activity in its public domain through signage, authorisations, and proposals towards the citizens. It is responsible for maintenance of public buildings and areas, for which the municipality of Tortosa provides regular planning and design assistance. Health and education facilities are therefore also maintained by the EMD, while health and education services are shared with Tortosa on a case-by-case basis. Similarly, the local police services do report to government of the EMD, but are not administered by it, just like waste management, which is for a large part still conducted by Tortosa. Regarding financial matters, the EMD Bitem only has very limited competencies to collect its own revenue (only through payments for minor services like street parking and the public pool). The majority of its budget for basic tasks thus comes from the municipality's yearly contribution based on, among others, a share of the overall collected taxes. For extraordinary expenses, the village depends on one-time contributions and funds from private actors and higher tiers of government, for which the EMD, as an semi-independent governing entity, can often apply.

Coming back to the operationalisations introduced before, it seems clear that the semi-independent structure of the EMD Bitem is a solid case of local decentralisation. It allows to get an initial understanding of its relationship with governance legitimacy. Considering the village's separate mayor and council voting process, which allows it to administer its own territory and budget to a certain extent, the case certainly adheres to Dardanelli's (2021) definition that focusses on representation, administration, and expenditure at the sub-level. Regarding Bitem's fit in the defined theoretical continuum framework, it is safe to say that the type of decentralisation taking place in the EMD is rather straight-forward and uniform in nature. Competencies are delegated in a consolidated manner to the EMD's official government, which is a single governance actor with general-purpose jurisdiction, and which executes most tasks itself without outsourcing to private actors. Taken together, this makes the EMD Bitem a rather conventional case of decentralisation, but at the local level.

## 6. Local Decentralisation and Governance Legitimacy in Bítem

As mentioned above, in determining the dynamics of local decentralisation and legitimacy, citizen perception plays an important role. Consequently, outside of the understanding of formal local decentralisation developed in the previous chapter, it is equally important to understand how the process is perceived by the citizens, and if it matches their feeling of legitimacy. This chapter therefore discusses the insights from the exploratory interviews with citizens of Bítem, as well as with its president-mayor (appendix 1.1). It does so by discussing separately their perceptions of local decentralisation and of governance legitimacy, and subsequently, by considering how these are related to each other.

### 6.1. Perceived Dynamics of Local Decentralisation

First off, it is important to note that many citizens, at least in the case of Bítem, are not so much concerned with, or aware of, the process of local decentralisation. From the interviews it appears that this is mainly related to their political interest and awareness. Interviewees are in most cases very open to speaking about village governance and social life, even in situations when these are implicitly political dynamics. However, they are hesitant to engage in conversations about topics where the words ‘politics’ or ‘government’ are explicitly mentioned. When asked about past changes in village politics, one respondent for example answered (appendix 1.1, interview 7):

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*“Look, to me, this just does not interest me very much. I have never really cared about it, I have always been non-affiliated. Things simply change and I don’t mind how or by whom. Regardless, it is always good.”*

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Out of the thirteen exploratory interviews conducted with citizens of Bítem, almost half of the interviewees indicates to have little or no interest in politics. Sometimes these citizens simply attach much value to stability and cohesion of the community (appendix 1.1, interview 4), or they actually do have a strong opinion about independence and self-governance of the village, but not about the ‘formal politics’. In those cases, the opinion appears to result more from an intuitive perception of independence and self-governance as being matters of all people, rather than from an actual understanding of systems of politics and government.

The latter the group of respondents seems to regard politics as the concern of the societal elites, far removed from their reality. This is in line with past research, which clearly shows the

prominence of interest in politics as a factor. In a diverse global sample, around 78% of respondents engages with politics through voting during elections, but only a small percentage of respondents is more concretely involved through attending political events (33%), or engaging in (online) debates (17%) (Castillo & Wike, 2018). As a result, it should again be noted that, at least for a part of Bitem's citizens, societal organisation and governance are subconscious matters that relate to their perception and intuition, separate from the 'formal politics' they are confronted with.

Simultaneously, there is a group of citizens in the village that is interested and actively involved in politics, and that does see a role for themselves in interacting with the 'formal politics'. This group tends to have a better understanding of the functioning of the political system and governance structures like the EMD. Logically, the citizens in this group still have the strong opinion about independence and self-governance that is present in the first group, but this appears to be based more on understanding than on perception. Crucially, this variance in understanding leads to different perceptions regarding the extent of decentralisation.

Within the group of less politically interested and engaged citizens, some respondents see Bitem as involved in much self-governance. However, most citizens perceive a great dependence of the village on, again, 'formal politics'. By contrast, within the group of highly politically engaged and interested citizens, most respondents recognise that the EMD is a semi-independent system, which has elaborate but not full self-governance competencies. Based on this understanding, the respondents then argue for more, or for less independence of the village. This is illustrated by one of the interviewees (appendix 1.1, appendix 14) saying:

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*"It is better to be a completely independent village. (...) There would be more subsidies that we could access to do things in the village."*

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The second important thing to note, relates to the horizontality of the local decentralisation in Bitem. As discussed above, the formal process that takes place is mostly vertical in nature, with delegation of competencies from the *ajuntament* of Tortosa, as one single governing entity, to the EMD Bitem, as another single governing entity. However, based on the answers in the exploratory interviews, it can be argued that horizontal decentralisation does take place in a more informal way, through the involvement of associations. Named by nearly every respondent as an important – but not political or governing – element of the local community,

the clubs play an important role in societal organisations by uniting citizens in social activities. Examples of such associations include the *Associació de Caçadors* (hunting), *Associació de Jubilats* (elderly), *Club Esportiu Montaspre* (hiking), *Unio Esportiva Remolins-Bítem* (football), as well as the former *Associació de Dones* (women) and *Associació de Veïns* (neighbours). These structures might be mostly apolitical in nature, yet their organisational role in a small community like Bítem should not be underestimated.

Similarly, it is empirically clear that the local religious institution, the Catholic *parròquia* (parish) led by the progressive *mossèn* Tomàs also holds an important role within the community. The church provides an important meeting point for the older generations, as well as a point of contact and council for the younger generations. This central community role is illustrated through an official delegation which represents the EMD in important church events and masses. Overall, these types of horizontal decentralisation might thus be not so extensive in the formal political sense, but are certainly influential in the informal sense.

## **6.2. Perceived Dynamics of Governance Legitimacy**

Reflecting on governance legitimacy in the case of Bítem, one must once again start from Lipset's (1960, p. 77) definition: the citizen's belief that "the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society". As described above, based on the EMD President's interpretation, this was one of the main drivers of the transformation to EMD. To be more precise: the belief of Bítem's citizens that the former political institutions (including the process of appointment of a mayor) as part of the municipality of Tortosa, did not rightly represent the village's interests.

