

# **INTERROGATING THE PERFORMANCE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION IN NIGERIA**

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## **Abstract**

Local government is one of the oldest forms of governance in Nigeria, evolving under various names and administrations. It is fundamentally designed to enhance governance at the grassroots level and drive local development. Despite its long history and numerous reforms, local government has not succeeded in bringing the anticipated development to rural communities. This paper examines the administration of local government and explores ways to reposition it for sustainable grassroots development. It emphasizes the legal framework, performance, challenges, and prospects of the local government system, relying on secondary data for analysis. The findings reveal that inadequate financing, undue interference, lack of resident participation in policy-making and development programs, corruption, and other related issues have hindered local governments from being effective instruments of positive change. The paper concludes that genuine reforms and repositioning of local governments are essential to enhance their capacity as reliable agents of transformational development.

**Keywords:** Development, Grassroots, Governance, Local government, Rural Development

## **Introduction**

The need for effective governance at the grassroots level in any modern society cannot be overstated. Central governments alone cannot adequately manage the affairs of an entire country, particularly in remote areas. This necessity led to the creation of local governments in Nigeria as the third tier of government. Nigeria, with its vast size, population exceeding 200 million, and over 250 ethnic groups, requires decentralized governance to address local needs effectively.

In 1976, the official handbook on the reformed system of local government in Nigeria defined local government as “government at the local level exercised through representative councils established by law to exercise specific powers within defined areas. These powers should provide substantial control over local affairs, including staffing, institutional, and financial powers to initiate and direct service provision, determine and implement projects, complement state and federal government activities, and ensure active participation of people and their traditional institutions to maximize local initiative and response to local needs” (FRN, 1976). Similarly, the United Nations Office for Public Administration views local government as “a political subdivision of a nation or (in a federal system) state,

constituted by law with substantial control over local affairs, including the power to impose taxes or exact labor for prescribed purposes, governed by an elected or locally selected body.”

These definitions underscore that local government is designed to serve the interests of local inhabitants in various dimensions. Bamidele (1986) noted that local government is essential because it brings governance to the doorstep of the people, providing opportunities for self-governance and the utilization of local talents. Local government plays a crucial role in delivering essential services such as markets, dispensaries, roads, and community projects that the central government cannot provide alone. Additionally, local governments serve as training grounds for political education and leadership development (Ola and Tonwe, 2009).

Suleiman (2012) emphasized that local government should promote rural development by improving the living conditions in rural communities. This includes providing or assisting communities in acquiring adequate food supply, decent shelter, health facilities, mass education, water supply, electrification, roads, and industries. The basic objective is to organize, develop, and utilize available resources (both human and material) to meet the basic needs of people, such as food, clothing, shelter, utilities, and healthcare.

To be effective, local governments must meet these objectives. However, in Nigeria, local governments have largely failed in their fundamental responsibility of ensuring rural development. Many rural areas still suffer from infrastructure deficits, poverty, hunger, and lack of essential services despite numerous reforms and resources dedicated to improving the system. This paradox forms the basis of this paper, which aims to examine the challenges facing local governments and explore how they can be repositioned for effective and sustainable rural service delivery.

### **Theoretical Underpinning: Bottom-up Model**

The bottom-up model gained prominence due to the shortcomings of the top-down model, which often fails to recognize the potential and needs of local and rural residents in their own development (Gurria, 2015). Centralized development decision-making, typically involving city-based experts, is often detached from local realities. This approach is frequently marked by planning arrogance, where technocrats assume they know best what the grassroots level needs (Parnwell, 2008).

In contrast, the bottom-up model emphasizes local actors' participation in decision-making about strategies and the selection of priorities for their area (Bon, 2013). This model represents a significant shift towards grassroots development, empowering local communities to take charge of their future. It allows local community members and stakeholders to express their views, expectations, and plans.

The bottom-up approach is a rural service delivery model that encourages transparency and participation at every stage, from definition to implementation, evaluation, and revision of programmes. This involvement can be direct or through bodies representing collective interests, such as professional organizations, women's groups, and other community-based entities. This local participation encourages local actors to be involved in all stages of decision-making and implementation. This enriches democracy at the grassroots level. This approach also ensures that development strategies are tailored to the specific needs and realities of the local area, as well as promotes openness in processes, fostering trust and accountability. By this broader level of participation and involvement, the approach harps on opportunities available to local communities to influence their own development trajectory. In addition, by involving local stakeholders, projects are more likely to be sustainable and have long-term benefits.

