

**DECENTRALIZATION AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA:
RETHINKING SERVICE DELIVERY IN NIGERIA'S FEDERAL
SYSTEM**

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ABSTRACT

Decentralization has long been proposed as a mechanism for improving governance, enhancing accountability, and promoting effective service delivery in African states. In Nigeria, a federal system was adopted at independence to manage diversity, distribute power, and bring government closer to the people. However, despite decades of constitutional decentralization, local governments often struggle to deliver basic services, reflecting structural, financial, and institutional challenges.

This article investigates the dynamics of decentralization and local governance in Nigeria, focusing on the capacity of local governments to provide public goods and services under the federal system. Adopting a desk-based qualitative approach, the study examines secondary data from government reports, policy documents, academic literature, and international governance assessments. Theoretical frameworks including fiscal federalism, decentralization theory, and public choice theory are employed to analyze the relationship between autonomy, accountability, and service delivery outcomes.

Findings reveal that local governments in Nigeria face persistent challenges, including inadequate revenue generation, political interference from state governments, limited administrative capacity, and weak citizen engagement. While decentralization theoretically enhances local participation and responsiveness, in practice it is often undermined by overlapping responsibilities, dependency on federal allocations, and weak institutional structures.

The study concludes that meaningful service delivery requires rethinking decentralization as a combination of fiscal, administrative, and political empowerment, supported by ethical governance and robust accountability mechanisms. Lessons from Nigeria provide insights for other African states seeking to improve local governance through decentralization reforms.

Keywords: Decentralization, Local Governance, Service Delivery, Federal System, Nigeria, Africa.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Decentralization is widely regarded as a key mechanism for improving governance, enhancing accountability, and ensuring efficient public service delivery. By transferring authority from central to sub-national levels of government, decentralization theoretically brings government closer to the people, fosters citizen participation, and promotes responsiveness to local needs (Rondinelli, 1981). Across Africa, decentralization has been embraced as part of political and administrative reforms aimed at addressing governance challenges, mitigating conflict, and improving socio-economic development outcomes.

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, adopted a federal system of government at independence in 1960 to manage its diverse ethnic, cultural, and regional composition. The Constitution of Nigeria provides for three tiers of government—federal, state, and local—each with constitutionally defined powers. Local governments are mandated to provide essential services, including primary education, healthcare, water supply, sanitation, and local infrastructure. The rationale for decentralization in Nigeria is thus grounded in principles of proximity, efficiency, and participatory governance.

Despite these constitutional provisions, service delivery at the local government level remains inconsistent and often suboptimal. Many local governments struggle with inadequate financial resources, weak institutional capacity, political interference from state governments, and limited citizen engagement (Olowu & Wunsch, 2004). Consequently, the promise of decentralization—bringing governance closer to the people—remains largely unrealized in Nigeria, raising critical questions about the effectiveness of local governance and the federal system in promoting sustainable service delivery.

1.2 Problem Statement

While decentralization theoretically enhances accountability and service delivery, empirical evidence suggests that local governments in Nigeria often fail to deliver basic services effectively. Challenges such as fiscal dependency on federal allocations, political interference, bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption, and overlapping responsibilities undermine local autonomy and operational capacity. This situation not only erodes public trust but also hampers development outcomes and citizen well-being.

Key questions emerge: Why do local governments in Nigeria struggle to fulfill their constitutional mandates? How does the federal system shape decentralization outcomes? What reforms are necessary to strengthen service delivery at the local level, and what lessons can other African states draw from Nigeria's experience?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

This article seeks to:

1. Examine the relationship between decentralization and local governance in Africa, with a focus on Nigeria.
2. Assess the capacity of Nigerian local governments to deliver essential public services under the federal system.
3. Identify the structural, fiscal, and political challenges undermining effective service delivery.
4. Analyze how decentralization affects citizen participation, accountability, and governance quality.
5. Offer policy recommendations to strengthen local governance and service delivery in Nigeria and other African states.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to understanding decentralization and local governance in Africa by:

