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Factors affecting the role of local councils in local policy-making

Role of local
councils

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine empirically the relevance and impact of a number of factors on the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province/Iraq.

Design/methodology/approach – This research theoretically based on literature review and adopted an analytical approach to clarify the related concepts through the policy cycle approach. On the empirical side, the research adopted a descriptive analysis for research questions and used statistical analysis to test the research hypotheses.

Findings – The results of the study reveal that variables of the local policy-making process, political factors, interaction patterns and the role of other actors have relevance in the role of local councils. In addition, the study concludes that technical feasibility, budgetary considerations, public opinion, coalition building, civil society, executive bodies, administrative organs and non-governmental organizations have a positive effect on the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province, while interest groups have a negative effect on the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province.

Practical implications – The findings and recommendations of this research can practically use by the local councils to achieve effective local policy, particularly in Erbil province/Iraq.

Originality/value – This research has interesting implications in theory and practice, as it provides several contributions to the literature, as well as the practical contribution for local councils in the local policy-making process.

Keywords Political factors, Local councils, Interaction patterns, Erbil province/Iraq, Local official and unofficial actors, Local policy-making process

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The local government systems, to a greater or lesser extent, are designed to identify local concerns and to set local priorities. Local authorities act as a system of administration in subdivisions of the state, usually governed by a council and/or mayor (Callanan, 2011, p. 3). In this context, the local council is defined as the supervisory-legislative body charged with such tasks as passing ordinances and approving budgets. By contrast, the local executive, which may be popularly elected or chosen by the council, is responsible for such functions as implementing council decisions and drafting budget proposals (Hankla and Downs, 2010, p. 3). In other words, the council is the legal legislature that represents all citizens in the community to vote on policy issues (Zhang, 2014, p. 361). The councilors have the



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responsibility to make important decisions by voting in council on issues such as resolutions of the council, policy changes, the integrated development plan and the annual budget. Councilors, therefore, need to be informed about the content of plans (Paradza *et al.*, 2010, p. 13). The city managers are expected to contribute to the policy process in the areas of agenda setting, policy formulation, leadership and goal setting, all of which are in addition to their primary responsibility for policy implementation (Demir and Reddick, 2012, p. 527). Indeed, the concept of local councils varies according to the political, social and economic philosophy of the state. The local councils represent the will of the local communities to express the needs and interests of these communities. The local councils are the deliberating (legislative) and monitoring authority at the local level. To put it another way, the role of local councils in local policy-making represents the primary role of local councils.

The provincial act of the Kurdistan Region/Iraq No. 3 of 2009 stipulates that the local councils have competent to prepare their budget, approve the budget of the administrative unit, outline the public policy of the administrative unit, and draw up annual and strategic plans for local development. Act No. 3 of 2009 considers the provincial council as a supervisory authority and has competent to issue regulations, instructions, and decisions to regulate the administrative and financial affairs. There are three tiers of local councils including the provincial, district, and sub-district councils. Local government bodies are composed of two main authorities. The first one is the local councils concerned with deliberating and supervision authorities. They are representative institutions at the local level and have many functions and responsibilities. Local policy-making is one of the most important tasks entrusted to them. The second one is the executive bodies of the local administrative units. They are responsible for implementing the local policy under the control of the local council.

The process of policy analysis is a series of intellectual activities carried out within a process comprised of activities that are essentially political. These political activities can be described as the policy-making process and viewed as a series of interdependent phases organized through time: agenda setting, policy formulation, policy adoption, policy implementation and policy assessment (Dunn, 1994, p. 15). As the role of local councils concentrated on the local policy-making, therefore, this study will focus on the role of these councils in the initial phases of the local policy-making process, including problem identification, agenda setting, policy formulation and policy decision-making. The role of local councils in the local policy-making process is affected by a number of factors. Hence, the research tries to explore the importance and impact of these factors on the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province/Iraq.

1.1 Problem statement

Despite the reforms and changes made to the local government system in Iraq and the Kurdistan region after the political change in 2003, through which local councils were given a wide range of powers and responsibilities in accordance with the principle of administrative decentralization. It is noted that the local units continue to suffer from the decline in the level of public services provision and face many problems that impede the process of achieving the local development. Therefore, this study sought to investigate the main research question: What relevance do the affecting factors have in the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province? This main question built on the four following questions:

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- Q1. What importance do local policy-making process variables have in the role of local councils in local policy-making?
- Q2. What importance do political factors have in the role of local councils in local policy-making?
- Q3. What importance do interaction patterns have in the role of the local councils in local policy-making?
- Q4. What importance do the roles of other actors have in the role of local councils in local policy-making?

The study, thereafter, tries to test research four hypotheses:

- H1. There is no significant impact at significance level $\alpha > 0.05$ of the local policy-making process variables on the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province.
- H2. There is no significant impact at significance level $\alpha > 0.05$ of political factors on the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province.
- H3. There is no significant impact at significance level $\alpha > 0.05$ of interaction patterns on the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province.
- H4. There is no significant impact at significance level $\alpha > 0.05$ of the role of other actors on the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province.

