

**CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT
ADMINISTRATION IN NIGERIA: LESSONS FROM IMO STATE**

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ABSTRACT: The local government administration in Nigeria, particularly in Imo State, has faced significant challenges in achieving good governance and national development. Despite being the tier of government closest to the people, local government administration in Nigeria has failed to deliver desired results. The recruitment of leaders and control of resources have become overly centralized, leading to a disconnect between the government and rural communities. This study aims to investigate how local government administration in Nigeria can be democratized to ensure greater participation from local communities in the recruitment of leaders. The research methodology employed secondary data collection and observational methods. The findings suggest that local government administration in Nigeria should adhere to democratic principles, similar to higher tiers of government. Furthermore, a uniform legal framework should be established across all 774 local government areas in the country, as enshrined in the law. The study concludes by recommending that the third tier of government in Nigeria must operate with uniform national governance structures, free from interference from superior tiers. This is essential for promoting good governance, national development, and inclusive people-oriented governance at the grassroots level.

Keywords: Local Government, Good Governance, National Development, Grass Roots Administration

INTRODUCTION

Effective governance, characterized by clear rules, participatory processes, and a commitment to public welfare, is the bedrock of national development. While this principle holds true across all levels of government, it is particularly crucial at the local level, where governance directly impacts the daily lives of citizens. This article argues that the realization of Nigeria's national development objectives hinges on the establishment of good governance practices within its local government administrations, which serve as the foundational tier of governance and are most proximate to the people.

The concept of governance, as articulated by Sharma (2012), encompasses the capacity of government to design, formulate, and implement development-oriented policies that improve the lives of citizens. This definition aligns with the broader understanding of governance as the formal act of ruling, involving resource control and decision-making processes aimed at enhancing public welfare (Longman Dictionary). Cicero's assertion that "liberty without law will lead to anarchy" (Schuller, 2005) underscores the necessity of a structured framework within which governance

operates. In Nigeria, this framework was established by the 1999 Constitution, which designated local government as the third tier of government, following the federal and state levels. This structure, comprising 774 local government areas, positions local governance as the most accessible and influential level for grassroots development.

Local government administration in Nigeria, from its colonial origins in native administration to its contemporary form, has consistently aimed to deliver social, security, economic, and political services through popular participation. Iheanacho (2013) highlights the local government as a "veritable agent of development and grassroots participation in the democratic process," emphasizing its role in fostering democratic engagement at the community level. Akpan (1956) and Oyediran (1988) further underscore the importance of local participation in both the selection of decision-makers and the decision-making process itself. This grassroots democratic approach breaks down the nation into manageable administrative units, allowing for tailored governance that addresses the specific needs and concerns of local populations.

However, the potential of local government to drive national development remains largely unrealized due to systemic challenges that hinder the establishment of good governance. Good governance, as Sadana (2012) suggests, is a mirror reflecting the responsiveness, accountability, transparency, and people-friendliness of government to the governed. One critical facet of good governance is active citizen participation. Yet, in many Nigerian local governments, these principles are often compromised by issues such as corruption, inadequate funding, and political interference from higher levels of government. These challenges undermine the capacity of local governments to effectively manage resources, implement development projects, and respond to the needs of their constituents.

To unlock the developmental potential of local government, it is imperative to implement reforms that promote good governance. Firstly, there must be a concerted effort to enhance transparency and accountability through the implementation of robust financial management systems and mechanisms for citizen oversight. Secondly, local governments must be granted greater autonomy to manage their resources and implement development projects without undue interference from state or federal authorities. Thirdly, there is a need to strengthen citizen participation through community engagement initiatives and the establishment of platforms for dialogue and feedback. Finally, capacity-building programs for local government officials are essential to enhance their skills in areas such as planning, budgeting, and project management. Local government administration is the cornerstone of grassroots development in Nigeria. Fostering good governance practices at the local level can enable Nigeria to create a more inclusive and equitable development trajectory. This requires a commitment to transparency, accountability, citizen participation, and the empowerment of local authorities to serve their communities effectively. When local governments are freed to function within their constitutional framework, they can truly become national development instruments, driving progress from the ground up.

Hence, this study examines how the lack of autonomy in local government administration in Nigeria, particularly in Imo State, has hindered good governance and national development. It argues that democratic governance and legal restructuring are necessary to enhance local government effectiveness.

Statement of the Problem

The persistent stagnation of development at the grassroots level in Nigeria, particularly in this era of high technology, fintech, and artificial intelligence, is inextricably linked to the systematic erosion of local government autonomy. The current state of local government administration in Nigeria stands in stark contrast to the robust systems that existed during the colonial and military eras, now reduced to an appendage of state governments in matters of public officer appointments, resource control, and financial management. This usurpation of local government functions has left communities disenfranchised, denying them access to employment opportunities, empowerment initiatives, political participation, and essential social security systems.

