



DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.13599293

Federalism and Local Government Administration: Examining Autonomy, Performance, and Service Delivery

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the dynamics of federalism and its impact on local government administration in Nigeria, with a focus on autonomy, performance, and service delivery. Federalism, as a system of governance that divides power between national and subnational entities, is designed to promote efficient administration and responsive governance. However, the practical implementation of federalism in Nigeria reveals significant challenges, including the tension between centralized control and local autonomy. The Nigerian Constitution of 1999 established a federal framework aimed at balancing power between federal and state governments. Despite this, local governments often face constraints due to financial dependence on state and federal allocations, limited administrative capacity, and political interference. The study employs a qualitative approach by analysing the operational challenges faced by local governments. It examines historical developments, financial management practices, and the effectiveness of local governance structures. Key findings highlight issues such as inadequate resource allocation, insufficient capacity for policy implementation, and the impact of centralization on local administrative efficacy. By addressing these challenges, the research offered recommendations for enhancing local government performance and service delivery within Nigeria's federal system.

Keywords: Local Government, Federalism, Autonomy, Performance, Service Delivery

INTRODUCTION

Federalism is a governance structure that involves shared rule, enabling multiple levels of government to operate while allowing autonomous political units to perform their specific roles within a broader system. Despite formal policies of decentralization, however, poor intergovernmental relations can lead to tensions between central and local governments (Karingi, 2003). In a federal system, each unit has the autonomy to decide whether to remain in or exit the union. Nonetheless, the current mechanisms and institutions for coordinating intergovernmental policies are inadequate and need enhancement (Lawson, 2011). The Nigerian Constitution of 1999 delineates the roles and powers of the different levels of government, ensuring that no single level can independently provide services to the public, thereby underscoring the importance of collaborative governance (Shah, 2006). Nigeria's federalism is marked by a diversity of ethnic groups, cultures, languages, political affiliations, and power struggles. To address these diverse elements while ensuring effective service delivery at the grassroots, local governments were established (Boadway and Shah, 2009). The federal government is defined by several core characteristics, including the distinct and independent nature of each government level, the principle of mutual non-interference in power distribution, and the presence of a Supreme Court or legal body to mediate disputes between government levels. These principles are

vital for maintaining a balanced distribution of power in a federal system, allowing each government level to function independently while respecting the authority of others. The courts play a crucial role in resolving disputes, which is essential for fostering cooperation and preventing conflicts from escalating into major political crises (Abia, 2010). Federalism is a form of government that integrates common rule, allowing for multi-level governance and enabling independent political entities to carry out their own roles within a broader framework. Yet, inadequate intergovernmental ties can lead to tensions between the central and local governments even when official decentralisation plans are implemented (Karingi, 2003). Every unit in a federal system has autonomy, which allows them to decide whether to stay in the union or leave it. However, the institutions and processes now in place for coordinating intergovernmental policies are inadequate and need to be strengthened (Lawson, 2011). The 1999 Nigerian Constitution emphasises the need for cooperation in governance by outlining the roles and responsibilities of the several tiers of government in a way that prohibits any level from providing services to the people on its own (Shah, 2006)

Diverse ethnic groupings, dialects, political affiliations, cultures, and power rivalries are hallmarks of Nigeria's federalism. Local government was established in order to provide for these diverse constituents while guaranteeing service delivery at the community level (Boadway & Shah, 2009). Some defining features of the federal government include the autonomy and independence of each government tier, the principle of mutual non-interference in power distribution, and the existence of a supreme court or judiciary to resolve disputes between various levels of government. These guidelines guarantee that every level of government can function autonomously while also recognising the authority of others, which is essential for preserving a stable balance of power in a federal form of government. In order to foster collaboration and keep disagreements from turning into more serious political crises, the judiciary's role in settling disputes is also crucial (Abia, 2010).

Objective of the Study

The objective of the Study is to examine the degree of autonomy granted to local governments within federal systems and to evaluate the impact of local government autonomy on administrative performance and service delivery.

Concept Clarifications

Federalism

Federalism is a system of government in which power is constitutionally divided between a central (national) authority and multiple regional (state, provincial, or local) governments. In this arrangement, both levels of government have distinct areas of jurisdiction and autonomy, allowing them to make decisions and enact laws relevant to their specific responsibilities. This division of power is intended to balance the benefits of unity and shared governance at the national level with the ability to address local needs and preferences at the regional level. Amah, E .I. (2016) Some Key characteristics of federalism includes: Constitutional Division of Powers, Autonomy and Diversity Accommodation. Examples of federal systems includes countries like the United States, Canada, Germany, India, and Australia, where federalism enables these nations to maintain national unity while addressing regional diversity and local governance needs.