1.2 Research limitations

As for the timeframe, the study covers the period from 2005 to 2015, during which two electoral processes were held in the formation of local councils, in 2005 and 2014. As for the spatial limits of the study, Erbil province has been chosen as a location of the study because it enjoys relative stability compared to other Iraqi provinces, it is the capital of the region, and the diversity of political, social, and ethnic structure of local councils. In addition, the researcher faced some challenges in the distribution and collection of the questionnaires, due to the spatial spread of the local councils and other actors within the boundaries of the province.

2. Conceptualizing the local policy-making process

Public policy is a statement by the government - at whatever level, in whatever form - of what it intends to do about a public problem, such as a law, regulation, ruling, decision, order, or a combination of these. The lack of such statements may also be an implicit statement of policy (Birkland, 2016, p. 9). To many, public policy is a "black box" from which laws, regulations, and operational policy come. Opening the black box provides a better understanding of how policies are formed and how the public can be more actively engaged in the process (Hardee *et al.*, 2004, p. 3). Public policy can be described as the overall framework within which government actions are undertaken to achieve public goals, with a good working definition of public policy, is the study of government decisions and actions designed to deal with a matter of public concern (Cochran and Malone, 2014, p. 3). Therefore, policy-making can be seen as a political process with continuous steps and phases involving multiple parties of various levels and disciplines.

2.1 Problem identification

The policy process includes several key aspects: a definition of the problem to be addressed, the goals the policy is designed to achieve, and the instruments of policy that are employed to address the problem and achieve the policy goals (Cochran and Malone, 2014, p. 3). So, problem structuring can supply policy-relevant knowledge that challenges the assumptions underlying the definition of problems reaching the policy-making process through agenda-setting. Problem structuring can assist in discovering hidden assumptions, diagnosing causes, mapping possible objectives, synthesizing conflicting views, and designing new policy options (Dunn, 1994, p. 17). As for the local level, problem identification involves the definition of the problem when individuals, groups or entities express the existence of a problem related to services provided to the local residents and the quality of those services or the local development issues. It attracts the attention of local councils towards a policy given area. It is the starting point in the local policy-making process.

2.2 Agenda-setting

Agenda setting is the process by which problems and alternative solutions gain or lose public and elite attention, groups struggle to gain their issue a position among other issues that share a limited space on the agenda or prepare for a time when their issue becomes more likely to take a higher place on the agenda (Birkland, 2007, p. 63). A lack of persuasiveness weakens not only the chances of problems and solutions to survive on the agenda but also the power of those that back a hopeless case (Winkel and Leipold, 2016, p. 116). The range of issues pressing on government and the public is huge, but the attention capacities of both the general public and government are constrained, and constrained quite severely. The public holds many generalized positions on issues, but only a few of those issues are relevant at any particular time; that is, people will attend to only a limited number of issues (Jones and Baumgartner, 2004, p. 2). Government officials have a limited amount of attention they can devote to different policies (Kimball *et al.*, 2012, p. 9). Agenda setting success must be acted upon quickly, before attention shifts elsewhere (Cairney and Zahariadis, 2016, p. 5). In this regard, there are many factors that influence the attention of policymakers: first, that is the appearance of new information on the problem through relevant indicators, second that is focusing events like crises or disasters that come along to call attention to the problem, third, feedback when governmental officials receive feedback about the operation of existing programs, and finally, budgetary considerations that including the cost of programs. Sometimes programs come to be so costly that policy cut back the existing programs to save money (Kingdon, 1995, pp. 90-103). Hence, the local councils have to take into consideration factors that affect the councilor's attention in the local policy-making process.

2.3 Policy formulation

Policy formulation involves formulating initial proposals for action programs to address the problem. Policy formation does not produce a law, enforcement order or administrative rule. Policymakers may insist on not acting towards certain issues and leave them alone; events are leading themselves (Anderson, 1997, p. 85). It is worth to note that alternatives should have a number of attributions that make them more survival, such as technical feasibility, which demonstrates the feasibility of their implementation and the mechanisms by which proposals would be brought to practical use, value acceptability that indicates the compatibility of proposals to the values of participants in the policy community and anticipation of future constraints which should consider the future constraints to policy alternatives, such as financial constraints, public acceptance, support or opposition by

elected officials (Kingdon, 1995, pp. 131-139). There is a range of political factors play a distinctive role in the local policy-making, notably public opinion or national mood and political and administrative changes.

Decision makers cannot ignore public opinion in their choices, and the elected government official, who completely ignores public opinion, does not account for him in his positions and voting at the ballot, may find himself outside the arena (Anderson 1997, p. 98). The political processes affect the agenda. Swings of the national mood, fluctuations in public opinion, election results, changes of administration and rotation in parliament all may have strong effects (Kingdon, 1995, p. 17). One common source of structural change is leadership change through elections in democratic systems. Changes often come about when new proposals are put forward by the governing party coalition in an attempt to incorporate new policy ideas or new groups of voters (Baumgartner *et al.*, 2006, p. 5). It is worth mentioning that the local public opinion plays a more important role on the role of the local council in local policy-making because of the small size of the local community and the existence of relative harmony between its members and groups compared to the impact of public opinion in the policy process at the national level.