The absence of a clear and consistent evolution of political participation through democratic processes at the local level has fostered social fragmentation and hindered community cohesion. Local populations are deprived of the opportunity to develop and refine democratic practices, such as power rotation and the equitable distribution of public positions among wards and autonomous communities within their local government areas. This micro-zoning of political power, which facilitates peaceful transitions and fosters a sense of ownership, is conspicuously absent in the current administrative framework. Consequently, the development of healthy political relationships and alliances at the local level is stifled.

The administrative and democratic maladies plaguing the Nigerian local government system, particularly in Imo State, demand urgent attention. The caretaker committee, sole administration, or mayoral systems, which are antithetical to the presidential democratic model adopted from the United States, have become entrenched. This practice, where state governors appoint and deploy executive officers to local government areas, often without the requisite approval from the State House of Assembly, is prevalent across numerous Nigerian states. This approach has effectively dismantled the political apprenticeship system, which historically nurtured leadership development at both the national and sub-national levels. Notable political personalities such as the late Hon. Bethel Amadi, Senators Samuel Anyanwu, and Hon. Enyinnaya, all of whom emerged from vibrant local government administrations, exemplify the potential of this system. The current administrative structure has, however, deprived a generation of Nigerians of the opportunity to pursue political careers and contribute to their communities through meaningful participation in local governance.

One of the most significant risks associated with gubernatorial appointments is the inherent bias of appointees toward their appointer's agenda, policies, and programs. The absence of a robust political process for leadership recruitment at the local level effectively silences the voices and stifles the engagement of the people, thereby eliminating the political trade-offs and bargaining that shape responsive service delivery. Consequently, the needs of the people are often overlooked, leading to developmental mismatches. For instance, projects that do not align with community priorities, such as the construction of infrastructure that fails to address pressing needs like road maintenance or rural electrification, are often abandoned or become moribund.

The absence of good governance in all facets of governance, especially in local government administration, has severely disrupted grassroots administration. Many local government

headquarters are now dilapidated and overgrown, emblematic of the deliberate disruption of local governance. The resulting decline in social service delivery, encompassing primary education, healthcare, rural road maintenance, and local market upkeep, has further exacerbated the plight of local communities. In Imo State, the situation is compounded by the state government's appropriation of local government revenues, including capitation rates, tenement rates, and operational permit fees, as stipulated in the State Consolidated Revenue Law of 2021. This usurpation of local government funds has severely undermined the financial autonomy of these administrations.

Furthermore, the local government, which should be the driving force behind agricultural production and food security, has failed to fulfill this critical role. The lack of people-centred administration has resulted in the paradoxical situation where rural residents must travel to urban centres to purchase foodstuffs that should be produced locally. The absence of functional local government administrations has hindered the effective mobilization of agricultural production in rural areas.

The erosion of democratic processes at the local government level has inflicted profound damage on the Nigerian polity. The urgent need for the complete democratization of this tier of government cannot be overstated. Restoring local governance to the people will not only ensure accountability and responsiveness but also facilitate the establishment of sound financial, capital, and human capital development systems.

Research Questions

- i. How has local government administration functioned in the contemporary time in Imo State, Nigeria, in respect of local government leadership administration?
- ii. How has local government administration resolved grassroots democratic participation of local people in formation of government in public Offices in their local area councils?
- iii. How has local government administration in Imo State, Nigeria, fostered national developmental drives across the state or nationwide?

Research Objectives

The functionality of the local government administration in Nigeria, especially in Imo State, will engender the achievement of its purpose as a tier of government closer to the people. As a grass roots government, it is expected to hear and bear people impulse thereby quickly rise above the yearning and meet expectations of well-meaning people in particular the academia and scholars. Therefore, this research paper sought to these below:

- i. Administration of a local government system that truly belongs to the local people through devolution of the democratic process that guarantees people-oriented leadership.
- ii. Local government administration system that adhere to the norms of grass roots participation of local people in their governance structure.

- iii. Local government administration that engenders local people's participation in general developmental drives, agendas, programs, and projects of the government for the local people.

Significance of the Research

The significance of the paper is basically a public enlightenment and awareness creation to the reading public on the essence of good governance in the local government administration that will engender national development at the local level of governance.

The absence of functional and people oriented through evolution of popular democracy in that tier of government rather than abnormalities of use of caretaker's committee system, sole Administration system or mayoral system of administration have adversely affected the structures, organization and mechanism of the local government administration. The negative multiplier effect has continued to protract poverty and dysfunctional system at that tier. This has robbed even other tiers and the entirety of the Nigeria polity the even development from rapid concentrated development to the local people in 774 local government in Nigeria.