This lower level of legitimacy under the old governance system is largely confirmed when considering the exploratory interviews. When asked if and why political institutions were right for them when Bítem was a *pedanía* of Tortosa, almost all respondents reacted with a negative answer. They name too much dependence on the city's policies, and insufficient control over own village affairs and budget, as the main reasons. Some answered that this coincided with the quality of the representatives. Furthermore, the two citizens that preferred the *pedanía* system or were indifferent to it in their answer, not only indicated to be little interested and involved in politics, but also still preferred the EMD when asked to compare the two governance systems (appendix 1.1, interviews 1, 2, 7). Logically, the transformation to the semi-independent governance system of the EMD should have taken away some of the concerns around the old system and thus lead to increased legitimacy of governance. Whereas this logic

for a large part holds under the exploratory interviews, it cannot easily be concluded that the EMD is the most legitimate form of governance for Bítem.

Clearly visible across the answers of the various interviewees, is the beforementioned desire for independence and self-governance, preferably as far-reaching as possible. Out of the thirteen interviews with citizens, four interviewees indicated to see a fully independent Bítem as a better system, and three more indicated to agree with this viewpoint if certain practical conditions were met. Of the remaining interviewed citizens, one indicated to be indifferent, and five others expressed to be against full independence for the village. As these exploratory interviews are not meant to draw conclusions from quantitative comparison, it would not be fair to say that citizens deem full self-governance as more legitimate. Nonetheless, it does highlight the relevance of the independence sentiment and perception.

Finding direct control as an important link between decentralisation and legitimacy, is in general terms supported by the academic literature. Past research has been conducted on the related concept of programmatic representativeness: the extent to which citizens' interests are represented in politics (Gerring & Veenendaal, 2020, p. 108). There, it was found that larger-scale political communities experience less programmatic representativeness (Frederick, 2010; Keena, 2016). Strictly speaking, this only says that citizen interests are better represented in politics of small communities, not that these interests are actually implemented. However, the theory behind these results holds that in smaller communities, citizens are better able to hold politicians accountable for the representation of their interests (Gerring & Veenendaal, 2020, p. 109). This also implies that citizens exercise more influence over executives to have them pursue policy in their interest, which is the definition direct control intended here. When asked about the Pedanía, one citizen for example expressed (appendix 1.1, interview 8):

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*“It was worse. Now we are a bit more independent. Before, we had to rely on Tortosa for everything.”*

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Among the remarks and conditions expressed by, again, the more politically interested and involved citizens, who tend to be aware of the governance systems' limitations, the village's geography, size, and resources are the most prominent. They argue that the EMD system works well for Bítem because its close proximity to a city, its relatively small population, and its



limited resources, do not allow the village to be fully independent of Tortosa. This is perfectly exemplified by the following response regarding EMD suitability (appendix 1.1, interview 5):

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*“Yes, for the size of Bítem. When the village is small in size, there is a number of services that would be very costly to have. For a small village, being an EMD is more efficient than being completely independent.”*

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Noteworthy is that this position is not supported by the president of the EMD (appendix 1.1, interview 12), the person with probably the most knowledge of the system, who would favour full independence if possible. In clarification, she points to full independence working out for other villages close to cities, with smaller populations and less resources. Aside from the consideration if this standpoint is politically motivated, the different arguments do highlight the debate and tension around legitimacy: through self-governance versus operational efficiency.

This finding is again largely in line with academic theory on decentralisation, efficiency, and legitimacy. These concepts are often related to each other in the literature, and especially efficiency and legitimacy are thought to be interacting (Offe, 1984). In many contexts, (local) governance reforms are taking place to strengthen efficiency, but these do not per se have unambiguous outcomes (Evans, 2014). In general, decentralisation does not always bring more efficiency (O’dwyer & Ziblatt, 2006). Often, government-inherent factors such as resources and capacity determine if decentralisation increases legitimacy or not (Robinson, 2007). The finding that governance efficiency is a factor that can influence, but does not in itself form part of, the relationship between local decentralisation and legitimacy, is therefore realistic.

### **6.3. Hypothesised Relationship Local Decentralisation and Governance Legitimacy**

When taking together the insights from the exploratory interviews in Bítem, it appears that the intuitiveness and practical advantages of self-governance can, with the right conditions, lead to increased governance legitimacy under local decentralisation. As described above, a strong desire of the community to be in control of the affairs that affect it, and to be able to choose its own representatives, is clearly visible across the interviewed citizens’ responses. Own control over budget spending, priority setting, and mayor election, are named as the most important factors that make the current EMD system receive higher valuations of appropriateness than the past system of *pedanía*. In line with this, even stronger local decentralised or self-governing systems can count on even higher levels of legitimacy from some respondents. This form would

bring within reach some of the expressed objectives like control over local landmarks, revenue generation, and professionalisation of the government.

When purely considering the drivers behind increased legitimacy under local decentralisation from the exploratory interviews, the factor of governance closer and more responsive to the citizen, with more direct control, should thus play a mediating role in the envisioned causal mechanism. However, of equal crucial importance are the practical considerations and constraints mentioned by – in particular the well-informed – citizens. The EMD is in most responses still named as the most appropriate, and thus legitimate, system of governance for the village's specific situation. As mentioned above, this mainly relates to Bítem's small population size and limited ability to generate income, as well as to the proximity of Tortosa as a big city. This makes it more efficient to still be part of the larger municipality for competencies like social service provision. Consequently, the factor of efficiency should have a moderating role in the hypothesised causal mechanism (figure 3).



Figure 3: incorporating 'direct control' and 'governance efficiency' into preliminary schematic representation of the hypothesised causal mechanism around local decentralisation and legitimacy.

## **7. Contextual Factors Influencing Local Decentralisation in Bítem**

Outside of the effect of variables like direct control and efficiency, found to be influential in the main relationship between local decentralisation and legitimacy described above, the role of the hypothesised contextual variables should equally be determined. Community cohesion, societal transformations, partisanism, and corruption all feature prominently in the literature around decentralisation and multilevel governance, leading to specific theoretical expectations regarding their influence on legitimacy under local decentralisation. These expectations, expressed below through the influential work of Gerring & Veenendaal (2020), serve as the baseline for the investigation. The subsequent analysis of exploratory interviews in Bítem then allows to assess these predictions and complement the hypothesised relationship with new variables to construct a plausible causal mechanism around it.

### **7.1. Community Cohesion**

According to decentralisation theory, cohesion decreases when the scale of political units increases. Driving this decrease are more heterogeneity, less connectedness, and more deviance from social norms (Gerring & Veenendaal, 2020, p. 370). There, larger-scale communities are often more diverse when it comes to the beliefs, values, and identities that are relevant to politics (Gerring & Veenendaal, 2020, p. 66). These larger-scale communities equally tend to offer less opportunities for citizens to meet each other personally on a regular basis, leading to less social trust and common identity (Gerring & Veenendaal, 2020, p. 75). In these situations of decreased common identity and trust, it is likely that community members in their behaviour divert from set social norms more often, or perceive their fellow citizens to do so (Gerring & Veenendaal, 2020, p. 76). The interaction of these dynamics makes that larger-scale communities often witness lower levels of community cohesion. Logically, it is then predicted that smaller-scale communities, such as the political scope of local decentralisation, experience higher levels of community cohesion. In line with this prediction, it is expected that the political institutions that enable these higher levels of cohesion are more often perceived as right for the community, making for higher governance legitimacy.