Local Government

One of the essential components of a state's character and identity is the concept of local government. It displays a steadfast conviction in the value of democratic involvement in local government. A community with its own unique interests and goals is granted people and authority by a higher level of government through local government. The decentralised governance system facilitates the delivery of customised services and functions that are aimed at meeting the distinct requirements of local communities. By actively participating in the policies and decisions that impact their everyday lives, residents can cultivate a sense of ownership and engagement in the democratic process through local government (Agagu, 1997).

According to Abubakar (2010), a local government is a legally recognised political division of a national or state that has significant authority over local matters. This includes the authority to levy taxes or need work for designated objectives. Such an entity's governing body is chosen locally, either by election or another method (Ikeanyibe, 2009).

Autonomy

Local government autonomy refers to the degree of independence and self-governance granted to local government units, such as municipalities, cities, or counties, by the central or state government. This autonomy allows local governments to make decisions, manage resources, and implement policies that directly affect their communities without undue interference from higher levels of government. Key aspects of local government autonomy includes: Financial Independence, Administrative Authority, Legislative Powers, Political Independence, Performance and Service Delivery

Service Delivery

According to Nico and Ophillia (2015, as cited in Nwokike and Chidolue, 2021), service delivery fundamentally involves providing services and products to the intended customers, clients, or citizens. It encompasses the actions taken by producers, manufacturers, office holders, or political administrators to fulfill the needs and expectations of their targeted groups. When these stakeholders effectively meet the desires and requirements of those they serve, it can be confidently asserted that they have delivered high performance. This concept emphasizes the importance of aligning service provision with the specific demands and preferences of the intended recipients, ensuring that the services or products provided truly address the needs of the population. Therefore, effective service delivery is not merely about the act of delivering a product or service but also about ensuring that the delivery is relevant, timely, and satisfactory to the end-users. In this context, the success of service delivery is measured by the extent to which it meets or exceeds the expectations of those it is intended for, thereby contributing to the overall well-being and satisfaction of the community or customer base.

Theoretical Perspective

The multiple goal-seeking model, rooted in the general system theory developed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy, offers valuable theoretical insight into the fundamental purpose of local governments. As an organized human system, local governments are established with the intent to achieve specific objectives. This notion is reflected in the Nigerian Constitution, which outlines the creation and functioning of local governments. According to the 4th schedule of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the responsibilities of local governments are clearly delineated. W.J.M. Mackenzie and his colleagues, in their efficiency-service delivery theory, argue that the primary focus of local governments should be on service delivery to the people. They posit that local governments, due to their proximity to the grassroots, are uniquely positioned to provide certain services more efficiently and effectively than higher levels of government. However, to fulfill these responsibilities, local governments must be endowed with the necessary powers, resources, and autonomy. The lack of these critical elements is evident in the challenges faced by the local government system in Imo State. Thus, the efficiency-service delivery theory is particularly relevant to this study.

Nature and Structure of Nigeria Federalism

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, operates a federal system of government designed to manage its complex diversity, comprising over 350 ethnic groups, multiple religions, and a vast geographical expanse. The nature and structure of Nigeria's federalism have evolved over the decades, shaped by historical events, socio-political dynamics, and economic factors (Oluwadare, 2021). This talk will explore the key features of Nigerian federalism, its constitutional framework, the centralization of power, fiscal federalism, and the ongoing debates on restructuring. The roots of Nigerian federalism lie in the colonial period when the British administration introduced regional governance to manage the country's diverse population. The 1946 Richards Constitution first established regional divisions, which were further solidified by the 1954 Lyttleton Constitution, creating a formal federal structure with considerable autonomy for the regions (Fagbadebo & Ruffin, 2021). However, post-independence, the balance of power gradually shifted towards the central government, especially during military regimes, leading to a more centralized federal system. The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which currently governs the country, outlines the federal structure. It divides legislative powers between the federal and state governments through three key lists. Exclusive Legislative List, Concurrent Legislative List and Residual Legislative List. This division of

powers theoretically allows for a balance of governance, but in practice, the federal government often exercises more control, particularly in areas of critical national interest. Onah & Okoli, 2006)

Centralization of Power: Despite the constitutional division of powers, Nigeria's federal system is highly centralized. The federal government retains significant control over key sectors, especially oil revenues, which are the primary source of the country's income. This centralization is evident in the control of security forces, national infrastructure, and major economic policies. For example, the federal government's dominance in security matters has been a source of tension, particularly in the face of rising insecurity across the country. The creation of regional security outfits like Amotekun in the South-West is a response to these tensions, reflecting the states' demands for more autonomy in managing local security issues (Agbede, 2020).