2.4 Policy decision-making

Policy formulation may interfere with policy decision-making in the policy-making process. The policy formulation is an effort that focuses on selecting an alternative among alternatives offered. Meanwhile, decision-making leads to the issuance of final decisions. Policy decisions include actions by some officials or organs to ratify, amend or reject, and the positive form of decisions is in the form of legislation or administrative orders. It is necessary to distinguish between policy decisions that affect the content of the government's direction and routine decisions regarding the application of policy and its decisions in daily life (Anderson, 1997, p. 93). In the public policy-making process, stakeholders and decision makers are engaged in a never-ending process of trying to influence each other's thinking and behavior (Suskind, 2006, p. 269). To identify the basic conflict-handling intentions, two-dimensions can be used, cooperativeness that means the degree to which one party tries to satisfy the other party's interests, and assertiveness that is the degree to which one party tries to meet his or her own interests. Accordingly, five conflict-handling intentions can be identified: competing is assertive and uncooperative, collaborating is assertive and cooperative, avoiding is unassertive and uncooperative, accommodating is unassertive and cooperative, and compromising is midrange on both assertiveness and cooperativeness (Robbins and Judge, 2007, p. 510). Consequently, the local policy-making process involves many patterns of interaction among local policymakers:

2.4.1 Bargaining. Bargaining is a process of negotiation between two or more persons who have the power to agree on a solution that is, in part, acceptable to their interests and not necessarily an ideal solution (Anderson, 1997, p. 102).

2.4.2 Consensus. Consensus is built in the political stream by bargaining more than by persuasion. When participants recognize problems or place on proposals in the policy stream, they do so largely by persuasion. They organize indicators and argue that specific conditions ought to be defined as problems, or they argue that their proposals meet such logical tests as technical feasibility or value acceptability. But in the political stream, participants build consensus by bargaining – trading provisions for support, adding elected officials to coalitions by giving them concessions that they demand, or compromising from ideal positions that will gain acceptance (Kingdon, 1995, p. 199).

2.4.3 Coalition building. The policy participants strive to translate components of their belief systems into actual policy before their opponents can do the same. To have any

prospect of success, they must seek allies, share resources, and develop complementary strategies. The policy participants will seek allies with people who hold similar policy core beliefs among legislators, agency officials, interest group leaders, judges, researchers and intellectuals from multiple levels of government. If they also engage in a nontrivial degree of coordination, they form an advocacy coalition (Sabatier and Weible, 2007, p. 196). In this respect, the obstacles for negotiation and consensus can be either the self-interested, cautious individual found in the tragedy of the public or the individuals seeking to protect their interests against an adversarial coalition (Weible *et al.*, 2012, p. 9). It is worth to note that the nature of responsibilities and powers of local councils requires interaction with other actors in the local policy-making process. However, interactions vary depending on the political composition of the actors involved in the policy process, phases of the policy process and the importance of policy domain or policy issues before the local councils.

3. Local policy-making actors

At the local level, policy-making actors inside of government (official actors) are local councils, executive bodies and administrative organs. And policy-making actors outside of government (unofficial actors) involve interest groups, political parties, NGOs, civil society, mass media, citizen/policy entrepreneurs and the private sector.

3.1 Local official actors

The local councils are responsible for drawing up the public policy of the administrative units in coordination with ministries and developing annual and strategic plans. In addition, they have competent to determine the priorities of the local projects. Besides the local councils, there are two governmental bodies: First, executive bodies that prepare the draft of the annual budget and strategic plan for the administrative units and submit them to the local councils for approval and ratification. Moreover, executive bodies are responsible for the implementation of policies, laws, decisions, and instructions issued by the competent authorities. Second, administrative organs belong to the regional government, they are public institutions and government departments that operate and perform some basic public services in the local units. The executive bodies and administrative organs exert an important role in transforming the demands into plans, programs and projects due to their specialization, through which they influence local policy-making.

3.2 Local unofficial actors

They are actors outside of government including interest groups, political parties, NGOs, civil society, mass media, citizen/policy entrepreneur and the private sector.

3.2.1 The interest groups. Obviously, interest groups activity is varied. Some of it affects the agenda; other activity affects the alternatives considered by policymakers. Some of it is positive, promoting new courses of government action; another activity is negative, seeking to block changes in public policy (Kingdon, 1995, p. 48). Interest groups have resources such as money, information, membership, and the ability to mobilize the public that insiders may not control. There are therefore strong inducements to cooperate. While the literature on lobbying developed with a view of interest groups mostly outside government trying to affect the behavior of seemingly neutral officials (Mahoney and Baumgartner, 2014, p. 203). Hence, interest groups are organized groups of people who share common values, goals, and interests and aim to influence the policymakers to shift a course of the policy so that their interests are realized.