When considering the responses given during the exploratory interviews in Bítem, it is clear that community cohesion is indeed a factor of importance. First, the theoretical assumption that cohesion increases under local decentralisation is confirmed, may it not be with a very strong effect. A majority of respondents does indeed express an experience of increased cohesion, indicated through the Catalan term *sentiment de poble*, since the transformation to the EMD system (appendix 1.1). Many of these interviewees refer to the number of social activities and initiatives in the village, which has gradually increased over time and allows to people to connect better. At first sight, this view appears to support the theory of increased cohesion through increased interconnectedness under local decentralisation. However, several respondents equally report a decreased interest and participation in the social initiatives, indicating lower levels of cohesion (appendix 1.1). Interviewees mention competitiveness with Tortosa's large events as a motivator for the decreased participation, and also describe that cohesion has always been present, but now simply takes a different, more visible, form.

Second, community cohesion does appear to be a significant determining factor for governance legitimacy. There, many respondents naturally refer to dynamics of community cohesion, even when not specifically asked about the topic. Especially when discussing horizontal decentralisation, with the role of associations in the community, cohesion is mentioned as an

important and credible development by many respondents. In addition, community cohesion also features in responses when asked about future objectives for the village, and even several times when discussing the advantages and disadvantages and the legitimacy of the different governance systems. In particular this latter discussion is very illustrative of the importance the cohesion. A clear example of the relevance of community cohesion as a factor in creating governance legitimacy, comes from statements such as (appendix 1.1, interview 4):

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*“An even more independent village would be better, as it might lead to more cohesion.”*

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Academically, the relationship between decentralisation, cohesion, and legitimacy is not clear-cut. Significant differences exist in the outcomes of scientific studies regarding decentralisation's effect on cohesion (Scott, 2009). Similarly, in community governance, cohesion is just one of the factors that can co-construct legitimacy (Connelly, 2011). Rationally, if community cohesion was not a factor of importance in the causal mechanism around the relationship, it would not feature as prominently as a topic across the different interviews. In line with the literature however, it is not likely that this factor always results directly from local decentralisation, nor that it always impacts governance legitimacy. As a result, for the case of Bitem, community cohesion might not per se be a mediating factor in the causal mechanism, but appears to still play a moderating role the creation of governance legitimacy.

## **7.2. Societal Transformations**

Evidently, the effects and interactions of variables described above do not take place inside a vacuum. It is crucial to consider the societal context and its transformations in relation to which the causal mechanism takes place. These developments can be diverse in nature, with political, economic, and natural events being among the important examples. Rationally, simultaneous transformations in the wider political sphere, such as changes in regime type or electoral system, which directly or indirectly influence the community, can be confounding to the effects of local decentralisation. In a similar way, major economic transformations experienced by the community, such extreme growth or decline in wealth or living standards can influence the process of local decentralisation, as well as the citizens' experience of legitimacy. In addition, natural phenomena like storms, floods, or draughts, can severely impact the community's livelihoods and therefore its form of governance and legitimacy perception. Evidently, the

possible societal transformations are numerous, which is why the exploratory interviews in Bítem again centralise citizen perception to identify such events based on relevant examples.

The view emerging from this citizen perception is nearly unanimous: very little drastic societal transformation has taken place simultaneous to the local decentralisation process. In terms of politics, many respondents recognise the sketched trend of democratisation over the years, starting with the fall of the Francoist dictatorship and progressing through the various political reforms. However, none of the interviewees identifies major transformations in the wider political system affecting the community (appendix 1.1). Furthermore, the interviewed citizens of Bítem do indicate several ups and downs when it comes to the wellbeing of the people in the village. However, these are spread across time and do not coincide with the local decentralisation changes. Such ups and downs include the decay and reconstruction of communal facilities and landmarks, often coinciding with better or worse personal leadership of the village (appendix 1, interviews 4, 14). Finally, no major transformations can for that matter be discovered in the natural realm. Interviewees do report occasional periods of draught or floods to have taken place over the years, but not coinciding with the period before or after transition to EMD. If societal transformations of the political, economic, or natural kind would have played an important role, respondents would have been much more confident and aligned in naming these events. Hence, it can be concluded that confounding factors to the causal mechanism are likely not to be found in major societal transformations.

### **7.3. Corruption**

Literature on decentralisation further discusses the role that the scale of political units can have on corruption. Even though concrete evidence remains to be found, it is often suggested that corruption is more present in smaller political units. In situations of decentralisation, the more direct influence and control that citizens have in governance described above, might easily lead to dynamics of clientelism or even corruption (Gerring & Veenendaal, 2020). This could be the case because citizens are closer to, and often even have personal connections to administrators, through which they could receive benefits, or undemocratically influence policy. It is thus expected that the more direct control of citizens on governance under local decentralisation, leads to more, or less legitimacy, depending the influence that corruption has.

In the case of Bítem, the exploratory interviews make clear that corruption does not play a role of significance when it comes to local decentralisation and governance legitimacy in the village. About half of the interviewed citizens state that all forms of corruption are absent, or that they are not aware of any. Out of the remaining respondents, only one claims that corruption might

have increased a bit under the EMD (appendix 1.1, interview 1), while another respondent claims that it must have decreased because of the closer social and institutional controls on these practices in the community (appendix 1.1, interview 5). One interviewee highlights that, regardless of the governance system, there have always been small favours taking place, by saying (appendix 1.1, interview 10):

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*“What before was not done with money, was done with meals.”*

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Across the responses therefore, no serious forms of corruption - such as officials misusing public money – are recognised in the village, but sometimes clientelist dynamics might be taking place. In those cases, small favours might be done, and access to government services might be easier, if citizens have a personal connection to the officials. This is understandable given the small and personalistic style of governance and in general does not take any worrying shape. In addition, it is fair to say that, if corruption would have played a more central role in determining governance legitimacy, more citizens would have mentioned examples that they are aware of. All in all, given the variety and balance in responses, without anyone expressing serious concerns about corruption, can be concluded that this factor does not play a role of importance in the local decentralisation and legitimacy dynamics for Bitem.

#### **7.4. Partisan Identification and Support**

Relating not so much to the process of local decentralisation, but being even more determining for the creation of legitimacy, are the dynamics of partisanism. Logically, a governance system in which a citizen's political favourite is in power, is easily regarded as the appropriate one by that citizen. Whether citizens identify with, and support the politicians in power or not, could therefore be a decisive factor for governance legitimacy. Consequently, if simultaneous to the local decentralisation process, the party in power changes, this might influence the interviewed citizens' perceptions of legitimacy of the new governance system. Partisanism can therefore threaten the internal validity of the relationship by providing an explanation for increased or declined governance legitimacy alternative to local decentralisation.

