Regional Commissioners and the Governance of Sustainable Development in Tanzania

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Abstract
Regional Commissioners (RCs) occupy a strategically important position between Tanzania's central government and the authorities responsible for district- and council-level implementation. Yet their contribution to sustainable development has received limited empirical attention. This qualitative case study examines how RCs understand and exercise their authority to coordinate development across sectors and administrative levels, and how leadership competence shapes that role. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with ten serving and five former RCs, supplemented by documentary review and contextual observation, and analysed thematically. Sustainable development is treated not as a single outcome attributable to an individual office-holder, but as a governance process requiring policy integration, territorial equity, institutional continuity, public accountability and attention to long-term social, economic and environmental consequences. Participants portrayed RCs as brokers of national priorities, convenors of sectoral and security institutions, and influential actors in district-level implementation. They also emphasised that formal authority does not produce effective coordination automatically: its developmental value depends on competence, credibility, sectoral knowledge and the capacity to anticipate interactions among policy fields. Concentrated authority can accelerate implementation, but it may also weaken participation and accountability when directives are insufficiently questioned. The study therefore recommends a transparent competency framework, systematic induction, performance assessment and stronger accountability safeguards for RC appointments. It concludes that RCs can enable sustainable regional development, but their contribution remains institutionally mediated and should not be inferred from authority or short-term output gains alone.

Introduction

Sustainable development is implemented territorially. National visions and global commitments acquire practical meaning through decisions about land, agriculture, education, infrastructure, public safety, investment and service delivery in particular regions and localities. These decisions are rarely confined to a single sector. Agricultural expansion can affect water availability and grazing systems; infrastructure can improve connectivity while displacing livelihoods; and short-term production gains can generate long-term environmental or social costs. Sustainable development therefore depends not only on policy content but also on the public institutions capable of coordinating competing objectives, resolving cross-sectoral tensions and maintaining attention to long-term consequences (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2018).

In Tanzania, Regional Commissioners occupy a potentially consequential position in this coordination architecture. Article 145 of the Constitution provides for a Regional Commissioner for each region, appointed by the President, while the Regional Administration Act establishes the office and its governmental and law-and-order functions (United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 1977, 1997). RCs operate between central ministries and the district and local-government institutions through which many development programmes are implemented. This position gives them formal authority and the symbolic standing of representing the President within the region. It also places them at an institutional boundary where national priorities, sectoral mandates, local needs and political expectations meet.

This boundary position is particularly important under the Tanzania Development Vision 2050 (Dira 2050), which connects economic transformation with human capability, social development, environmental integrity, climate resilience and the reduction of territorial disparities (URT, 2025). Progress toward these objectives requires more than the completion of individual projects. It requires horizontal coordination among sectors, vertical coordination across levels of government, attention to uneven regional conditions, and accountability for the distribution and durability of development benefits. RCs may facilitate these processes, but presidential appointment and formal authority do not in themselves demonstrate a contribution to sustainable development.

Against this background, the study examines how serving and former RCs understand and exercise their regional development role. It addresses three questions: (1) How do RCs use formal and symbolic authority to coordinate development across sectors? (2) How does regional leadership influence district- and council-level implementation? (3) What opportunities and accountability risks arise from the high levels of institutional and public compliance associated with the office? The article contributes an actor-centred account of an institution that is prominent in Tanzanian public administration but underexamined in scholarship on sustainable and multilevel governance.

Regional Governance and Sustainable Development: Literature Review

Regional governance and sustainable development are closely intertwined, but the nature and developmental consequences of that relationship remain contested. Governance at the regional level may coordinate policies, resources and institutions around shared development priorities, but coordination does not automatically produce equitable, accountable or environmentally sustainable outcomes. At a supranational scale, Bruszt and Palestini (2016) similarly demonstrate that development is not an automatic consequence of regional integration; it depends on governance arrangements capable of anticipating and managing tensions among economic and developmental objectives. Although their analysis concerns cooperation among countries, the underlying insight is relevant to subnational governance: regional authority contributes to sustainable development through the institutional relationships and coordinating practices it enables, rather than through territorial position alone.