1. Highlighting the practical challenges of implementing decentralization in federal systems.
2. Providing insights into how institutional, fiscal, and political factors shape service delivery outcomes.
3. Offering lessons for policymakers, scholars, and development practitioners seeking to enhance local governance and accountability.
4. Informing reforms aimed at strengthening citizen-centered governance, institutional capacity, and ethical public administration in decentralized systems.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Empirical Review

Decentralization has been widely studied as a mechanism for improving governance and service delivery in Africa. Empirical studies indicate that decentralized governance can enhance accountability, transparency, and citizen participation when local governments are adequately empowered (Ribot, 2002). In countries such as Kenya, Uganda, and Ghana, decentralization has facilitated local development projects, increased citizen engagement, and improved service delivery in health, education, and infrastructure (Smoke, 2015).

In Nigeria, local governments are constitutionally mandated to provide essential public services, including primary education, healthcare, water, sanitation, and local roads. However, empirical evidence suggests that service delivery at the local level is uneven and often inefficient. Olowu and Wunsch (2004) note that local governments face chronic fiscal dependency on federal allocations, which undermines their autonomy and capacity to plan and implement projects effectively. Additionally, political interference from state governments frequently compromises decision-making, resource allocation, and administrative integrity.

Studies also highlight administrative and institutional weaknesses, including understaffing, poor record-keeping, lack of technical expertise, and bureaucratic inefficiencies, which impede effective service delivery (Akinola, 2017). Corruption at the local level, including misappropriation of funds and favoritism in procurement, further weakens local governance structures (Suberu, 2010).

Despite these challenges, some local governments have leveraged participatory governance mechanisms—such as town hall meetings, development committees, and social audits—to improve accountability and responsiveness. Evidence from Lagos, Ogun, and Kaduna states shows that citizen engagement can enhance service delivery outcomes when integrated with strong institutional oversight and ethical leadership (Fashola, 2021).

2.2 Gaps in Literature

While research on decentralization and local governance in Nigeria is extensive, several gaps remain:

1. **Limited Focus on Service Delivery Outcomes:** Many studies examine institutional frameworks or political structures but pay less attention to actual service delivery performance at the community level.
2. **Insufficient Integration of Ethics:** Literature often neglects how public sector ethics and leadership influence the effectiveness of decentralized governance.
3. **Comparative African Perspectives:** Few studies situate Nigeria's federal system within broader African decentralization experiences to identify transferable lessons.
4. **Citizen-Centric Approaches:** The role of citizen participation, feedback mechanisms, and social accountability in enhancing service delivery remains underexplored.
5. **Sustainability of Reforms:** Research rarely addresses how decentralization reforms can be institutionalized to survive political transitions and changing leadership.

These gaps justify a study that examines decentralization not only as an institutional arrangement but also as a practical tool for improving service delivery and governance outcomes.

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Fiscal Federalism Theory

Fiscal federalism theory posits that decentralization of fiscal authority can improve efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness in public service delivery (Oates, 1972). It emphasizes that sub-national governments are better positioned to tailor services to local preferences, provided they have adequate revenue sources and autonomy.

3.2 Decentralization Theory

Decentralization theory focuses on the transfer of administrative, political, and financial powers from central to local governments to promote citizen participation and improve public service delivery (Rondinelli, 1981). The theory suggests that the effectiveness of decentralization depends on clarity of roles, resource availability, and institutional capacity.

3.3 Public Choice Theory

Public choice theory applies economic principles to political decision-making, highlighting that local governments, like any other organization, respond to incentives and constraints

(Buchanan & Tullock, 1962). This theory helps explain why local officials may underperform when incentives are misaligned, oversight is weak, or resources are centralized.

3.4 Good Governance Theory

Good governance theory emphasizes accountability, transparency, responsiveness, participation, and rule of law as central to effective public administration (UNDP, 1997). Applying this framework to local governance underscores the importance of ethical leadership, citizen engagement, and institutional integrity in achieving service delivery goals.

Collectively, these theories provide a robust framework for analyzing decentralization and local governance in Nigeria, highlighting the interplay between institutional autonomy, ethical governance, fiscal capacity, and citizen-centered service delivery.