When considering the case of Bitem however, it appears that partisan identity and support have very little influence on the relationship. In fact, without even considering the exploratory interviews, official statistics of municipal government composition already diminish the likelihood of partisanism playing a role. Parallel to the local decentralisation process, the



governing party *Convergència i Unió* (CiU), received 41.44% (2007), 49.15% (2011), and 34.34% (2015) of votes, through which it was continuously in power, despite slightly changing council compositions (El País, n.d.). Furthermore, executive power in the equally remained in the hands of the same people: in Tortosa, mayor Ferran Bel Accensi from 2007 to 2018, and in Bítim, mayor and first EMD president Josep Cugat Ginovart from 2007 to 2019. With this consistency in leadership, it would be difficult to argue that citizens' perception of governance legitimacy was influenced by their preferred party taking or losing power.

In addition, when including the results given by interview respondents, one can see that political affiliations are diversely spread across the interviewees, mostly remaining the same over time, or at most becoming a bit more moderate (appendix 1.1). If partisan identities were influential here, a constant in perceived (de)legitimacy, simultaneous to the change of systems under the same political leadership would have been visible in the responses. This further strengthens the idea that partisan identification and support have not influenced the respondents in their perception of governance legitimacy. Together, this implicates that out of the explored contextual factors, only community cohesion has to be included in the hypothetical mechanism as an important factor (figure 4), and that partisanism, just like corruption and societal transformations, can be left out.

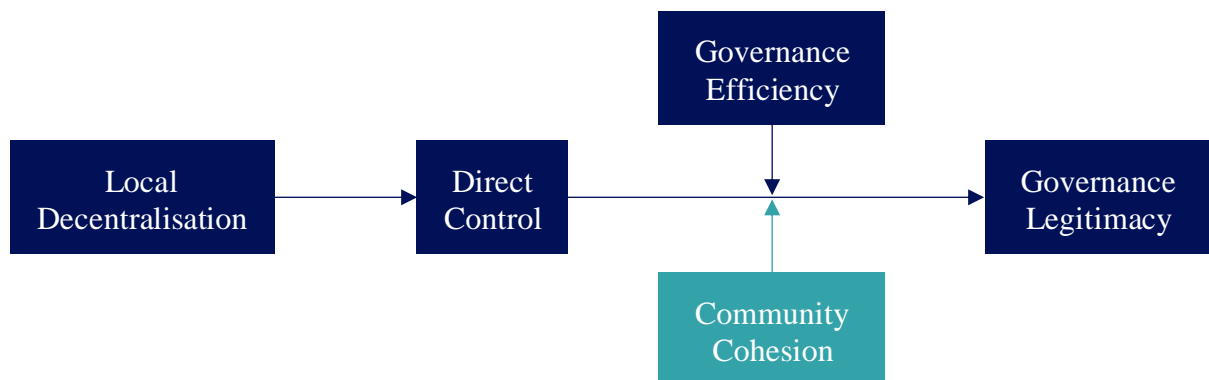


Figure 4: incorporating community cohesion as a factor into the final schematic representation of the hypothesised causal mechanism around local decentralisation and governance legitimacy.

## **8. A Systematic Comparison of Local Decentralisation**

The second phase of this study is explanatory in nature and focuses on testing the hypothesised causal mechanism, as developed in the exploratory phase. It makes a first step in developing theory on local decentralisation and governance legitimacy by investigating the internal and external validity of the relationship. It does so by taking the hypothesis out of the context in

which it was originally developed, through a systematic analysis of different cases. In absence of sufficient quantitative data, the present chapter conducts a more feasible intermediate-N comparative analysis, based on a most different systems design. Rounding-off the study, the subsequent chapter proposes a design for follow-up research under ideal circumstances.

In order to get an indication of the wider validity of the hypothesised relationship, it is valuable to investigate more cases of local decentralisation. Studies that focus on governance legitimacy under local decentralisation, do not feature much in the academic literature. Nonetheless, there are case studies of this kind which, more or less implicitly, provide information on the factors of interest from the causal mechanism, often by measuring related, or proxy variables. Synthesising this information and comparing it in a systematic manner, can then help generate insight into the credibility of the hypothesised causal mechanism outside of the context in which it was developed. Evidently, as it consists of just a handful of cases, each informed by a single academic study, this investigation is neither sufficiently quantitative, nor sufficiently in-depth, to draw strong conclusions on the relationship's internal and external validity. Instead, it should be seen as indicative research, following an expanded but simplified most different systems design. It makes use of existing case studies as data to inform a systematic comparison of the same relationship under different circumstances.

### **8.1. Rural EATIMs and Urban Distritos in Spain**

Beyond the specific case of Bitem, Spain is home to many other examples of local decentralisation. In their contribution to an edited volume on sub-municipal governance in Europe, Navarro and Pano (2018) implicitly describe local decentralisation for this context. In essence, they differentiate between two forms of sub-municipal governance in Spain: traditional rural territories (EATIMs) and modern urban districts. Both are governance systems in which decentralisation takes place below the municipal level, but the origins and functions of these systems are different (Navarro & Pano, 2018, p. 228). The authors find this dual model of sub-municipal governance to be reflective of the challenges and the transformation that local governance is facing. As a part of global demographic shifts, urbanisation brings challenges of shrinking to rural areas, and of growth to cities (Navarro & Pano, 2018, p. 244). For the sake of effective comparison, the rural form of local decentralisation will be the focus here.

Similar to the specific case of Bitem, the decentralisation taking place in other parts of Spain is rather straightforward and moderately far-reaching in terms of independence. Devolution of competencies almost exclusively takes place vertically, from municipality executives to a community's mayor and council, without involving other actors horizontally (Navarro & Pano,

2018, pp. 234-235). This dynamic only involves public actors, in the form of elected and appointed officials, no private actors. The sub-municipal units have general purpose jurisdictions with regular municipality tasks, sometimes supplemented by service provision necessary and specific to the area (Navarro & Pano, 2018, p. 236). Contrary to these relatively far-reaching institutional and policy competencies, the sub-municipal units do not have much fiscal control and still depend much on municipal budgets (Navarro & Pano, 2018, p. 236). Taken together, local decentralisation in the case of Spain is mostly coherent and straightforward in nature, but only moderately far-reaching.

In terms of governance legitimacy and its causal mechanism, the Spanish case appears to be in line with the hypothesised dynamics. Especially in rural areas, local decentralisation is deeply rooted in societal traditions. It is a form of governance regarded as intuitive, perceived to have positive effects on participation and efficiency (Navarro & Pano, 2018, p. 237). It is therefore often implemented with these goals in mind: maintaining efficiency in small-scale settlements and allowing for participation in large-scale urban administration (Navarro & Pano, 2018, pp. 242-243). In practice, this involves measures to make decisions more efficiently, closer to the citizen, with more direct influence through separate elections and participatory tools (Navarro & Pano, 2018, pp. 242-243). Hence, from the article, it is clear that governance legitimacy is positively impacted by local decentralisation, even though exact measured outcomes are not described. Similarly, factors from the hypothesised causal mechanism are involved in this effect, but their exact interaction is not completely clear.