Regional governance is the territorial organisation of public authority through which national policies are interpreted, coordinated and implemented within subnational spaces. It is especially important for sustainable development because economic, social and environmental objectives frequently intersect in particular places. Agricultural expansion, infrastructure, education, land management and public safety may be administered through different sectors, yet their effects converge within regions and localities. A territorial approach therefore requires horizontal coordination across sectors and vertical coordination among national, regional and local institutions (OECD, 2020; UN DESA, 2018).

Decentralisation scholarship nevertheless shows that assigning functions to subnational institutions does not automatically create effective autonomy, coordination or accountability. Decentralisation may involve political devolution, administrative delegation or deconcentration of central authority, and these arrangements can coexist within the same state (Smoke, 2015). Their interaction often produces overlapping mandates and blurred lines of responsibility. Consequently, subnational performance depends not only on the formal distribution of functions but also on resources, administrative capability, intergovernmental relationships and the mechanisms through which citizens can hold institutions answerable.

Tanzania illustrates this institutional complexity. Decentralisation by devolution strengthened the formal role of local government authorities, but regional administration continues to represent and supervise central government interests. Earlier research shows that governance reforms are mediated through local political and administrative practices rather than implemented as simple transfers from the centre (Harrison, 2008). Community involvement in planning remains uneven (Massoi & Norman, 2009), while more recent studies identify continuing political influence, limited local discretion and ambiguity in responsibility for service delivery (Kapelela et al., 2025; Mdee & Mushi, 2021; Rugeiyamu & Msendo, 2025). Research on SDG localisation further identifies unclear allocation of responsibility, insufficient coordination and frequent turnover in key positions as obstacles to implementation and accountability in Tanzania (Jönsson & Bexell, 2021). These findings caution against equating formal decentralisation with clear accountability or effective local decision-making.

The Regional Commissioner sits at the intersection of these arrangements. Constitutionally appointed and supported by statutory governmental and public-order functions, the RC represents central authority while interacting with districts, councils and sectoral institutions (URT, 1977, 1997). This boundary position may enable the RC to convene actors, communicate priorities and resolve implementation bottlenecks. However, it can also intensify upward accountability and constrain local deliberation when presidential representation or administrative deference overrides the mandates of elected and professional institutions. The office should therefore be analysed relationally, as part of a multilevel system, rather than as an isolated leadership position. Literature on SDG localisation similarly identifies political leaders as strategists, convenors and brokers whose effectiveness depends on leadership capability, intergovernmental coordination and clearly defined relationships with administrative officials (Guha & Chakrabarti, 2019). Evidence from Tanzania also indicates that hierarchical governance and inadequately designed coordination mechanisms can constrain collaborative SDG implementation and weaken accountability at the local level (Lauwo et al., 2022).

Sustainable development further raises the standard by which regional coordination should be judged. Short-term increases in production, project completion or administrative compliance do not by themselves demonstrate sustainability. Policy coherence requires institutions to identify interactions and trade-offs among economic, social and environmental objectives and to consider distributional effects and future generations (OECD, 2020; WCED, 1987). Tanzania Development Vision 2050 similarly connects economic transformation with human capability, territorial inclusion, environmental integrity and climate resilience (URT, 2025). Regional leadership is therefore developmentally valuable when it integrates policy fields, attends to uneven territorial needs, preserves institutional continuity and remains accountable to citizens and law.

Existing studies have examined decentralisation, local service delivery and political influence in Tanzania, but the coordinating role of RCs has received limited direct empirical attention. In particular, little is known about how serving and former office-holders understand the relationship between their authority, leadership competence and sustainable regional development. This study addresses that gap by examining the mechanisms through which RCs perceive themselves to influence cross-sectoral and multilevel coordination, while distinguishing those perceptions from independently demonstrated development outcomes.