3.2.2 The political parties. The political parties, interest groups and social movement organizations strongly influence public policy. These political organizations define public

problems, propose solutions, aggregate citizens' policy preferences, mobilize voters, make demands of elected officials, communicate information about government action to their supporters and the larger public and make relatively coherent legislative action possible (Burstein and Linton, 2002, p. 381). In local policy-making, whether political parties form minority or majority, operate according to their orientations. To pass on local policy issues, political parties often participate in a coalition with other parties or entities within the local council. At the same time, councilors with party affiliations may have to reconcile between partisan commitments and their commitments to voters who have voted for them in accordance with their electoral program.

3.2.3 The non-governmental organizations. NGOs contribute to the local policy-making process through the introducing proposals or project at the local level or contributing some local activities. Casey (2004, p. 253) stated that the attempts by third sector organizations to influence public policy are directed towards convincing or obliging institutional actors to pay attention to a policy domain which is being ignored or to change existing policies, rather than to the more bureaucratic phases of policy implementation. Third sector organizations, in effect, work to change the paradigms within which the policy process takes place.

3.2.4 The civil society. At the local level, civil society organizations are actively engaged in community development, skill improvements for sustainable livelihoods and access to basic social services. Through local elections and local elected councils, they can hold local leaders accountable and influence the articulation of local needs and priorities. In urban areas, civil society organizations have played a major role over the years in urban shelter, services and protecting the interests of slum dwellers and squatters in government – initiated programs (Cheema, 2011, p. 8).

3.2.5 The mass media. Media organizations employ a limited number of journalists to report on policy deliberations to the public. An abundance of issues and information must be shifted and prioritized into a small fraction of policies that are considered for action by the government (Kimball et al., 2012, p. 10). The policy process might take a long time to get to the decision and many policy actors may intervene during the formulation phase. If causality is not more than a strong hypothesis when one compares the media coverage and policy agendas this is even more so in the case of media agendas and decisions. Causality, if any, is obscured by the complexity of events and the number of intervening factors and agents during the policy formulation phase (Boda and Patkos, 2015, p. 4).

3.2.6 The citizen/policy entrepreneur. The entrepreneur is the individual who understands the importance of ideas in the policy process and promotes them in such a way as to convince the other actors about an issue. In case of changes in the agenda, the entrepreneurs try to redefine the issues as to make them attractive to previously apathetic groups, and, if these groups chose to take part in a political dispute, they may disrupt existent monopolies (Capella, 2012, p. 8).

3.2.7 The private sector. The involvement of businesses and civil society – consumers, private entrepreneurs, employees and citizens and community groups, NGOs in designing public policy is critical if the government of developing countries is to improve the transparency, quality and effectiveness of their policies as well as establishing the legitimacy of the public policy (Hai, 2013, p. 1). In this regard, the private sector participates in the process of local policy-making by attending the local councils' meetings on local policy-making. In addition, the private sector provides public services through a partnership with the public sector. It is clear that the role of other actors in local policy-making may have a positive or negative impact on the role of local councils, depending on the influence and interests of the groups they represent.

In sum, local councils need to take into account the importance of previously discussed affecting factors in local policy-making. The research attempts to verify the relevance and impact of factors that affect the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province through the current empirical research.

4. The empirical analysis

4.1 Research methodology

The design of the study is descriptive in the theoretical aspect and quantitative in the empirical aspect. Theoretically, this research adopted the analytical approach to define the main concepts and an empirical study to explore the relationships between the main study variables as illustrated in Figure 1. Therefore, in addition to the conceptualization related literature, a field study was conducted to examine the importance of factors related to the role of local councils in local policy-making, and to investigate the impact of these factors on the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province.

To achieve the objectives of this research, the questionnaire developed and used for data collection. It is worth noting that the questionnaire formulated on the basis of the literature review (Kingdon, 1995, Baumgartner *et al.*, 2011, Sabatier and Weible 2007). The questionnaire developed on the five-point Likert scale as the measurement tool, rating from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The data were analyzed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS). In addition, Cronbach's alpha coefficient test was used to assess the reliability of the measurement, and it was found that the total coefficient is above 0.75. Therefore, the values are acceptable because all coefficients are higher than 0.60. Sekaran maintains that Cronbach's alpha is computed in terms of the average intercorrelations among the items measuring the concept. The closer Cronbach's alpha is to 1, the higher the internal consistency reliability (Sekaran, 2003, p. 307).

4.2 Population of the study

Table AI reveals the study population, which consisted of official and unofficial actors of policymakers in Erbil province. Official actors included heads and members of (47) local councils: the provincial council (30) elements, (10) district councils (90) elements, (36) sub-districts (252) elements, (47) heads of executive bodies, and (28) administrative organs. Unofficial actors, included (10) interest groups, (10) political parties, (54) non-governmental organizations, (62) civil society organizations, (10) citizen/policy entrepreneurs, (10) mass media, and (48) private sector institutions, bringing the total number of the population to (651) elements.