The bottom-up model is particularly relevant to the discussion of local government in Nigeria. It emphasizes effective service delivery from the rural segment of society and the active participation of community residents. However, in Nigeria, many rural development policies and programmes are designed and imposed by higher levels of government in a top-down manner. This centralized

approach often fails to meet local needs and leads to the underperformance of local governments in fostering rural development.

The failure of the top-down approach in Nigeria highlights the importance of adopting a bottom-up model for rural development. Local governments need to shift towards a more inclusive and participatory approach where residents have a say in the planning and execution of development projects. By doing so, development initiatives will be more aligned with the actual needs of the communities, leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes. The bottom-up model offers a viable framework for repositioning local governments in Nigeria to achieve sustainable grassroots development. By prioritizing local participation and tailoring development initiatives to the unique needs of rural communities, local governments can become more effective in delivering services and improving the quality of life for their residents.

### **Local Government System in Nigeria**

The local government system in Nigeria has roots that date back to the creation of the country. Following the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914, the Native Authority Ordinance of 1916 empowered Governor General Sir Fredrick Lugard to establish Native Authorities for local administration (Ibrahim, 2003). During the colonial period, efforts were made to develop a national policy for local governance. By 1946, the Richards Constitution restructured Nigeria into three regions, transferring control of native authorities to these regions, which then assumed responsibility for reforming the Native Authority System (Adeyemi, 2019; Etibom, 2022).

With the advent of military rule in 1966 and subsequent state creation, numerous reforms were introduced. A significant reform occurred in 1976 when the federal military government established guidelines for local government reform, creating a national system with a standardized structure, revenue sources, and personnel management system. This reform also introduced democratic elections for local governments and positioned them as the third tier of government, enabling them to play a more effective role in local development (FRN, 1976). The reform was incorporated into the 1979 Constitution, which mandated democratically elected local councils and ensured revenue allocation from the federation account, giving local governments' constitutional recognition for the first time.

Between 1979 and 1999, local governments underwent a series of reforms, which placed them under the control of federal and state governments. This centralization hindered the development and progress of local governments. Currently, Section 7, Subsection 1 of the 1999 Constitution states: "the system of local government by democratically elected local government councils is under this Constitution guaranteed, and accordingly, the government of every state shall, subject to Section 8 of this Constitution, ensure their existence under a law which provides for the establishment, structure, composition, and function of such councils."

This constitutional directive authorizes states to enact laws establishing local governments, detailing their structure, composition, and functions. However, Eze-Michael (2021) noted that the 1999 Constitution did not effectively create a third tier of government, as it left the establishment and regulation of local governments to the states. Consequently, local governments in Nigeria often function as extensions of state governments and exist at their discretion.

The local governments in Nigeria have evolved, and this evolution included colonial era (1914-1946), when the system of Native Authorities was introduced. This system allows to authorities to manage local affairs under the supervision of the colonial administration; regional control (1946-1966), when the Richards Constitution restructured Nigeria into regions, transferring local governance responsibilities to regional authorities; military reforms (1966-1976), when multiple reforms aimed at centralizing control and creating a uniform system for local government administration were enacted; 1976 reforms established a national local government system with democratic elections, standardized structures, and revenue sources, incorporated into the 1979 Constitution; post-1979 reforms continued adjustments to local government structures, often leading to increased state and

federal control; 1999 constitution reaffirmed democratically elected local councils but with significant state control over their establishment and functions.

However, it must be pointed out that the 1999 constitution which places local government under the respective state government limits local autonomy and often results in underfunded and poorly managed local councils. Despite constitutional guarantees, local governments struggle to fulfill their roles in local development effectively. The lack of clear delineation of powers and responsibilities between federal, state, and local governments exacerbates these issues, leading to inefficiencies and stagnation in local governance.

### **Overview of Local Government Performance in Nigeria**

Local governments in Nigeria are designed to serve as crucial instruments of rural development, addressing the unique needs of local residents, particularly in rural areas. The Fourth Schedule of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution outlines the primary functions of local government councils. These functions include economic development, the construction and maintenance of infrastructure such as roads, street lighting, drains, public highways, parks, gardens, and other public facilities as prescribed by the State House of Assembly. Additionally, local governments are responsible for the provision and maintenance of primary, adult, and vocational education, the development of agriculture and natural resources (excluding mineral exploitation), and the provision and maintenance of health services (FRN, 1999).