Multilevel Governance Theory: Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by multilevel governance theory. Multilevel governance describes decision-making as dispersed across interacting territorial levels and institutional arenas rather than monopolised by a single central authority. Hooghe and Marks (2003) distinguish relatively stable, general-purpose jurisdictions from more flexible, task-specific arrangements, but both forms direct attention to interdependence, negotiation and coordination across institutional boundaries. Piattoni (2009) further conceptualises multilevel governance as a dynamic arrangement involving political mobilisation, policymaking and institutional restructuring. Although the approach emerged largely from European governance research, its central analytical proposition is applicable beyond federal systems: national, regional and local actors may remain hierarchically unequal while still depending on one another for information, resources and implementation. More recent formulations likewise emphasise that public functions may be organised at different territorial scales, producing continuing interdependence among levels of government (Hooghe et al., 2020).

Applied to Tanzania, multilevel governance does not imply that the RC, councils and central ministries possess equal or autonomous authority. Instead, it provides a lens for examining how a presidentially appointed regional office connects levels and sectors within a unitary state. Studies of land-use governance, SDG implementation and climate-policy mainstreaming demonstrate that Tanzanian development interventions are mediated by institutional mandates, resources and interactions across national, regional, district and local levels (Kijazi et al., 2017; Lauwo et al., 2022; Kitogo et al., 2026). The framework directs attention to both coordination capacity and power. An RC may bridge institutional gaps by convening actors and aligning priorities, but the same office may recentralise influence, blur responsibility or reduce space for local participation. Authority is therefore treated as relational and institutionally mediated rather than as an individual attribute that automatically produces development. This tension also raises a legitimacy question: improvements in coordination and policy performance do not necessarily strengthen participation, representation or democratic accountability (Peters & Pierre, 2004; Piattoni, 2009).

The theory is operationalised through five connected dimensions of sustainable-development governance. Policy integration concerns the management of interactions among economic, social and environmental priorities. Vertical coordination concerns alignment among national, regional, district and council institutions. Territorial equity concerns uneven needs and the distribution of development benefits within and between regions. Institutional continuity concerns the durability of coordination beyond the tenure of an individual office-holder and attention to long-term consequences. Participation and accountability concern legality, citizen voice, role clarity and the ability to question public authority. Together, these dimensions guide the coding and interpretation of the interview material (OECD, 2020; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018; World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

The framework generates a cautious analytical expectation. RC authority may support sustainable development when it enables cross-sectoral coordination, adapts national priorities to regional conditions and strengthens continuity without displacing local mandates or accountability. Conversely, high compliance may signal implementation capacity but may also weaken deliberation and obscure responsibility. Following Piattoni (2009), the analysis therefore distinguishes output legitimacy, associated with effective coordination and performance, from input legitimacy, grounded in participation and representation. It examines not whether strong RC authority is inherently beneficial, but the institutional conditions under which coordinating authority contributes to integrated, equitable, durable and accountable development.

Materials and Methods

The study adopted a qualitative case-study design focused on the institution of the Regional Commissioner in Tanzania. Fifteen information-rich participants were selected purposively from an accessible group of serving and former office-holders: ten serving RCs and five former RCs who had also held ministerial office. Semi-structured interviews were conducted between 10 July and 30 October 2025 using a common guide aligned with the study questions. Interview evidence was supplemented by the Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, the Regional Administration Act and Tanzania Development Vision 2050 to distinguish statutory and policy mandates from participants' accounts of administrative practice. The study was not designed to produce a statistically representative assessment of all RCs or regions. Administrative permission and informed consent were obtained; participation was voluntary, quotations were anonymised using codes R1-R15, unnecessary biographical details were removed, and interview files were password protected.

Data were analysed manually through reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2024) six-phase approach. The authors familiarised themselves with the material, generated initial codes, developed and reviewed candidate themes, and interpreted the final themes through the multilevel-governance framework and its five sustainable-development dimensions. An analytical matrix documented the development of codes and themes, and divergent accounts were examined rather than suppressed. Credibility was supported by comparing serving and former office-holders' accounts and using legal and policy documents to clarify the institutional context; dependability and confirmability were strengthened through a common interview guide, documented analytical decisions and reflexive attention to the authors' professional proximity to the field (Ahmed, 2024). The principal limitations are purposive sampling, elite self-reporting, potential social-desirability bias, deductive-identification risk and the absence of independent longitudinal outcome data.