Local Government Autonomy in Historical Context

Before the 1976 reforms, local government in Nigeria was primarily seen as an administrative tool for delivering social welfare services, rather than as a politically significant entity with guaranteed autonomy. State governments treated local governments as mere extensions of their authority, leading to performances that consistently fell short of public expectations. This situation sparked the demand for a more effective and independent local government system. The concept of local government autonomy raises an essential question: What does it mean for a local government to be autonomous? A.E.C. Ogunna defines it as the power to recruit and manage employees, generate and control funds, establish bylaws and regulations, and fulfill legally assigned duties without interference. Uba Nnabue views autonomy as the absence of influence from higher levels of government. The core idea in these definitions is the notion of local self-governance. However, it is crucial to recognize that complete autonomy within a sovereign state is impossible, as it would lead to the creation of new sovereign entities. Thus, local government autonomy refers to the degree of independence that local governments have in managing their affairs, including personnel and local issues, without interference from state and federal authorities.

The pursuit of local government autonomy in Nigeria is as old as the local governments themselves. It originated from the resistance to colonial rule by various Nigerian communities. However, after independence, regional and state governments failed to accord local governments their due status as the tier of government closest to the people. In 1976, the federal government took steps to elevate the local government to a national concern by introducing reforms intended to enhance its status. According to Obasanjo (2021), these reforms significantly changed the position of local governments, yet the goal of achieving full autonomy remained elusive. State governments continued to encroach on the roles and functions of local governments, with governors during the Second Republic frequently dissolving local governments and creating new ones at will. Frustrated by the ongoing lack of autonomy for local governments, the Babangida administration implemented several comprehensive measures designed to strengthen the third tier of government and provide it with the necessary autonomy to function effectively.

Local Government Revenue Sources

Mukoro (2019) discusses the diverse revenue sources available to local governments in Nigeria, which are outlined in the 1979 Local Government Reforms and subsequent reforms, as well as in the constitution and state revenue laws. These sources are generally categorized into two types: internal and external. Internal revenue sources are those that are generated and controlled directly by the local government. These include:

1. **Rates:** Local taxes such as property tax, which is based on the property's value and paid annually by the owner to the local government. Capitation rates are fixed amounts imposed on every adult male in the local government, while special rates are levied for specific projects.
2. **Fines:** Revenue generated from individuals who violate local government laws, with fines typically imposed by customary courts within the local government area.
3. **Profits and Earnings:** Local governments may engage in business ventures, generating revenue from profits, interests, or commissions, thus expanding their financial base.
4. **Fees and Charges:** These are payments made for services provided by the local government, such as permits for bicycles, wheelbarrows, canoes, and carts. Additional fees may be

collected for alcohol licenses, restaurant operations, amusement parks, public restrooms, and vital records like birth, death, and marriage certificates.

In contrast, external revenue sources are those that come from outside the local government and are determined by external authorities. These include:

5. **Statutory Allocation:** The local government's share of revenue from the Federation Account and state internally generated revenue, which is legally fixed and cannot be altered.
6. **Grants:** Financial assistance provided by the federal or state government to the local government to help it deliver essential services. These grants can be general, specific, matching, or equalization grants.
7. **Loans:** Local governments can borrow funds from the federal or state governments, financial institutions, or individuals for significant capital projects. However, such borrowing requires prior approval from the state government.

As the funds available to local governments increase, so too does the need for proper financial management. The financial memoranda detail the responsibilities of various officers in managing revenue and expenditure, emphasizing that funds should only be spent when necessary. Before any department or officer incurs expenses, they must adhere to the cash flow analysis provided by the treasurer to the Executive Committee.

Revenue Allocation/Resource Control

In Nigeria's federal system, equitable distribution of federal funds has been a contentious issue. The federating units lack fiscal autonomy and depend heavily on the federal government for funding. The Niger-Delta region, which is crucial to Nigeria's economic future due to its contribution of over 90% of the nation's revenue through crude oil, has faced significant challenges. The environmental degradation and loss of agricultural livelihoods caused by oil exploration have led to a sense of exclusion and unfair treatment among the local population. The Federal Government has gradually centralized control over oil revenues through legislation such as the Petroleum and Land Use Acts, reducing the Niger-Delta's control over resources from their land. As a result, the importance of the derivation principle in revenue allocation has diminished, leading to an inequitable revenue-sharing formula that benefits one region over others. The derivation principle, as outlined in the constitution, mandates that a portion of federally collected revenue from a state is returned to it as compensation for its contribution to federal revenue. However, the current and historical revenue allocation formulas reveal a trend towards Northern dominance in the allocation process, further exacerbating regional disparities.