Next significance of the study is to illuminate the public Office holders the need of good governance across the broad spectrum of governance in the country especially the local government where government is closer to the local people. Development as an intent of leaders have to be conceived, formulated and delivered within the local People's needs and expectations.

Finally, this article intends to increase publication in the field of local government administration for students, Learners and practitioners in the Public Administration.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The concept of Local Government in Nigeria

Scholarly discourse on local government administration in Nigeria has been extensive. To contextualize this research, a review of key definitions is presented. Local government, fundamentally, is recognized as a level of governance situated below national or state authorities, designed to exercise political power within specific territorial boundaries through elected councils. This perspective aligns with the understanding that local government facilitates the decentralization of authority, bringing governance closer to the populace.

Specifically, local government can be defined as a unit of government established by law, operating beneath the central or state levels, and exercising political authority through a representative council within a defined area (Akinola, 2020). This definition emphasizes the legal foundation and representative nature of local governance. Furthermore, it is viewed as a grassroots democratic process, wherein a nation is subdivided into smaller administrative units, enabling residents to actively participate through elected representatives who execute functions under the overarching authority of the national government (Oluwale, 2018). This underscores the participatory and democratic elements inherent in local administration. Additionally, local

government is seen as the management of local affairs by the people of a specific locality, reflecting a focus on self-governance and community-driven administration (Adeyemi, 2019).

In Ogunna (1996:1) local government is a form of devolution of the political power of the State. It is the government of the grassroots which is designed to serve as an instrument of rural development.

Local government is the government which is established at the grassroots or local level. It is a political authority under the State for decentralising political power and delegation of authority. (Fajobi 2010:1). Ezeani (2004:37) believed that existence of local government is to bring about democracy and to provide opportunities for political participation to the citizens as well as to educate and socialize them politically. Since local government affords opportunities for the political participation, it is also useful training ground for national political participation.

Adeyomo (2010) observed that local governments are good recruiting ground for the upper levels of governance, hence a source of greater participation in the governance administration of the entire polity. Njoku (2009:23) writes that development involves progression, movement, as well as advancement toward something better. Hence, it is improvement in the material and non-material aspects of human life. Thus, a developing local government is a local government in motion, a people in search of self improvement, a group concerned with and committed to its advancement through its own efforts. Sandy (1962) sees local government as appropriate agent of development, national integration and national consciousness. The local government decongests government at the center and sub-national levels, thereby freeing national leaders from onerous details and unnecessary involvement in local issues. Local government helps people understand political and economic development. Okoli (2005:86) states that local government perform all those functions political and democratic education, service delivery and bring about socio-cultural and developmental changes that ensure strong unified nation. It is a suitable instrument of political integration, nation building and socio-economic development. (Iheanacho, 2023:19).

Mohammed Olaniyi (2010:14) notes that administrative devolution involves the transfer of governmental or political authority to lower-level units of government, empowering them to engage in policy decision-making that impacts their jurisdictions. In this devolved system, local governments are defined by legally recognized geographical boundaries, within which they exercise their authority and carry out public functions.

Venkataramaiya and Pattabhiram (1969, p. 11) define local government as the administration of a locality—be it a village, city, or any area smaller than a state—by a governing body that represents local inhabitants. This body possesses a substantial level of authority, is capable of generating a portion of its revenue through local taxation, and allocates its funds towards services that address local needs. This framework is distinct from state and central government services.

Sharma (2012:995) noted that local government functions at the grassroots level, closely connected to the daily lives of individuals in society. Unlike state or national governments, local government maintains a unique proximity to the populace. Rao (1996) defines local government as the segment of governance that primarily manages local matters, overseen by authorities that are subordinate

to the state government but elected independently by qualified residents. According to Robson, cited in Sharma (2012:995), local government encompasses the concept of a non-sovereign community with defined territory, possessing the legal authority and requisite organization to govern its own affairs. Gokhale (1972:307) further asserts that local government is characterized by governance conducted by local individuals through representatives elected by the community.

Harpreet et al. (2012) emphasize that effective governance is essential for establishing the rule of law, enforcing contracts and agreements among individuals, maintaining law and order to ensure the security of citizens, optimizing costs and resources, protecting the environment, and delivering services to society efficiently. They further argue that good governance must be examined within the broader context of development and in light of the necessary adaptations in an era characterized by globalization and new communication technologies, which are significantly transforming the lives of individuals.

The World Bank (1992) emphasizes that good governance is fundamental to establishing and maintaining an environment conducive to robust and equitable development. It is a crucial complement to effective economic policies. The key elements of good governance include: (1) Political accountability, (2) Regular elections to validate the exercise of political power within a democratic framework, (3) Involvement of diverse socio-economic, cultural, and professional groups in the governance process, (4) Adherence to the rule of law, (5) Independence of the judiciary, (6) Accountability of the bureaucracy, (7) Freedom of information, (8) Transparency, (9) An efficient and effective administrative system, and (10) Collaboration between government and civil society.