Results

The analysis generated five interconnected themes concerning the authority, coordinating role, implementation influence, accountability risks and leadership competencies of Regional Commissioners. The themes show how formal position interacts with competence and institutional relationships, while also identifying limits to treating authority or compliance as evidence of sustainable-development performance.

Formal authority and symbolic presidential representation

Participants consistently described the RC as the central representative of national government within the region. R1 emphasised that citizens and officials commonly receive the RC's directives as carrying presidential authority, observing that 'no person ever queries what the Regional Commissioner has said.' The statement illustrates the symbolic reach of the office, but it also reveals a tension examined below: deference can facilitate collective action while limiting deliberation and challenge.

Participants linked this symbolic authority to formal convening roles, particularly leadership of the Regional Security Committee and interaction with sectoral and district officials. R5 argued that these positions give the RC visibility and access to information across institutions, allowing the office-holder to mobilise attention and resources around regional priorities. The evidence indicates that the RC's coordination capacity arises from the combination of constitutional appointment, statutory responsibility and administrative convention. It does not establish that every authority attributed to RCs by participants is formally assigned in law.

A former officeholder (R3) recalled that President Julius Nyerere personally invested considerable time in orienting newly appointed RCs. Whether the precise duration remembered by the participant can be independently verified or not, the account conveys the historical understanding of the office as one requiring preparation for territorial leadership rather than ceremonial representation alone.

Cross-sectoral coordination as a sustainability function

Participants portrayed RCs as operating across agriculture, education, land, public administration and security rather than within a single ministerial portfolio. This breadth is potentially important for sustainable development because regional problems often involve interactions among sectors. Respondents repeatedly used the idea of 'systemic thinking' to describe the capacity to anticipate consequences, establish priorities and connect otherwise fragmented interventions.

R6 described reviewing the legal mandate of the office, identifying weak Standard Seven examination performance and developing targeted strategies. The same participant associated subsequent regional improvements with focused regional leadership and also reported increased cotton production. These examples show how an RC may focus dispersed institutions on measurable priorities. They should, however, be interpreted as perceived contributions rather than causal proof: the study did not independently measure the influence of budgets, professional staff, national programmes, climatic conditions or other actors.

From a sustainable-development perspective, coordination has greater value when it does more than accelerate individual outputs. Improved educational performance can strengthen long-term human capability, while agricultural production can contribute to livelihoods and food or industrial systems. Yet production gains become sustainable only when their distributional, labour, land, water and environmental consequences are also considered. The interviews demonstrate the office's potential to convene such considerations, but provide limited evidence that all five dimensions of the analytical framework were systematically applied in practice.

Vertical coordination and district-level implementation

Most participants reported that District Commissioners and council executive officials generally respond to an RC who is considered competent and credible. The Regional Security Committee and other regional forums were described as channels through which regional priorities are communicated and implementation problems escalated. In this sense, the RC acts as an institutional broker between central direction and district- or council-level action.

The relationship was not described as automatic. R2 observed that a strong District Commissioner may command greater practical respect than a comparatively disengaged RC, producing uneven implementation within the same region. R6 similarly noted that formal position does not compensate fully for weak preparation or limited engagement. These accounts qualify a purely hierarchical explanation: authority creates an opportunity for coordination, but practical influence depends on competence, credibility and relationships with implementing institutions.

This finding also exposes a multilevel-governance dilemma. Strong coordination can reduce fragmentation and align implementation with national goals. At the same time, heavy dependence on personal authority can blur responsibilities between presidential appointees, professional administrators and elected local-government institutions. Sustainable regional governance therefore requires role clarity and institutionalised coordination that can continue when individual RCs are transferred or replaced.