For example, Kano State alone received nearly 15 billion Naira as statutory allocation in the 1995/1996 fiscal year, whereas Lagos State, which is significantly more populous and productive, received just more than a billion Naira from the same Federation Account. The inequality in the current income allocation formula is highlighted by this revenue sharing disparity, which also shows how Nigerian federalism is far from being a fully federal fiscal system. On July 10, 1992, the Allocation of Revenue Amendment Decree of 1992 was promulgated, bringing the present revenue allocation formula into force. To ensure equity and justice in the distribution of money among the federating units, this formula must be reviewed. Specifically, the Niger-Delta region ought to have sufficient control over the money derived from their land in order to guarantee sustainable development and solve the problems posed by oil exploration. Nigeria is generally seen as a mono-economy, at least with regard to federally collected money. This can be attributed in significant part to the fact that 83% of total revenue in 2008 came from oil. The several tiers of government, apart from Lagos State and Rivers State, mainly depend on their allotted portions of federally collected money to carry out their operations. The "Allocation of Revenue (Federation Account etc) (Amendment) Decree of 1992," which was enacted on July 10, 1992, established the revenue allocation formulas that are currently in use. This decree states that the federal government receives 48.5% of the revenue, state governments receive 24%, local governments receive 20%, and a special fund receives 7.5%. It is significant to remember that, except for the two states indicated above, the operations of the other states substantially depend on their allotments from the federal government. According to Adamolekun (2018), a decentralised federal system in Nigeria will more closely adhere to the terms

of the Federal Republic of Nigeria constitutions from 1954 and 1960, resulting in more reliable responsibility sharing and allocation. A brief exclusive federal list including topics like foreign policy, national defence, and the macroeconomy would exist under such a setup. Furthermore, several critical services that are currently under the province of the federal government, such as policing and internal security, would be assigned shared accountability. In accordance with certain functions in the Second Schedule of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution, the sub-national government will take on the principal responsibility.

But according to Adamolekun (2018), the National Assembly's unwillingness to take into account the delegation of authority in the proposed constitutional change suggests that others outside of the military political class are also committed to the ongoing over-concentration of power. He suggests that all geopolitical people commit to support the decentralisation constitutional amendment as a requirement for candidates running in the general election of 2019, including state and federal legislators, governors, and the president. In order to guarantee equal authority and resource distribution across all federating entities, Adamolekun goes on to say that the present allocation percentages applied to the Federation Account should reflect the expected division of responsibilities. As a result, he suggests a 35:65 sharing ratio, which would mean that the federal government would receive 35% and the federating units' governments would receive 65%. In conclusion, Adamolekun suggests that Nigeria adopt a decentralised federal system with balanced task distribution and sharing among the federating units to guarantee fair distribution of power and resources. According to Shehu's (2017) research, Nigeria's fiscal arrangements were first set up as a unitary system, with a central government with substantial constitutional authority over fiscal concerns. However, the 1946 constitutional division of the country into three regions resulted in the regions taking up the central government's financial obligations. Shehu notes that "by 1947, the regional administrations' two primary constitutional sources of funding were Declared and Non-Declared. Income from the regions themselves as well as grants from the central revenue". As articulated in the spirit of the conversation, this organised dysfunction led to a series of intense, exaggerated, and unsettling inter-ethnic regional antagonism, despite the elites' intended plan (Majekodunmi, 2015).

Challenges of Local Government System in Nigeria

Absence of Autonomy: A locally autonomous government was the goal of the 1976 Local Government (LG) reform's original drafters. This was meant to stimulate local participation in the management of their affairs and to act as a training ground for political engagement. The LG was acknowledged as the third level of government in the reform as a result. According to Ajayi (2000), the LG was intended to operate as a largely autonomous authority and an agent of socio-economic development, as specified in section 7(1) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria's 1999 Constitution. Sadly, though, the autonomy that was promised when the reform was first proposed has vanished into thin air. Since 2003, state administrations have viewed local government as an outpost of state administration, as indicated by Adeyemi (2013) and Gboyega (2001).