## **8.2. Rural Sołectwa and Urban Dzielnice in Poland**

Moving to another case within the European continent, local decentralisation in Poland can equally be seen as a dual system. The article by Swianiewicz (2018) describes this contrast between sub-municipal governance in urban and rural areas. These governance forms might be regulated by the same law and thus look rather similar on paper, but in reality they do function very differently (Swianiewicz, 2018, p. 169). Local decentralised governance in rural areas seems to generate greater citizen involvement by appealing to intuitive traditional structures (Sołectwa). Simultaneously, the same process in urban areas (Dzielnice) appears to find a poor connection with, and involvement of, the local communities (Swianiewicz, 2018, pp. 187-188). The author attributes this continued difference to both the difference in traditional roots and to the influence of specific societal groups on politics (Swianiewicz, 2018, p. 169). If conducted properly however, both forms can have positive legitimacy outcomes.

In terms of local decentralisation, the two forms of sub-municipal governance are not so different in theory. Poland's legal system only creates a general framework for decentralisation, which recognises just one type of sub-municipal unit, it being in rural or urban areas (Swianiewicz, 2018, p. 169). Much authority to arrange the devolution of competencies therefore rests in the hands of the individual municipalities. Their councils can decide on important decentralisation matters such as the transfer of money and functions, as well as the defining of sub-municipal boundaries (Swianiewicz, 2018, p. 170). Recent legal innovations encourage municipalities to support forms of local decentralisation in rural areas, but less for urban areas, which results in large differences between municipalities (Swianiewicz, 2018, p. 172). When implemented in far-reaching ways however, local decentralisation can involve the election of community councils and disposition over the own delegated budget. Once again, this decentralisation is vertical in nature, to public actors with general-purpose jurisdictions (Swianiewicz, 2018, pp. 170-186). In sum, large differences exist in local decentralisation in Poland, but when implemented the process is often quite far-reaching.

Legitimacy-wise, positive effects are visible, depending on the context. Like for the case of Spain, it is clear that a return to traditional rural structures of self-governance is an intuitive step in Poland. There, revitalising traditional community governance leads to increased citizen interest and participation in local politics (Swianiewicz, 2018, p. 187). By contrast, in the urban context a negative spiral is visible in which few delegated competencies and little citizen involvement strengthen each other, exacerbated by a poor connection to communities (Swianiewicz, 2018, p. 188). It therefore appears that, in this case, direct control and governance efficiency are once again very influential. The factor of community cohesion however, does not feature explicitly nor implicitly, which makes that its influence can be neither confirmed nor negated.

### **8.3. Traditional Kgotlas and VDCs in Botswana**

Local decentralisation in Botswana takes the shape of participatory organs within traditional structures. The article by Phago and Molosi-France (2018) describes the case of these 'village development committees' (VDCs). It presents an interesting example of a situation in which traditional governance structures are employed to boost citizen participation, but in fact lead to opposite results. The governance that results is not responsive to community needs, struggles with accountability, and has a poor account of service delivery (Phago & Molosi-France, 2018, p. 755). The community participation structures are deemed too weak and can thus better be

seen as consultative instead of participatory governance mechanisms, similar to the traditional structures that they are based on (Phago & Molosi-France, 2018, p. 752).

In the case of Botswana, local decentralisation is not very far-reaching. The created governance structure is intended to be a participatory decision-making mechanism, where communities can practice more self-governance. However, barely any of the important governance competencies are in reality delegated to sub-municipal levels of government. The VDCs do not have any fiscal control, and do only to a very limited extent possess institutional and policy powers (Phago & Molosi-France, 2018). Arguably, the limited decentralisation that does take place, is also more pluriform in nature according to the theoretical framework. There, it is indeed the VDC that takes on limited general-purpose jurisdiction in policy creation, but this body is in turn composed of multiple actors. In the VDC, the village chief (kgosi), area councillors and extension/community development workers, represent traditional village structures and the central government alongside the elected representatives (Phago & Molosi-France, 2018, pp. 750-751), making the governance more horizontal in nature. This results in local decentralisation in Botswana being weak, having only limited policy competencies delegated in a public and general-purpose, but more horizontal, manner.

The VDC system faces issues with legitimacy, as its official purpose is not well-matched with the local governance reality. The traditional governance structure with the village chief and assembly (kgotla) that VDCs are integrated in, do not sustain the neutral public participation objective of the local decentralised bodies. Instead, VDCs often become consultative bodies, subject to the politicised interference of prominent leaders instead of grassroots voices, which enjoys less legitimacy and leads to less citizen engagement (Phago & Molosi-France, 2018, pp. 751-752). In line with this dynamic, citizens gain very little direct control over policy. Consequently, resulting governance is little efficient, achieving effects for the local community in just a few policy areas (Phago & Molosi-France, 2018, p. 471). Similarly, community cohesion is not discussed, but seems not to influence legitimacy positively in this case.

#### **8.4. Rural Pueblos and Ejidos in Mexico**

In ways similar to the previous case, local decentralisation in Mexico centres around the question of representation of small villages and rural areas (pueblos and ejidos). The article by Fox (2007) describes the situation as a struggle between citizens and state representation across the different levels of government. There, processes of increasing decentralisation make that more power and resources are concentrated in municipal centres, incentivising local communities that are left out to demand their share in governance (Fox, 2007, p. 528). Local

decentralisation in Mexico therefore centres around the struggle and power relations between municipal centres and outlying villages (Fox, 2007, p. 548).

Similar to the case of Poland, the extent of local decentralisation really differs per case, as regional governments have a large voice in this matter. There, only a few provinces allow for far-reaching competencies of sub-municipal governments in which administrators are independently elected (Fox, 2007, p. 530). Nonetheless, a nearly invisible layer of sub-municipal governance is widespread in Mexico, especially among rural and indigenous communities (Fox, 2007, pp. 548-549). Under those circumstances, the few cases of far-reaching local decentralisation might primarily be about control over resources, but equally attach importance to institutional recognition (Fox, 2007, p. 534). These come down to, once again, public actors with general-purpose jurisdictions, without much horizontal involvement of other actors in the community. Together, this makes that the cases in which local decentralisation is allowed to take place, are also relatively far-reaching.

When it comes to the outcomes of this sub-municipal governance, the official competencies are not necessarily the primary benefit. Instead, local self-governance in these cases seems to be especially valuable in terms of recognition. In relation to the citizen-state struggle described, this recognition takes the form of local communities being able to be their own voice, without their legitimacy being questioned by actors from the municipal centres (Fox, 2007, p. 550). Far-reaching cases of local decentralisation in the Mexican context thus seem to feature increased legitimacy through more direct control. Both community cohesion and governance efficiency are not mentioned explicitly, but especially community cohesion does not appear to have a positive influence, given the struggle of local communities against the municipal centres.

### **8.5. Discussion and Limitations**

Drawing together the insights from the cases analysed above, it is clear that decentralisation can take very different forms in, or even within, other contexts. Regarding the intention to follow a most different systems design for this analysis, it has become apparent that the same forms of decentralisation in different contexts barely exist. The four examined cases show that clear differences are present in delegated competencies between urban and rural areas, as well as between individual communities, because of the regulating political forces. Even when considering the most far-reaching cases of each context (table 1), every arrangement of local decentralisation has its own unique dynamics. For the largest part, the cases have in common that decentralisation is public and general purpose in nature. However, whereas the Spanish and



Polish contexts see many delegated competency areas, cases in the Botswanan and Mexican contexts are more selective in this devolution.