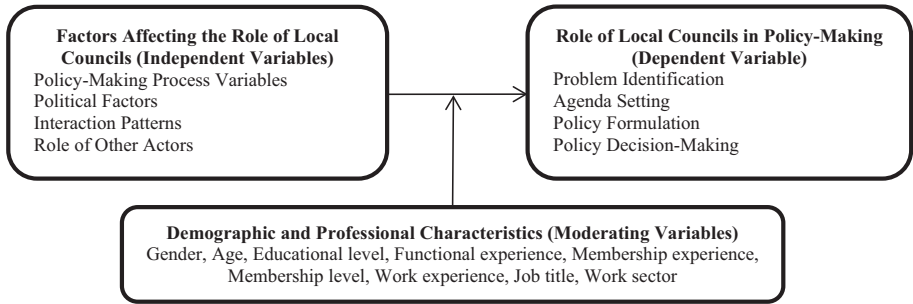


Figure 1.
Research
conceptual model

4.3 Selection of the study sample

To calculate the sample size, the Cochran's formula was used; resulting in a sample size of 242 subjects. In an attempt to select a convenient and representative sample, the disproportionate stratified random sampling was used to select a sample of 242 individuals. The sample was randomly selected as follows: the official actors included: (20) councilors from province council, (45) councilors from five district councils, (84) councilors from 12 sub-district councils, (18) heads of executive bodies and (12) administrative organs. The unofficial actors included: (6) interest groups, (6) political parties, (11) NGOs, (18) civil society organizations, (6) citizens/policy entrepreneurs, (6) mass media and (10) private sector institutions. A total of 242 questionnaires were distributed on the sample and only 221 responded. The response rate was 91 per cent, and 18 questionnaires were excluded for the lack of validity. Thus, 203 questionnaires were valid for the purpose of statistical analysis, which constituted 84 per cent of the questionnaires distributed.

4.4 Demographic and professional characteristics of respondents

The results of the study reveal that the sample consists of (88.7 per cent) males and (11.3 per cent) females and (51.2 per cent) of respondents' ages are 40 years or above and (48.8 per cent) are less than 40 years. Regarding the educational level, (89.7 per cent) have a bachelor degree or less and (10.3 per cent) are postgraduate degree holders. According to the functional experience, (66.5 per cent) have above 11 years of experience and (33.5 per cent) have less than 10 years. As for councilors, (59.2 per cent) have more than 6 years' membership experience in local councils and (40.8 per cent) have less than 5 years. As for the membership level in local councils, (57 per cent) are members of the councils and (43 per cent) are chairmen, vice-chairmen, and secretary of the council, as well as chairmen, vice-chairmen, and rapporteurs of the committees. As for the other actors, (50.7 per cent) have work experience for more than 11 years and (49.3 per cent) have less than 10 years. According to the job title, (38.4 per cent) are directors and general directors and (61.6 per cent) have other titles. As for the work sector, (65.8 per cent) are unofficial actors and (34.2 per cent) are executive bodies and administrative organs.

4.5 Data analysis

The descriptive analysis is used to find the mean, standard deviation, and relevance ranking for the respondents' responses to the questionnaire. The respondents' estimations were divided into three levels, based on the following equation: $(\text{upper limits} - \text{lower limits}) \div \text{number of levels} = (5 - 1) \div 3 = 1.33$. (1 – 2.33) indicates a low degree of relevance, and (2.34 – 3.66) indicates a medium degree of relevance, and (3.67 – 5) indicates a high degree of relevance.

In response to the first research question, [Table AII](#) reveals that the general mean of the variables of the local policy-making process is (3.71), indicates that the variables of the local policy-making process have high relevance in the role of local councils. The mean of problem identification and attention attracting are around (3.80) and (3.90) indicates that they have high relevance in the role of local councils, whereas the mean of alternatives attribution is (3.59) indicates that it has medium relevance in the role of local councils. In terms of ranking the relevance of the variables, [Table AIII](#) shows that the mean of the appearance of new information, problem identification, focusing events, budgetary considerations, feedback and value acceptability are around (3.70) and above, indicates that these variables have high relevance in the role of local councils. This shows that the variables of the local policy-making process have a great impact on the relevance of the local policy-making variables in the role of local councils. Whereas the mean of technical

feasibility and the anticipation of future constraints are around (3.50) and (3.37), respectively, this indicates that they have medium relevance in the role of local councils.

In response to the second research question, [Table AIV](#) presents that the general mean of political factors is (3.79), indicates that the political factors have high relevance in the role of local councils. In terms of ranking the relevance of political factors, the mean of political and administrative changes and the public opinion or national mood are around (3.70) and above, indicates that these variables have high relevance in the role of local councils. This shows that the local councils are concerned with political and administrative changes and local public opinion in local policy-making.

In response to the third research question, [Table AV](#) shows that the general mean of the interaction patterns is (3.60), indicates that the interaction patterns have medium relevance in the role of local councils. In terms of ranking the relevance of sub-interaction patterns, the mean of coalition building and bargaining are above (3.75), indicates that coalition building and bargaining have a high relevance in the role of local councils, while the mean of consensus is (3.26), indicates that the consensus has a medium relevance in the role of local councils. This shows that local councils adopt coalition building and bargaining, to reach agreement on local policy decisions, meanwhile they have not used the consensus pattern to reach agreement on local policy decisions. That is maybe due to the composition of the local councils and other actors, and the policy issues before the local councils.