4.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative desk-based research design, appropriate for examining governance structures, decentralization practices, and service delivery outcomes. Desk-based research allows for in-depth analysis of secondary data from scholarly articles, government publications, policy documents, and international reports. This qualitative approach enables a critical understanding of how decentralization, institutional structures, and ethical governance interact to influence service delivery in Nigeria's federal system.

4.2 Data Sources

Data were collected from the following sources:

1. Academic Literature: Peer-reviewed journals, books, and conference proceedings on decentralization, local governance, and service delivery in Africa and Nigeria.
2. Government Documents: Reports from the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Local Government Affairs, state government audits, and local government budget reports.
3. International Reports: Publications from the World Bank, UNDP, African Development Bank, and Transparency International, focusing on decentralization, local governance, and accountability.
4. Media and Policy Briefs: Newspaper articles, online reports, and civil society publications documenting service delivery outcomes and challenges in Nigerian local governments.

Triangulation of these sources ensured reliability, credibility, and comprehensiveness of data for analysis.

4.3 Method of Analysis

The study employed content analysis and thematic analysis to interpret data:

- Content Analysis: Texts were systematically reviewed to identify information on decentralization policies, local government structures, service delivery outcomes, and ethical governance practices.
- Thematic Analysis: Data were organized into key themes, including fiscal autonomy, administrative capacity, citizen participation, political interference, and service delivery performance. This facilitated a structured discussion aligned with the study objectives.

4.4 Scope and Limitations

The study focuses on local governance and service delivery under Nigeria's federal system. While references are made to other African countries for comparative insights, the primary analysis is Nigeria-centric. Limitations include reliance on secondary data, which may reflect reporting biases, incomplete datasets, or variations in the accuracy of published information. However, the triangulation of multiple sources mitigates these limitations.

5.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings reveal that decentralization in Nigeria's federal system presents a mix of opportunities and challenges for local governance and service delivery. While decentralization is intended to enhance autonomy, accountability, and responsiveness, structural, fiscal, and political constraints limit its effectiveness.

5.1 Fiscal Autonomy and Resource Allocation

Local governments in Nigeria are constitutionally dependent on federal allocations, primarily through the Federation Account, and have limited capacity for internally generated revenue (IGR). Table 1 summarizes average local government allocations and IGR performance in selected Nigerian states.

Table 1: Selected Nigerian States – Local Government Revenue Sources (2022)

State	Total Allocation from Federation Account (₦ Billion)	Internally Generated Revenue (₦ Billion)	Dependence Ratio (%)	Source
Lagos	35.6	10.2	77%	NBS Report, 2022
Kano	28.4	2.8	91%	NBS Report, 2022
Rivers	22.1	1.9	92%	NBS Report, 2022
Kaduna	19.3	1.5	93%	NBS Report, 2022

Discussion: Heavy dependence on federal allocations undermines fiscal autonomy, limiting local governments' ability to plan and execute projects effectively. Fiscal federalism theory suggests that decentralized governments should have independent revenue sources to enhance

efficiency and accountability (Oates, 1972). In Nigeria, this reliance fosters vulnerability to state political interference and reduces incentive for local revenue mobilization.

5.2 Administrative Capacity

Findings indicate that local governments often face shortages of skilled personnel, weak record-keeping, and bureaucratic inefficiencies. This hinders the delivery of essential services such as healthcare, education, sanitation, and road maintenance.

Discussion: Administrative weaknesses compromise the theoretical promise of decentralization. Even where funds are available, service delivery suffers due to inefficiency and lack of technical expertise. Effective decentralization requires capacity-building programs, recruitment of skilled personnel, and clear delineation of administrative responsibilities.

5.3 Political Interference

State governments exert significant control over local governments through appointment of officials, approval of budgets, and oversight mechanisms. This diminishes local autonomy and encourages patronage politics.

Discussion: Political interference undermines accountability and weakens the link between citizens and local governments. Public choice theory suggests that officials respond to incentives; when state political actors dominate decision-making, local officials prioritize political loyalty over public service delivery. Ethical governance and political autonomy are essential for realizing the benefits of decentralization.