Despite these clearly defined roles and the various reforms introduced by successive administrations to enhance the capacity of local governments, their performance has consistently fallen short of expectations. Local governments across Nigeria have largely failed to meet their developmental objectives, serving more as welfare laggards than effective engines of grassroots development. Isa (2015) encapsulates this sentiment, noting that despite efforts by past administrations to transform local communities, local governments have not justified their establishment. Olaiya (2016) also describes local government performance as significantly below expectations, with local governments lagging in providing basic infrastructure such as water and sanitation, rural road access, and electricity (Lawal, 2014; Teniola, 2023).

The underperformance of local governments can be seen in the pathetic state of many rural areas in Nigeria. Local roads often remain unrepaired, rural electricity projects are incomplete, and rural health centers are dilapidated, lacking essential drugs and medical personnel. Rural boreholes and water pumps frequently lack water, and many rural water schemes and projects are deserted. The only visible remnants of these initiatives are signposts indicating their locations, but the projects themselves are often non-functional due to prolonged neglect, poor maintenance, vandalism, and a lack of community ownership (Edet, 2020).

The ineffectiveness of local governments in Nigeria can be attributed to several interrelated factors. Limited competence and capacity among local government officials hinder effective service delivery, compounded by insufficient training and resources. Widespread corruption and mismanagement of funds further undermine local government operations, with financial resources intended for development projects frequently diverted for personal gain. Excessive political interference from higher levels of government stifles the autonomy of local governments, making it difficult for them to implement projects that reflect local needs. Additionally, a lack of community engagement in the planning and execution of development projects compromises the sustainability and effectiveness of these initiatives. When local residents are not involved, projects often fail to address their actual needs, leading to wasted resources and unrealized potential.

Inadequate funding also significantly limits the ability of local governments to carry out essential functions. Dependence on federal and state allocations constrains their financial independence and operational efficiency, leaving them ill-equipped to meet the needs of their communities. This persistent failure to meet developmental objectives has profound implications for grassroots

development in Nigeria. Rural areas remain underdeveloped, with poor access to essential services and infrastructure, exacerbating poverty, limiting economic opportunities, and hindering overall national development.

### **Challenges of Local Government in Nigeria**

Corruption stands as one of the most significant challenges facing local governments in Nigeria. It has become entrenched within the system, with high levels of embezzlement and theft of public funds meant for developmental projects. Ovisuyi, Idada, and Isiraojie (2017) point out that this norm of corruption severely undermines local government efficacy. Edet (2020) further highlights the absence of accountability and transparency in council administration, along with general indiscipline and a lack of commitment to work. These factors collectively impede the progress of local governments, making it difficult to provide the basic facilities necessary for sustainable progress and rural transformation.

The constitutional framework poses another major obstacle to local government performance. The 1999 Nigerian Constitution places local governments under the control of state governments, stripping them of the autonomy needed to initiate policies and programs independently. Anayochukwu and Anayochukwu (2021) argue that this lack of freedom prevents local governments from transforming the economic status of their communities. Despite being recognized as the third tier of government, local governments are unable to operate without interference from higher authorities, creating a political paradox.

The top-down approach to rural development further exacerbates the ineffectiveness of local governments. Policies and programs designed to facilitate grassroots development are often initiated by policymakers at the federal and state levels, who typically reside in urban areas and lack an understanding of rural needs. Etebom (2022) and Edet (2020) note that this disconnect results in the imposition of unsuitable policies on local communities, thereby denying them the opportunity to participate in the development process. Oviasuyi et al. (2017) identify undue interference from higher levels of government and politicians as a significant barrier to local government performance. Local government officials, especially chairpersons, are subjected to external control and influence, limiting their ability to act independently.

A critical shortage of professional and skilled manpower also plagues the local government system. Essential personnel such as engineers, doctors, architects, lawyers, builders, and town planners are often unwilling to work in local government areas due to a lack of basic amenities, poor welfare packages, and high levels of insecurity. Adeyemi (2019) emphasizes that the absence of these key professionals, who are crucial for driving sustainable development, hampers the capacity of local governments to implement effective development projects.

Furthermore, inadequate funding severely limits the operational capacity of local governments. Financial dependence on higher levels of government, particularly the monthly allocations from the federal government, results in chronic underfunding. Eze-Micheal (2021) notes that these allocations are often insufficient to cover salaries and execute development projects. Many local governments lack alternative sources of revenue and rely entirely on these allocations for survival. Teniola (2023) observes that in some instances, monthly allocations are controlled by state governments, further complicating local government financial planning and reducing their ability to manage funds effectively.