In response to the fourth research question, [Table AVI](#) indicates that the general mean of the role of other actors is (3.53), indicates that the role of other actors has medium relevance in the role of local councils. In terms of ranking the relevance of the roles of other actors, the mean of mass media and political parties are around (3.70) or above, indicates that they have high relevance in the role of local councils. However, the mean of the role of administrative organs, the private sector, citizen/policy entrepreneurs, executive bodies, civil society, interest groups and NGOs are around (3.30) or above, indicates that other actors have a medium relevance in the role of local councils. It is clear that local councils have not paid more attention to the involvement of other actors in local policy-making. In sum, the descriptive analysis shows that the value of mean for all factors are around (3.00) and (4.00), of medium and high relevance. That is most respondents agree to the existence of medium and high relevance of those factors in the role of local councils in the local policy-making process.

4.6 Testing the research hypotheses

For the purpose of analyzing and discussing the results of the empirical study, simple and multiple linear regressions analysis were used to test the research hypotheses. The following decision rule has been adopted: Acceptance of the null hypothesis if the value of the calculated statistical significance level is greater than (0.05). Refuse of the null hypothesis if the value of the calculated statistical significance level is equal to or less than (0.05).

To prove whether the study hypotheses are acceptable, simple linear regression was used to test the impact of independent variables on the dependent variable. As [Table AVII](#) indicates that from the first model, where the local policy-making process variables are the independent variable, it is clear that the local policy-making process variables have a significant positive impact on the role of local councils at confidence level 0.95, and this appears from the weight of Beta (0.389), which is significant at the (0.000) level. The adjusted *R*-squared is (0.147), which means that variables of the local policy-making process explain (14.7 per cent) of the variation in the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province.

From the second model, where political factors are the independent variable, it is obvious that the political factors have a significant positive impact on the role of local councils at confidence level 0.95, and this appears from the weight of Beta (0.193), which is significant at the (0.006). The adjusted *R*-squared is (0.033), meaning that the political factors explain (3.3 per cent) of the variation in the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province.

From the third model, where interaction patterns are the independent variable, it is clear that the interaction patterns have a significant positive impact on the role of local councils at confidence level 0.95, and this appears from the weight of Beta (0.276), which is significant at the (0.000) level. The adjusted *R*-squared is (0.071), which means that the interaction patterns explain (7.1 per cent) of the variation in the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province.

From the fourth model, where the role of other actors is the independent variable, it is obvious that the role of other actors has a significant positive impact on the role of local councils at confidence level 0.95, and this appears from the weight of Beta (0.494), which is significant at the (0.000) level. The adjusted *R*-squared is (0.240), which means that the role of other actors explains (24 per cent) of the variation in the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province. According to previous findings, all four hypotheses are rejected. Alternative hypotheses are accepted, which means that the study can conclude that there is a significant positive impact on the level of confidence $\alpha = 0.05$ for the factors (the local policy-making process variables, political factors, interaction patterns, the role of other actors) on the role of local councils in Erbil province.

To investigate the impact of the variables of the previous factors on the role of local councils, multiple linear regression analysis was used, as follows: For the variables of the policy-making process, [Table AVIII](#) presents the technical feasibility as the independent variable; it has a significant positive impact on the role of local councils at a significance level (0.000), and this appears from the weight of Beta (0.366). The budgetary considerations as the independent variable; it has a significant positive impact on the role of local councils at a significance level (0.050), and this appears from the weight of Beta (0.146). It is evident that the role of local councils is affected by the variables of technical feasibility and budgetary considerations, while the role of local councils is not affected by the variables of the appearance of new information, problem identification, focusing events, feedback, value acceptability, and the anticipation of future constraints. The reason may be due to the local councils doing not care about these variables in local policy-making. This result is closely consistent with the part of what concluded by ([Liu *et al.*](#), p. 13) that the budgetary considerations and feedback to the local government is more important than the objective indicators of the problem and the focusing events in local policy agenda setting.

For the variables of political factors, [Table AIX](#) shows that the public opinion or national mood as the independent variable; it has a significant positive impact on the role of local councils at a significance level (0.000), and this appears from the weight of Beta (0.351).

For the interaction patterns, [Table AX](#) presents that the coalition building as the independent variable; it has a significant positive impact on the role of local councils at a significance level (0.043), and this appears from the weight of Beta (0.153). This shows that the role of local councils is affected by public opinion or national mood in local policy-making while not affected by political and administrative changes. This result is in line with the findings of the study of ([Hai, 2013](#), p. 11) that the interaction among policy actors is essential in the policy-making process.