**Table 1: Overview of outcomes for the examined causal mechanism on governance legitimacy under the most far-reaching cases of local decentralisation for each context**

	<b>Spain</b>	<b>Poland</b>	<b>Botswana</b>	<b>Mexico</b>
Local Decentralisation	Vertical, public, general purpose (institutional, policy, fiscal)	Vertical, public, general purpose (institutional, policy, fiscal)	Vertical + horizontal, public, general purpose (policy)	Vertical, public, general purpose (institutional, fiscal)
Governance Legitimacy	High (intuitive)	High (engagement)	Low (not matched, leaders)	High (recognition)
Direct Control	Very relevant (incentive)	Very relevant (incentive)	Relevant (little participation)	Very relevant (struggle resources)
Governance Efficiency	Very relevant (incentive)	Very relevant (incentive)	Relevant (few effects)	Not described (less relevant)
Community Cohesion	Not described (likely relevant in intuitiveness)	Not described (less relevant)	Not described (less relevant)	Not described (less relevant)

From the compared cases it is evident that local decentralisation, also outside the original context of Bitem, can have positive consequences in terms of governance legitimacy. The difference in outcomes in Botswana versus the other contexts shows that legitimacy only improves when the decentralisation is well-matched with the local context. Clearly, this does not just involve making use of traditional structures, but, more importantly, also aligning objectives and competencies. The improvement in legitimacy has been indicated through diverse measures like increased intuitiveness, engagement, and recognition, but the mediating factor is nearly always direct control (table 1). It therefore appears that the foundation of the hypothesised causal mechanism, in which local decentralisation brings more direct control, which can in turn improve governance legitimacy, is confirmed by the different contexts.

The role of governance efficiency as a moderating variable equally seems to be confirmed. The provision of policy and services that are suited and useful for the local situation, is in many contexts seen as an important element of decentralisation, which makes that the actual presence

or lack of this efficiency can heavily impact the legitimacy. There it must be said that many contexts show large urban-rural differences, in which local decentralisation is often better suited to village self-governance than to urban neighbourhood participation. When it comes to community cohesion, none of the investigated contexts reserves a large role for this factor. It might be true that cohesion is implicitly part of the described processes, but evidence seems insufficient to determine or confirm the role of this variable outside the original context.

The conducted comparative case study might have improved understanding of the internal and external validity of the hypothesised relationship, but is still insufficient to actually confirm it. As said before, the exploratory research that the hypothesis is based on, is too weak to provide internal validity by itself. The explanatory phase has now made clear that external validity is not sufficiently strong to make the exact causal mechanism replicate in other contexts. Many aspects however, especially its foundation, do find recurrence in other cases. The mechanism's other factors – most notably community cohesion – are not found to be similarly relevant in other contexts. This realisation links back to internal validity, for which it is now clear that some factors are more determinant than others, but the scale of comparison is still too small to be certain of a strong association between all investigated variables. This shortcoming can be addressed in further research by expanding the comparative scope, as proposed next.

## **9. A Proposal for Ideal Testing of the Hypothesised Causal Mechanism**

This final chapter presents a proposal for follow-up research that would further strengthen the present study. It is centred around a quantitative analysis under ideal circumstances that would optimally complement the outcomes of the exploratory research. In particular, by adding more cases to the analysis, it aims to improve understanding of the internal validity of the hypothesised causal mechanism, which was not possible to do in the exploratory research because of its size. As a result, the paragraphs below outline guidelines for operationalisation of the concepts, case selection, data collection, and analysis, as well as a discussion of the implications and limitations of the proposed research.

### **9.1. Operationalisation**

In order to ensure that the defined variables of interest can be measured in valid and reliable ways during the explanatory phase, it is crucial to operationalise them by linking them to solid indicators (Halperin & Heath, 2020, pp. 253-254). For the main independent and dependent variable, this operationalisation has to a large extent already taken place before the exploratory phase. There, it was said that local decentralised governance takes place when one or more of

the core governance competencies (institutional, policy, and/or fiscal) is delegated within a municipality to community administrations of neighbourhoods, towns or villages. Consequently, local centralised governance is then present when these core competencies are all concentrated in the municipal government, and/or only minor or symbolic competencies are delegated. For legitimacy, citizen perception is centralised through the definition of “citizens’ belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society”. Depending on respondents’ answers, this by default creates a scale that measures legitimacy.

Not yet fully operationalised, are the mediating and moderating variables included in the causal mechanism. There, the factor of ‘direct control’ emerged from the exploratory interviews as indicating governance being closer and more responsive to the needs of the citizens. Again, this definition centres around citizens’ perception of having direct influence on the policy that is being made. This means that ‘direct control’ is operationalised to be present if citizens perceive their views to be incorporated into policy making about their own community. In addition, ‘governance efficiency’ as a moderating variable groups together indicators of practicality. Essentially: do the demographic, geographic, and economic conditions of the community make more independent governance efficient? This factor can best be measured through expert rather than citizen perception, as it comes down to an almost political-economic judgement if space, population, and resources allow for better governance (semi-)independently or in as part of the municipality. Finally, community cohesion is operationalised rather similar to the way it was explored the first research phase, based on citizen perception. It is indicated by the feeling of citizens that there is much interaction and identity creation in their community, for example through public events or common social initiatives.

## **9.2. Case Selection**

Aside from further testing the internal validity of the relationship, the explanatory second phase also needs to complement the exploratory first phase in something it could not do: assessing external validity. This requires a systematic comparison of cases to see if the main relationship significantly persists outside of its original context. In an ideal set-up, this would take the form of a large-N design, in which data from many local governance systems is compared (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 253). To understand if the hypothesised relationship is a universal phenomenon, it is important that the scope for case selection is as large as possible (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 252), preferably global. There, focus should be on a representation of local governance systems that is as broad as possible, centring around geographical distribution, but without disproportionately representing specific national states.

Importantly, the selection of local governance cases should include systems both in which local decentralisation is, and is not implemented. In other words, the sample should contain data from situations where governance competencies are decentralised to communities within a municipality, as well situations in which municipalities retain full centralised governance competencies. These types do not need to be equally represented, but variance in the main independent variable is necessary to test internal validity and not just external validity (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 252). Logically, countless local governance systems exist worldwide, which should allow for this variation to be found. Under – again – ideal circumstances, the selected cases would then be a representative sample of all this global diversity. Case selection does not need to take place on the dependent variable, but variance is again required for the analyses – and for the theory to make sense. Similarly, the causal mechanism's other variables of interest do not provide criteria for the case selection, but do need to be measurable in the cases.