Compliance, implementation capacity and accountability risk

Participants reported high levels of public and institutional deference to RC directives. R13 summarised this perception by describing the RC as 'the president of the region.' Such legitimacy may lower coordination costs during emergencies or when several institutions must act rapidly. Participants nevertheless recognised that the effect is double-edged: the authority of a competent RC may advance collective priorities, while the same deference can magnify arbitrary or poorly informed decisions.

The discussion of public-order powers makes this accountability issue especially important. R13 argued that coercive authority should be exercised cautiously and only for lawful public-order purposes. The developmental significance of this evidence lies not in treating detention or security authority as a development instrument, but in showing that regional coordination is embedded in a powerful administrative and security office. Sustainable development requires legality, participation and protection of rights alongside implementation capacity. Compliance cannot therefore be used as a sufficient measure of successful governance.

Competence, institutionalisation and continuity

Across the interviews, participants associated effective RC leadership with maturity, knowledge of public administration, conflict-management ability, familiarity with land and agricultural issues, and capacity to understand the regional system. The recurrence of these competencies across accounts suggests that the role demands a broader profile than political confidence alone.

However, the data do not establish that structured interviews by themselves would improve appointments, nor do they permit comparison of alternative appointment systems. The stronger inference is that appointment and performance arrangements should make the required competencies explicit and assess them through transparent and context-appropriate processes. Participants' emphasis on individual quality also points to the need for systematic induction, access to technical advice, performance review and institutional memory, so that regional development does not depend excessively on the characteristics of one office-holder.

Discussion

The findings position RCs as potential meta-coordinators of regional development: actors whose main contribution is to connect institutions and policy fields rather than deliver every service directly. Their constitutional appointment and practical visibility can enable horizontal coordination among sectors and vertical coordination across central, regional, district and council institutions. This helps explain why participants perceived leadership competence as consequential. An RC who understands institutional interdependence can convene actors, identify bottlenecks and draw attention to neglected regional priorities.

Viewed through multilevel governance theory, this coordinating role is relational rather than purely hierarchical: RCs depend on ministries, regional secretariats, districts and councils for information, expertise and implementation, even though authority is unequally distributed (Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Piattoni, 2009; Hooghe et al., 2020).

This coordination account develops the sustainable-development argument in three ways. First, it shifts attention from isolated outputs to policy integration. Educational performance, agricultural production, investment and public safety are important, but their sustainability depends on how they interact with livelihoods, equity, environmental integrity and future capabilities. Second, it emphasises territorial differentiation. Regions face different ecological conditions, economic structures and service deficits; regional leadership can translate national goals into context-sensitive priorities and draw central attention to disparities. Third, it places accountability within sustainability. Rapid implementation achieved through unquestioned authority may produce short-term outputs while weakening voice, local ownership or legal safeguards. Durable development therefore requires both state capacity and constraints on the exercise of that capacity. Recent Tanzanian evidence similarly shows that policy integration depends less on formal policy language than on mandates, fiscal rules, coordination, technical capacity and implementation conditions (Kitogo et al., 2026).

This finding corresponds to the framework's policy-integration dimension. It shows the potential of the RC's convening authority, while also indicating that economic, social and environmental consequences were not consistently assessed together.

The evidence also contributes to debates about decentralisation. RCs operate within a system where devolution to local authorities coexists with central representation and oversight. Their role can reduce coordination failures, but it may also recentralise influence if regional directives displace local deliberation. This is consistent with research showing that the formal transfer of responsibilities does not automatically generate local autonomy or clear accountability (Kijazi et al., 2017; Smoke, 2015; Kapelela et al., 2025; Rugeiyamu & Msendo, 2025). The appropriate policy question is consequently not whether RCs are simply strong or weak, but how their coordinating authority can complement rather than overwhelm local institutions.

The competence argument should likewise be institutional rather than personalistic. Merit-oriented principles for senior public leadership support predetermined competency criteria, transparent assessment and accountability for performance (OECD, 2019, 2020). For RCs, a competency framework could include strategic and systems thinking; knowledge of public administration and intergovernmental relations; conflict sensitivity; understanding of land, agriculture, social services and environmental governance; integrity; communication; and capacity for participatory coordination. Because the office is constitutionally appointed, the study does not assume that an ordinary competitive recruitment model can be transplanted unchanged. It instead recommends that the appointing authority be supported by documented criteria and a defensible assessment process, which may include structured assessment among several complementary mechanisms.