For the role of other actors, [Table AXI](#) illustrates that the role of civil society as the independent variable; it has a significant positive impact on the role of local councils at a significance level (0.002), and this appears from the weight of Beta (0.215). The role of

the executive bodies as the independent variable; it has a significant positive impact on the role of local councils at a significance level (0.003), and this appears from the weight of Beta (0.220). The role of the interest groups as the independent variable; it has a significant negative impact on the role of local councils at a significance level (0.004), and this appears from the weight of Beta (−0.173). It is clear that the negative signal indicates that the role of interest groups come on the contrary to the role of local councils in the local policy-making. The role of administrative organs as the independent variable; it has a significant positive impact on the role of local councils at a significance level (0.017), and this appears from the weight of Beta (0.163). The role of NGOs as the independent variable; it has a significant positive impact on the role of local councils at a significance level (0.030), and this appears from the weight of Beta (0.146). There is no significant impact at a significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$) of the variables of citizen/policy entrepreneurs, the private sector, political parties, and the mass media on the role of local councils. This is because these actors have not actively participated in the local policy-making process. This result is closely correlated with the results of the study of (Liu *et al.*, 2010, p. 13) that the mass media has little role in local policy-making. In addition, it is consistent with the findings of the study of (Owens and Lamm, 2014, p. 3) that despite the efforts by mass media, politicians, and interest groups, political attention will continue to vary from one issue to another based upon the associated value of the issue to those holding positions in power.

In sum, the results of the analysis of the previous hypotheses showed that the four independent variables considered in this study significantly explained about 49 per cent of the variation in the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province, and 51 per cent of that variation remains unexplained. This may be attributed to the complexity of social, political, and administrative phenomena. In other words, there are other additional factors may play an important role in explaining the variation in the role of local councils that have not been considered in this study.

- H5.* There is no significant difference at significance level $\alpha > 0.05$ in the perspectives of respondents towards the relationships between the factors affecting the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province, due to the demographic and professional characteristics.

To test the previous hypothesis the univariate analysis of variance was used whether there are differences in the perspectives of respondents towards the relationship between the independent and dependent variables due to the moderating variables at the level of significance ($\alpha > 0.05$). Table AXII shows that there are significant differences in the perspectives of the respondents towards the relationship between the local policy-making variables and the role of local councils due to gender, educational level, age, functional experience, work experience, job title and the work sector, while there are no significant differences due to membership experience, and membership level. There are significant differences in the perspectives of the respondents towards the relationship between political factors and the role of local councils due to gender, educational level, work experience, job title, and the work sector, while there are no significant differences in the perspectives of the respondents due to age, membership experience, and membership level. There are significant differences in the perspectives of the respondents towards the relationship between interaction patterns and the role of local councils due to gender, educational level, age, functional experience, work experience, job title, and the work sector, whereas there are no significant differences due to membership experience and membership level. There are significant differences in the perspectives of the respondents towards the relationship

between the role of other actors and the role of local councils due to all the demographic and professional characteristics.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The study attempted to examine the factors affecting the role of local councils in local policy-making. Data analysis and the test of the study hypotheses indicated important findings on the relevance and impact of these factors on the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province. The study has reached the following results and recommendations.

5.1 Empirical findings

- The results of the analysis reveal that variables of the local policy-making process and political factors have high relevance in the role of local councils. While the interaction patterns and the roles of other actors have medium relevance in the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province.
- The research indicates that variables of the local policy-making process, political factors, interaction patterns, and the role of other actors positively affect the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province.
- The results of the research reveal that technical feasibility and budgetary considerations, and public opinion or national mood have a positive effect on the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province.
- This research reveals that coalition building is the unique pattern that positively affects the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province.
- The results of the research indicate that the role of civil society, executive bodies, administrative organs and NGOs positively affect the role of local councils in local policy-making. While the role of interest groups has a negative effect on the role of local councils in local policy-making in Erbil province.
- The research indicates that variables of the local policy-making process, political factors, interaction patterns, and the role of other actors of (49 per cent) affect the role of local councils in local policy-making. This is evidence that there are other factors that affect the role of local councils and are not addressed in this study.

5.2 Recommendations and future research

In light of the findings mentioned above, the study has made the following recommendations:

- Local councils should pay more attention to technical feasibility, budget considerations, public opinion or national mood in local policy-making in Erbil province.
- Local councils should allow greater opportunity for local councilors and other actors to exercise coalition building in the local policy-making in Erbil province.
- Local councils should promote the active participation of civil society, executive bodies, administrative organs and NGOs in local policy-making. Local councils should also pay attention to the participation of the citizen/policy entrepreneurs, the private sector, mass media, and political parties in local policy-making in Erbil province.

- The regional government should pay more attention to selecting appointee officials for the executive bodies and administrative organs at the local level.
- Finally, concerning future research, further research is needed to identify other factors that have relevance and impact on the role of local councils in the local policy-making process in Erbil province/Iraq. In addition, the study recommends conducting similar research model including all provinces in the Kurdistan region and Iraq.