### **9.3. Data Collection**

As mentioned before, measuring the dependent variable governance legitimacy, relies heavily on citizen perception. Data collection therefore needs to be grounded in public opinion for the selected cases, but in a more structured interview manner for comparative reasons. Under ideal circumstances, this takes the shape of large-scale public perception surveys, similar to for example the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, or the European Social Survey. Most importantly, the survey should include perceptions of governance legitimacy, which can be obtained in the same way as during the exploratory interviews, by asking people if they believe the system by which they are governed works for them. Data on the moderating variables 'governance efficiency' and 'community cohesion' is equally crucial to include and can be obtained through the same questions as in the exploratory phase (appendix 1.2). The hypothesised mediating role of 'direct control' now requires more specific testing as well. Outside of asking respondents about the motivations behind the amount of governance legitimacy perceived, data on this variable can equally be collected by asking if citizens perceive to have more direct control over policy. This is possible now that the comparison between governance systems is between respondents, instead of a time measurement within the same questionnaire. Finally, the collection of data on the other contextual factors investigated in chapter 7 is still very useful. This data can be obtained through the same questions that were asked before (appendix 1.2) and allows to discover deviations from the causal mechanism in other cases.

From the exploratory phase it has become clear that expert knowledge on the functioning of the governance system is crucial and perhaps the best way of collecting data on local decentralisation dynamics. It is therefore useful to complement the public perception survey described above with an expert survey for the included local governance cases. This is common practice in many cross-national datasets (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 253) and could thus very well be used for this cross-system dataset. There, experts can provide details on horizontality, jurisdiction, and privatisation of the local governance case, according to the identified theoretical framework. Such information would be difficult to obtain from citizen responses in a public perception survey, but is nonetheless crucial for classifying a case as strongly or moderately centralised or decentralised. The combination and triangulation of different data sources, such as expert perceptions, official documents, and academic articles, to measure local decentralisation, is useful and will likely strengthen the research further. It is however important that all sources are reliable and valid in measuring what is intended (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 253), indicated by the operationalisation as described above.

#### **9.4. Analysis**

Analysing the collected data requires both a solid categorisation and the right methods. The data collection, as described above, culminates in a database with information on the main variables of interest and contextual variables per respondent. Crucially, this data needs to be categorised and coded in such a way that it can be statistically analysed. Most importantly, this requires a categorisation of the main independent variable according to the theoretical framework outlined in chapter 3.6. The information that the expert survey provides on the extent of delegation of institutional, policy, and fiscal governance competencies can be summarised together to classify the system of a respondent as fully centralised, fully decentralised, or semi-decentralised. This can simply be done by seeing if respectively none, all, or some of the competencies are delegated. For governance legitimacy, the recoding is more straightforward. If respondents are asked to indicate their perception of rightness of the system on a scale, this only has to be recoded into a useful scale such as between 0 and 1. Depending on the way the other variables of interest are obtained, these can similarly be structured as continuous or categorical.

Out of the statistical analyses taking place, the main one is a linear regression analysis. First, a two-sample t-test can be conducted to get an impression of the relationship between local decentralisation and governance legitimacy by comparing the means of the data of their samples. Subsequently, with the dependent variable in the relationship coded as a continuous

scale, a simple linear regression, which again includes the main dependent and independent variable, serves as a good base-line model of the relationship. There, one can already report on the significance and strength of the relationship without other variables involved. In a new round, the variables of the hypothesised causal mechanism can be incorporated in a multiple linear regression model, to see if the variables that were predicted to play a role, indeed have an influence on the relationship. Finally, in a third linear regression model, the other relevant variables from the dataset can be included. There, it can be tested if these variables do become relevant outside of the investigated context.

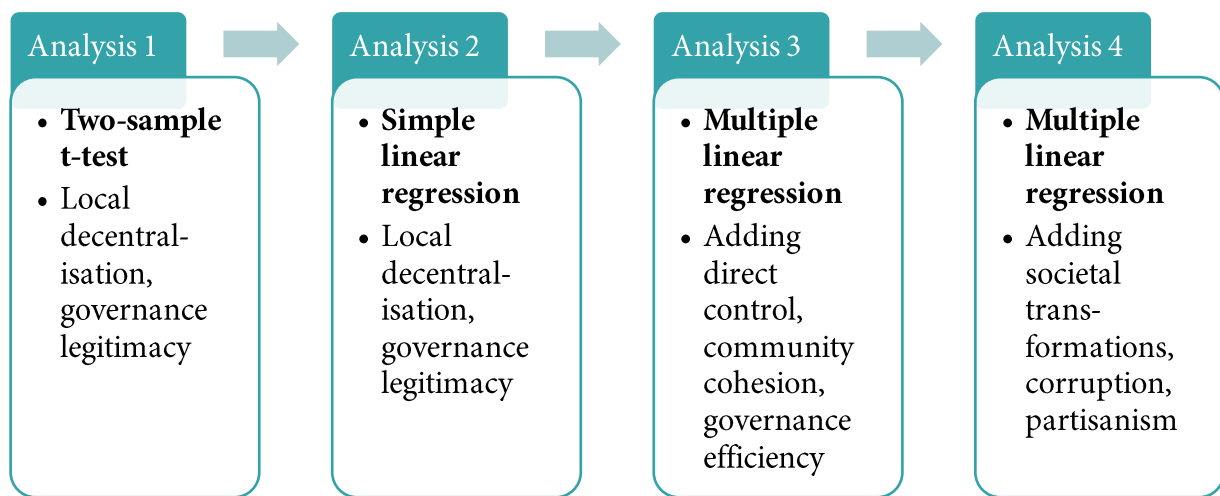


Figure 5: schematic overview of sequential statistical analyses to be conducted.

## 9.5. Implications and Limitations

When conducted properly, this quantitative investigation can shed light on both the internal and external validity of the hypothesised relationship. Evidently, it is necessary to conduct the appropriate tests and calculations, such as Pearson's R and pseudo R<sup>2</sup>, to ensure that the conducted analyses are a valid measurement of the relationship. If done correctly, the statistical analyses measure the significance and strength of the interactions between the variables of interest, leading to a better understanding of their internal validity. Furthermore, the analyses compare data from a wide variety of selected cases, allowing to determine if the hypothesised relationship is significant in multiple, instead of only one, case, clarifying its external validity. Importantly, what the quantitative investigation cannot do, is determining if the hypothesised causal mechanism is functioning in the same way in other cases, even if the variable interactions are significant. For this to be assessed, it is necessary to zoom in on the specific involved cases again (chapter 8), and see how each of the involved variables influences the relationship.



## 10. Conclusion

This thesis has considered the process of local decentralisation: the delegation of institutional, policy and fiscal governance competencies to actors closer to the citizens (Dardanelli, 2021, pp. 13-15; Lago, 2021, pp. 1-2), taking place within the local level. In particular, it has aimed to investigate the process' effect on governance legitimacy: the citizen's belief that "the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society" (Lipset, 1960, p. 77). From the literature, both empirical and theoretical, it becomes clear that the relationship has not been investigated explicitly yet. However, it does highlight that decentralisation is often more intuitive and efficient, especially when well-suited to the local context. This leads to the expectation that it will also have a positive effect on governance legitimacy. Equally indicated by the literature, is that variables like cohesion, partisan identity, and large societal transformations have the potential to play an important role in the relationship. These variables have been treated as conjectures, investigated further in the first of the two research phases.