The emphasis on competence and institutional support is consistent with evidence that localising sustainable development requires capable political leadership alongside a strong administration, clearly defined responsibilities and regular intergovernmental interaction (Guha & Chakrabarti, 2019).

In theoretical terms, this is a vertical-coordination dilemma: the RC may bridge gaps between levels of government, but sustainable multilevel governance requires that regional authority complement rather than displace elected councils and professional administrators (Mdee & Mushi, 2021; OECD, 2020).

The findings provide less direct evidence on territorial equity and institutional continuity. Participants emphasised setting regional priorities, but offered limited detail on how marginalised districts or groups were identified or how regional inequalities were monitored. Dependence on an individual RC also creates vulnerability when office-holders are transferred or replaced. This concern is consistent with evidence that frequent turnover in key positions, unclear responsibility and insufficient coordination impede SDG localisation in Tanzania (Jönsson & Bexell, 2021). These gaps reinforce the need for documented coordination routines, institutional memory and balanced performance indicators that endure beyond personal leadership.

Finally, the study cautions against attributing regional development trajectories primarily to RCs. Participants' accounts identify mechanisms through which RC leadership may matter, but regional outcomes are co-produced by ministries, local authorities, communities, professional administrators, private actors and material conditions. Future research should connect leadership tenures with longitudinal indicators across economic, social, environmental and equity dimensions, while tracing policy processes sufficiently closely to identify contribution rather than simple correlation.

The framework's participation-and-accountability dimension sharpens this caution. Deference may facilitate rapid implementation, but unquestioned compliance can narrow deliberation, blur responsibility and magnify poorly informed decisions. Multilevel governance may therefore become a trade-off in which coordination and problem-solving capacity are achieved at the expense of democratic input and clear accountability (Peters & Pierre, 2004). This tension also reflects wider evidence that Tanzania's hierarchical governance arrangements can facilitate central direction while limiting collaborative engagement and accountability in sustainable-development implementation (Lauwo et al., 2022). Compliance should therefore be treated as an ambiguous governance condition, not as sufficient evidence of effective or sustainable leadership.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Regional Commissioners occupy a strategically important position in Tanzania’s multilevel development system. Their formal and symbolic authority can help align sectors, mobilise institutions and connect national priorities with district- and council-level implementation. Their most defensible contribution to sustainable development lies in this coordinating capacity—not in an assumption that hierarchy, compliance or short-term output growth is inherently sustainable.

The interviews suggest that the value of the office depends on the interaction between authority and leadership competence. Systems thinking, administrative knowledge, conflict-management ability, integrity and sectoral understanding enable RCs to recognise interdependence and manage competing priorities. At the same time, concentrated authority creates accountability risks when deference discourages questioning or when security powers become conflated with developmental leadership.

The study therefore recommends: (1) a publicly articulated competency framework for RC appointments; (2) systematic induction covering intergovernmental relations, sustainable-development integration, rights, conflict sensitivity and regional planning; (3) performance assessment using balanced economic, social, environmental, equity and governance indicators; (4) institutionalised coordination mechanisms that preserve continuity across changes of office-holder; and (5) safeguards for legality, participation and local-government autonomy. Structured assessment may form part of appointment practice, but the evidence does not justify treating a structured interview as a sufficient reform on its own.

The study is limited by purposive sampling, elite self-reporting, potential deductive identification, and the absence of independent longitudinal outcome analysis. Further research should compare regional coordination practices, include district and council officials as well as citizen groups, and examine how RC leadership interacts with budgets, ecological conditions, and political institutions over time.

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Data Availability Statement
The interview data are not publicly available because participants could be identified through contextual information. Data sharing is restricted by ethical requirements and the terms of participant consent.

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