5.4 Citizen Participation and Accountability

Evidence shows limited citizen engagement in local governance planning, budgeting, and monitoring. Where participatory mechanisms exist—such as town hall meetings, ward development committees, and social audits—they improve service delivery outcomes.

Discussion: Good governance theory emphasizes citizen participation as a pillar of accountability and responsiveness. Active engagement enables communities to monitor local projects, provide feedback, and demand transparency, thereby strengthening the effectiveness of decentralized governance.

5.5 Service Delivery Outcomes

Service delivery across Nigerian local governments remains uneven. Urban centers like Lagos exhibit better service provision due to higher IGR and better administrative capacity, whereas rural and northern states often experience poor healthcare, inadequate education, and insufficient infrastructure.

Discussion: The findings confirm that decentralization alone is insufficient. Effective service delivery requires the alignment of fiscal autonomy, administrative capacity, political independence, and ethical governance. Lessons from Nigeria suggest that African states

implementing decentralization must combine structural reforms with citizen-centered accountability mechanisms to improve outcomes.

5.6 Comparative Insights

Comparative analysis with other African countries, such as Ghana and Kenya, shows that successful decentralization requires clearly defined roles, adequate financial resources, institutional capacity, and citizen participation (Smoke, 2015). Nigeria's experience underscores that federal structures without adequate empowerment and oversight at the local level are insufficient to guarantee improved service delivery.

6.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusion

This study examined decentralization and local governance in Nigeria, with a focus on service delivery under the federal system. The findings reveal that, while decentralization theoretically enhances accountability, responsiveness, and citizen participation, its implementation in Nigeria faces significant challenges.

Local governments remain heavily dependent on federal allocations, which undermines fiscal autonomy and encourages political interference from state governments. Administrative weaknesses, including inadequate staffing, technical capacity, and bureaucratic inefficiencies, further constrain service delivery. Limited citizen engagement and ethical deficits in local administration reduce accountability and the effectiveness of decentralization.

Urban centers with higher internally generated revenue and administrative capacity demonstrate better service delivery, while rural and northern states lag behind. Comparative evidence from other African countries highlights that decentralization succeeds only when fiscal, administrative, and political empowerment is coupled with ethical governance and active citizen participation.

Ultimately, decentralization in Nigeria's federal system has not fully realized its potential for improving local service delivery. Institutional reforms, fiscal empowerment, and ethical leadership are necessary to translate the principles of decentralization into tangible development outcomes.

6.2 Recommendations

1. **Enhance Fiscal Autonomy of Local Governments:** Local governments should be empowered to raise and manage their own revenue sources to reduce overdependence on federal allocations. This could include local taxation reforms and incentives for internally generated revenue.
2. **Strengthen Administrative Capacity:** Recruitment of skilled personnel, capacity-building programs, and modernized administrative systems are critical for effective service delivery at the local level.

3. **Reduce Political Interference:** Constitutional and legal safeguards should ensure that local governments operate independently from undue influence by state governments, allowing officials to prioritize citizen needs.
4. **Promote Citizen Engagement:** Participatory governance mechanisms, including town hall meetings, social audits, and community development committees, should be institutionalized to enhance transparency and accountability.
5. **Improve Ethical Standards:** Ethics training, enforcement of codes of conduct, and rewards for integrity should be integrated into local government administration to ensure responsible governance.
6. **Strengthen Monitoring and Evaluation:** Independent oversight mechanisms, including audits and performance evaluations, should be established to assess service delivery outcomes systematically.
7. **Encourage Best Practices from African Peers:** Nigeria should adopt lessons from successful decentralized systems in Ghana, Kenya, and Botswana, focusing on fiscal empowerment, institutional clarity, and citizen-centered governance.
8. **Policy Integration and Coordination:** Local, state, and federal governments should clearly define roles, responsibilities, and funding channels to minimize overlaps and inefficiencies in service delivery.

By implementing these recommendations, Nigeria and other African states can enhance the effectiveness of decentralization, strengthen local governance, and improve the quality and accessibility of public services.

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