These multifaceted challenges, ranging from systemic corruption and constitutional constraints to the top-down approach, shortage of skilled manpower, and inadequate funding, collectively impede the ability of local governments in Nigeria to fulfill their developmental roles. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive reforms aimed at enhancing transparency, increasing autonomy, engaging local communities in the development process, attracting skilled professionals, and ensuring adequate

funding for local government operations. Only through such measures can local governments become effective engines of grassroots development and contribute meaningfully to national progress.

### **Repositioning Local Government for Sustainable Development**

Based on the findings of this study, the following suggestions are put forth:

Local governments must be genuinely insulated from corruption to deliver effectively. Corruption undermines the efficiency and effectiveness of any institution. This process of insulation should start with local government staffers since they are the core of the institution. Regular training, workshops, and seminars should be organized to sensitize staff about the negative and destructive effects of corruption on individuals, groups, institutions, and society at large. Attitudinal change towards corruption is crucial because many Nigerians perceive corruption as a normal behavior or a golden opportunity to amass wealth. Therefore, people must gradually realize the high destructive tendencies posed by corruption. Disciplines such as accountability, transparency, openness, and diligence should be encouraged and promoted at all times. Financial recklessness must be strictly avoided, and corruption must be severely punished to serve as a deterrent. Anti-corruption agencies in Nigeria should regularly visit local governments for monitoring and surveillance, which will psychologically and practically instill fear and caution in the minds of the staffers.

Another way to reposition local governments for sustainable rural development is to review and amend parts of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution to address the issue of autonomy for local governments. Local governments need relative autonomy for optimum performance. Currently, local governments are created as the third tier of government, but the same constitution makes them an appendage of state governments. Subsection 1 of Section 7 of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution places local governments under the control of state governments. This lack of autonomy hinders their ability to determine their developmental directions freely. Limited autonomy, if not full, should be constitutionally provided to local governments for efficient operation. This can be supported with rules, procedures, and guidelines to enable local governments to genuinely play the role of the third tier of government.

The imposition of projects from higher authorities, resulting from the adoption of a top-down approach to development, must be discouraged and sanctioned within the local government system. Local governments, being the closest to the people, should serve as training grounds for future leaders and providers of local needs. Therefore, people must be allowed to participate in the decision-making process at the grassroots level. Local governments are more familiar with the problems and needs of rural residents than any other level of government. Any programs or policies designed to ensure rural development must reflect the actual problems and needs of local residents.

A bottom-up approach to development is advocated for effective community development activities. This approach allows for the participation and involvement of residents, ensuring that decisions emanate from the people and that residents participate from the first to the last stage of projects. This fosters a sense of ownership and belonging among community residents, leading to project sustainability and local transformation. When residents are part of the projects, they are motivated to protect and maintain them.

To attract and retain professional and skilled manpower in the local government system, it is essential to review local government welfare packages favorably for the professional class. This will serve as an inducement and attract skilled professionals to local government jobs. Additionally, rural areas should be equipped with minimal social infrastructure that can improve the quality of living, along with adequate security measures.

The issue of inadequate funding must be effectively addressed to enable local governments to participate adequately in development programs. The financial and fiscal relationship between states and local governments must be reviewed to free local governments from perpetual financial

dependency. The state-local joint account should be abolished to prevent financial abuse by state governments. Local governments should receive their allocations directly from the federation account, not through the state, as is currently practiced. Moreover, state governments must be compelled to pay local governments 10% of the state's Internally Generated Revenue (IGR), a provision that has long been ignored by states. Local governments are also advised to engage in profitable ventures capable of increasing their IGR.

In addition, it is crucial to enhance the capacity of local government officials through targeted training and development programs. Strengthening accountability mechanisms can help combat corruption and ensure that funds are used for their intended purposes. Promoting active community participation in the planning and implementation of development projects fosters ownership and sustainability, ensuring that initiatives are more likely to meet local needs. Ensuring adequate funding for local governments is also essential, providing them with the financial resources needed to carry out their functions effectively. Reducing political interference can protect the autonomy of local governments, allowing them to address local needs without undue external influence.

By addressing these challenges, local governments can be repositioned to play a more effective role in sustainable rural development, ensuring that they meet the needs of local residents and contribute to the overall progress of the nation.

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