Financial Challenges: The previous discussion indicates that the institutional issues that plagued local government management from 1979 to 2003 have reappeared, with dire implications. Local councils currently lack the resources to carry out any significant development initiatives because the state government has taken over their funding source. The fact that local government employees remain silent in the face of strong community criticism is even more concerning. Additionally, it has been customary for the federal and state governments to assign part of their duties to local governments without giving them enough money (Ojo, 2020).

Manpower Challenges: A thorough analysis of the workforce situation in Nigeria's local government system finds that, contrary to popular belief, the system is not always filled with academically sound workers, even if both state and local government employees have access to similar training facilities. As Kenje (2013) and Gboyega (2001) accurately point out, the local government system has a significant staffing quality issue as opposed to a quantity one. This problem is a result of deficient hiring and deployment practices, which prioritise political allegiance over necessity or merit. As a result, the administration is filled with inactive people who could cause problems for the system. In addition, politicians have taken control of the appointments of department heads, treasurers, and directors of administration—roles that should have been left to the Local Government Service

Commissions—sacrificing expertise in the process. Concerns are also raised by the political class's deficiencies in the local government structure. The provision of services and programs that are sensitive to the requirements of local communities may face difficulties as a result of this lack of experience. While giving local councils more authority is a positive step towards encouraging democratic governance and public engagement, it's also critical to make sure that local government representatives have the know-how and abilities needed to do their jobs well. Investing in local authorities' capacity building and training will help to solve these issues, enhancing grassroots service delivery to citizens and the standard of governance (Makinde, et al 2016). Therefore, in order to improve the standard of governance and advance development in Nigeria, it is imperative that the issues of personnel quality and recruitment practices within the local government system be addressed.

Indiscipline: A close analysis of the manpower situation in local government systems may challenge the assumption that these systems are staffed with highly educated personnel, comparable to other sectors. While it is true that local governments now employ professionals such as doctors and engineers, as noted by Kenje (2013) and Gboyega (2001), the real issue lies in the quality, rather than the quantity, of personnel, largely due to flawed recruitment and deployment practices. Unfortunately, hiring in local governments often prioritizes political loyalty over actual needs, leading to an excess of unproductive staff that strain the system. Since 1999, there has been a significant transfer of teachers from primary and secondary schools into local governments, along with politically appointed administrative heads who have not passed necessary exams or adhered to Civil Service Rules. As a result, these officers struggle to make informed decisions and merely pass on the comments of their subordinates to the chairman, adding only, "above for your approval." Additionally, in several states like Kwara and Kogi, experience and seniority no longer matter, with Grade Level 16 officers being subordinated to Grade Level 14 officers without any justification, leading to a decline in administrative standards and causing insecurity among dedicated staff, who become more focused on self-preservation than their duties. Moreover, the appointment of heads of departments, treasurers, and directors of administration, which should be the responsibility of Local Government Service Commissions, has been overtaken by political influence, disregarding merit and competence.

CONCLUSION

True federalism involves balancing unity among the various states and regions of a nation while granting each the autonomy to manage its affairs. The Nigerian federal system is based on the principles of resource control and power-sharing in line with federalism ideals. However, conflicts have arisen over the distribution of power and resources, leading to ongoing debates and raising concerns about the system's effectiveness. While diversity is a natural and beneficial characteristic of most federal states globally, in Nigeria, it has unfortunately resulted in slow planning, decision-making, implementation, societal divisions, and particularistic sentiments. Therefore, it is crucial to reform Nigeria's current federal structure to ensure that it promotes development and unity rather than division and conflict. The local government system, similarly, faces significant challenges, including excessive centralization, corruption, indiscipline, and lack of capacity, all of which hinder its ability to deliver essential services. Addressing these issues through urgent and comprehensive reforms is necessary to enhance the effectiveness of both the federal and local government systems in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the challenges facing Nigeria's local government system and federalism, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Greater authority should be devolved to state and local governments to better serve their constituents' needs. This requires amending the constitution to reduce federal government control and increase the autonomy of state and local governments.
2. The capacity of the local government system should be enhanced through investments in personnel development, provision of essential tools and infrastructure, and the implementation of institutional reforms that improve management and governance practices.

3. Fiscal decentralization should be encouraged to empower local governments to generate and manage their revenue effectively. This may involve revising the current revenue allocation system to ensure that more funds are directed to states and local governments.
4. The Nigerian government must take decisive action to combat corruption within the local government system. This includes strengthening anti-corruption agencies and enforcing stringent penalties against corrupt officials.
5. The government should foster greater public involvement in local government decision-making processes. This can be achieved by creating platforms for citizens to engage with local governments on issues that affect them and by establishing mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating local government performance.

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