The exploratory phase, featuring a single-case study of the village of Bitem in Catalonia, has revealed a causal mechanism through which local decentralisation can improve governance legitimacy. From the perception-based interviews conducted with the community's citizens, it appears that the current local decentralised EMD system is more often experienced as the appropriate form of governance than the former centralised municipal system. Further interviews point out that the perception of citizens to have more direct control over policy is an important mediating factor in this regard. Out of the literature-based conjectures, only community cohesion is found to play a moderating role in the relationship. At the same time, governance efficiency (i.e. the system's suitability and performance given the situation at hand) emerges from the case study as a second moderator of the relationship.

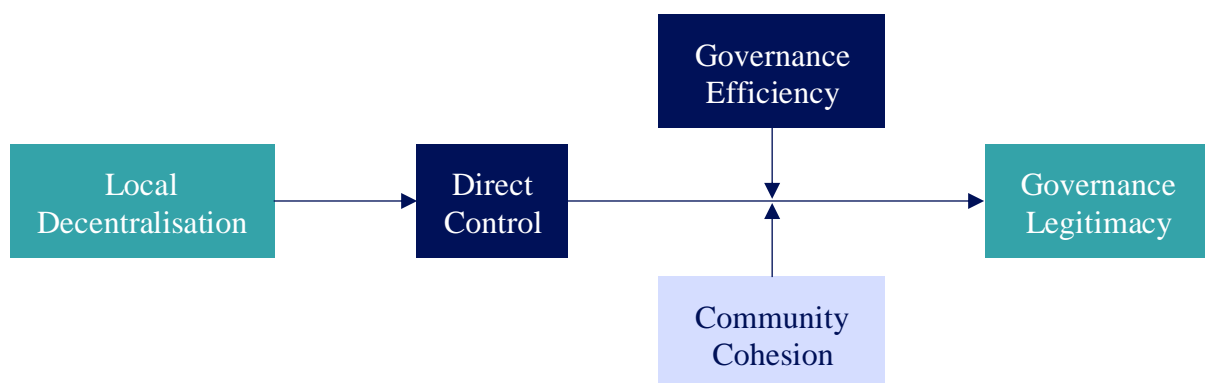


Figure 6: final schematic representation of the causal mechanism around local decentralisation and governance legitimacy.

The explanatory second phase serves to test the hypothesised causal mechanism through a comparative case study, but still does not provide sufficient validity to the relationship. The intermediate-N systematic comparison of four diverse cases, conducted due to a lack of sufficient large-N data, does result in external validity to the extent that the foundation of the relationship holds-up in some other contexts. There, direct control and governance efficiency are mostly confirmed to play the predicted role, but the influence of community cohesion cannot be determined and is therefore unsure (figure 6). The certainty regarding this internal validity of the relationship that a comparative case study should bring, cannot be provided with only on the basis of such a small scope or the few exploratory interviews, which is why this thesis makes a proposal for a follow-up quantitative study. Nonetheless, the conducted comparative study does provide a better understanding of the variable interactions than a quantitative study would.

In the end, the overarching objective of this thesis has been to see how local decentralised governance dynamics fit with wider (global) societal calls for both globalisation and localisation. With regard to this objective, an important take-away from the study should be that, especially in specific rural contexts, local decentralisation can indeed be employed to make governance systems more legitimate. There, it should be noted that not all contexts are suitable for this type of governance, and certainly not always in the same way. The study has shown that it is key that the system can be flexible and provide efficient governance for the circumstances at hand. In a world where trans-local collaborations of cities have the potential to play an important role in addressing global challenges, small communities outside the urban centres should not be left out. In this context, flexible forms of local decentralisation can help to make governance legitimate for these communities, even when the eyes of the world turn to the cities.

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## **Appendix**

### **1.1. Overview of Conducted Exploratory Interviews**

<b>N°</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Role Interviewee</b>
001	25-02-24	Citizen of Bítem
002	25-02-24	Citizen of Bítem
003	25-02-24	Citizen of Bítem
004	25-02-24	Citizen of Bítem
005	25-02-24	Citizen of Bítem
006	25-02-24	Citizen of Bítem
007	25-02-24	Citizen of Bítem
008	25-02-24	Citizen of Bítem
009	25-02-24	Citizen of Bítem
010	26-02-24	President of the EMD Bítem
011	26-02-24	Citizen of Bítem
012	27-02-24	Citizen of Bítem
013	28-02-24	Citizen of Bítem
014	28-02-24	Citizen of Bítem

### **1.2. Interview Questions for Citizens of Bítem**

#### **Warming-Up**

1. How long have you been living here? Where did you grow up? How involved/interested were/are you in politics (scale)?

Politics in the village and in the area might not have stayed the same over time.

2. Over the course of your life, how did politics in the area change?

Did political administration of the village become more independent/diverse/flexible?

Are you aware of the governance change to EMD in 2009?

#### **Confounding Factors**

Major political shifts identified are the transition to democracy after 1978 and Bítem's transition to EMD after 2009.

3. Over this timespan, which other major political/natural/personal events occurred that most impacted the area and when did they occur?
4. Measured on the political spectrum (left-right, progressive/conservative) was your attitude towards the ruling political parties, before, in between and after the identified transitions?
5. What was cohesion in the village like, before, in between and after the identified transitions?

6. How did you perceive corruption before, in between and after the identified transitions?  
Is this impacted by the EMD having independence over the budget?

**Core Relationship and Mediating Factors**

7. Did you believe that the political institutions under the pedania were good for you? What made them (not) right?
8. Do you believe that the political institutions of the EMD are good for you? What makes them (not) right?
9. Do you believe that the political institutions of a fully independent village would be good for you? What would make them (not) right?
10. Are there any actors/organisations outside the municipality that you consider have a crucial role in deciding or doing things in the community?
11. Is there anything you would like to see changed about politics in Bítem?

**1.3. Interview Questions for the President of the EMD Bítem**

1. How long have you been mayor? What was the process to become a mayor like?
2. What do you believe are your most important responsibilities as mayor of the EMD? How do these compare to those of a mayor of a fully independent municipality?
3. Is it correct if we identify three phases of post-war governance in Bítem: pedanía under authoritarian rule, pedanía under democratic rule, and EMD?
4. What do you think at the time were the motivations to become an EMD? (Alternative: What do you personally think is the main driver of decentralisation / becoming an EMD?)
5. Do you believe that the EMD is the right model for small local communities? What do you think are the main factors that determine if the EMD is the right model for a community?
6. Can you tell us more about the process to become an EMD? How does it compare to the process 20 years ago?
7. Can you briefly indicate how the EMD relates to each of the governance structures: Tortosa, Baix Ebre, Terres de l'Ebre, Tarragona, Catalunya, Espanya?
8. And how are the citizens involved on the EMD (democratic processes)? How are they represented (referendum, consell de barri, alters)?
9. Like to ask much more about the system, but maybe example is better: What is the process for projects of the EMD (example bicycle path, mas del bisbe)?
10. Other actors seem to fulfil important roles for the community (like church, associations, organisations). How do you see their role in governance of the village and their relationship with the municipality?