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Table AI.
The population and
sample size

Appendix. Research tables

Actors	Stratified size	Sample size
<i>Official actors</i>		
Provincial council	30	20
District council	90	45
Sub-district council	252	84
Executive bodies	47	18
Administrative organs	28	12
<i>Unofficial actors</i>		
Interest groups	10	6
Political parties	10	6
NGOs	54	11
Civil society	62	18
Citizen/Policy entrepreneurs	10	6
Mass media	10	6
Private sector	48	10
Total	651	242

Table AII.
Relevance ranking
for the variables of
the local policy-
making process

Variables of local policy-making process	Mean	SD	Ranking
Problem identification	3.91	0.53	1
Attention attracting	3.82	0.45	2
Alternatives attribution	3.59	0.52	3
General mean	3.71	0.40	

Table AIII.
Relevance ranking
for the sub-variables
of the local policy-
making process

Variables of local policy-making process	Mean	SD	Ranking
The appearance of new information	3.93	0.60	1
Problem identification	3.91	0.53	2
Focusing events	3.81	0.67	3
Budgetary considerations	3.80	0.65	4
Feedback	3.72	0.57	5
Value acceptability	3.67	0.66	6
Technical feasibility	3.50	0.69	7
The anticipation of future constraints	3.37	0.83	8
General mean	3.71	0.40	

Table AIV.
Relevance ranking
for political factors of
the local policy-
making process

Political factors	Mean	SD	Ranking
Political and administrative changes	3.91	0.69	1
Public opinion or national mood	3.68	0.74	2
General mean	3.79	0.57	

Table AV.
Relevance ranking
for interaction
patterns

Interaction patterns	Mean	SD	Ranking
Coalition building	3.77	0.59	1
Bargaining	3.76	0.67	2
Consensus	3.26	0.72	3
General mean	3.60	0.44	

Table AVI.
Relevance ranking
for the role of other
actors

The role of other actors	Mean	SD	Ranking
Mass media	3.78	0.63	1
Political parties	3.68	0.65	2
Administrative organs	3.65	0.62	3
Private sector	3.63	0.72	4
Citizen/policy entrepreneurs	3.50	0.65	5
Executive bodies	3.45	0.64	6
Civil society	3.43	0.82	7
Interest groups	3.41	0.70	8
NGOs	3.31	0.76	9
General mean	3.53	0.73	

Table AVII.
Simple linear
regression models of
the independent
variables on the
dependent variable

Simple regression model	Dependent variable	Independent variable	Beta	Adjusted <i>R</i> -squared	Significance of the model
First	The role of local councils	Local policy-making process	0.389	0.147	0.000
Second		Political factors	0.193	0.033	0.006
Third		Interaction patterns	0.276	0.071	0.000
Fourth		The role of other actors	0.494	0.240	0.000

Table AVIII.
Multiple linear
regression models of
the variables of the
policy-making
process

Dependent variable	Independent variables	B	Beta	T	Significance
The role of local councils	Technical feasibility	0.253	0.366	5.141	0.000
	Budgetary considerations	0.107	0.146	1.974	0.050
	Appearance of new information	0.104	0.130	1.758	0.080
	Problem identification	−0.098	−0.109	−1.412	0.160
	Focusing events	0.069	0.097	1.261	0.209
	Feedback	−0.023	−0.027	−0.392	0.695
	Value acceptability	0.012	0.017	0.217	0.828
	Anticipation of future constraints	0.009	0.015	0.193	0.848

Table AIX.
Multiple linear
regression models of
political factors

Dependent variable	Independent variables	B	Beta	T	Significance
The role of local councils	Public opinion or national mood	0.243	0.351	5.065	0.000
	Political and administrative changes	-0.064	-0.099	-1.432	0.154

Table AX.
Multiple linear
regression models of
interaction patterns

Dependent variable	Independent variables	B	Beta	T	Significance
The role of local councils	Coalition building	0.124	0.153	2.032	0.043
	Bargaining	-0.098	-0.137	-1.734	0.084
	Consensus	0.080	0.121	1.602	0.111

Table AXI.
Multiple linear
regression models of
the role of other
actors

Dependent variable	Independent variables	B	Beta	T	Significance
The role of local councils	Civil society	0.125	0.215	3.220	0.002
	Executive bodies	0.163	0.220	3.004	0.003
	Interest groups	-0.118	-0.173	-2.880	0.004
	Administrative organs	0.125	0.163	2.400	0.017
	NGOs	0.092	0.146	2.183	0.030
	Citizen/Policy entrepreneurs	0.070	0.095	1.413	0.159
	Private sector	0.041	0.062	0.956	0.340
	Political parties	-0.010	-0.014	-0.229	0.819
	Mass media	-0.007	-0.009	-0.133	0.895

Dependent variables	Demographic and professional variables	Independent variables					
		Local policy-making process variables		Political factors		Interaction patterns	
		F	Sig	F	Sig	F	Sig
The role of local councils	Gender	19.66	0.000	4.56	0.012	8.93	0.000
	Educational level	7.51	0.000	2.58	0.020	4.02	0.001
	Age	9.00	0.000	2.10	0.083	4.40	0.002
	Functional experience	9.00	0.000	2.00	0.102	4.10	0.003
	Membership experience	0.454	0.636	1.800	0.169	0.86	0.427
	Membership level	0.52	0.815	0.96	0.467	0.54	0.807
	Work experience	14.83	0.000	5.00	0.001	6.68	0.000
	Job title	23.13	0.000	12.16	0.000	11.0	0.000
	Work sector	8.65	0.000	4.90	0.000	3.55	0.001
						52.46	0.000
						19.11	0.000
						25.40	0.000
						26.61	0.000
						26.88	0.000
						8.60	0.000
						11.60	0.000
						23.20	0.000
						8.55	0.000

Table AXII.
Univariate analysis
of variance