Writing on the concept of national development, scholars and authors differ on the conceptualization of the term "development" before aggregating it to national development. According to C.B. Nwachukwu (1999:164), the concept of development is elusive. It is seen not only as a condition of life but also as a goal to be attained, and as the capacity to grow, change, and develop. In the political economy, development commences when the state, through its government, starts to meet the basic or essential needs of life by satisfying them. The primary purpose/goal of development is the eradication of poverty. The second purpose and goal of development is to progressively increase the choices and opportunities in social, political, and economic decision-making that affect individuals. The third purpose and goal of development is to enhance the capacity of people to participate in development, which involves incorporating the will of the people and their preparedness to engage with social institutions, take risks, and embark on ventures that promise positive change.

Unanka (2008:10) no precise conceptual definition of meaning of development. Yet, attempts are made to define it along with related concepts like modernization and industrialization. Development is the widely participatory process of social and material advancement (including greater equality, freedom and other values) for greater of the people through gaining greater control of their environment. Development aims at the satisfaction of Man's economic and social-cultural needs in the most effective and rational way. Okereke (2003) see development as conceptualized as the qualitative improvement in the living standard of the majority of the people through provision of economic and social infrastructures. The major concern of many of the Third World

countries since Independence has been how to improve their societies and guarantee a good life for their people. Nnamani (2009) stated that development is a multi-faceted concept in nature. In strict economic terms, it is the capacity of its national economy to generate and sustain an increase in its gross national income. It is also growth rate of income per capita. The ability of nation to expand its outputs faster than the growth of its population. He further stated that development means improvement in the social status of the people.

Therefore, national development encompasses human resources, resulting in meaningful progress and change in the economic, material, political, and human goods that are fairly accessible to all members of society. This, in turn, enhances their well-being, long life, and happiness in a sustainable manner (Unanka, 2008, p. 13). National development also means development geared towards satisfying the needs of the poor, while ensuring humanization through the satisfaction of needs such as expression, creativity, conviviality, and self-determination (Wingnaraja, 1976:5).

Common Features of Local Government Administration in Nigeria

Local government administration in Nigeria is the tier below the central and state governments, and it is closer to the local people than other tiers. It is a grassroots government created to serve the local people's needs in social, cultural, economic, and political spheres. Local government should provide essential services like primary education, primary healthcare, maintenance of feeder roads, and other standards of living that improve the lives of local people.

The presence of local government enables communities and villages to administer their affairs, elect representatives, and run governance councils within themselves. This fosters a democratic governance system among local people, ensuring harmonious coexistence. The evolution of rotational democracy in local council areas promotes peaceful relationships among communities and provides a platform for young people to launch their political careers.

The functionality of local government administrations in the local councils' areas across Nigeria has a great impact on the governance structures of local people because these autonomous communities and villages have evolved a democratic system that makes them jointly rule themselves by electing one of their own to manage their affairs. The destinies of local people from village to village are collectively met. Therefore, local government administration in the hands of local people offers opportunities for political participation for local people. They also create veritable ground for political training and preparation for the take-off of future high public Offices in public governance.

These fundamental attributes of objectives and functions of Local Government administration in Nigeria is no longer attainable due to administrative system recently advanced by the superior tier of government closer by to the local government. The current unfolding events in the country wide show great hamper to proper administration that tends to sustain national development across entire breath of Nigeria federation.

Historical Development of Local Government Administration in Nigeria.

Before the advent of colonial administration and the introduction of Western-style governance in Nigeria, indigenous people had their own systems of organization in local settlements. Historically, natives were already organized into basic administrative and political units for maintaining law and order, delivering local services to communities and villages (Onyenwigwe, 2011:199). Local administrations were overseen by traditional authorities through institutions like the Eze, Nze, Okpara, and title holders for the Igbo people in Eastern Nigeria. Similarly, the Emir and Emirates council governed the Hausa/Fulani in Northern Nigeria, while the Obas led the Yorubas.

The arrival of the Imperial British Government in 1900 led to colonial rule, significantly dismantling traditional systems and institutions under direct British supervision. Nigeria was divided into three regions: Northern, Western, and Eastern. Native Authorities served as training grounds for regional political actors (Obi, 2010:38). This period marked the beginning of Nigeria's modern local government system.

Following independence in 1960, the military regime abolished the regional system, replacing it with states and local government administrative areas. These smaller units aimed to bring government closer to local people, ensuring full participation in managing their affairs, promoting local democracy, and fostering rapid community development (Ogunna, 1999:138). Local government was also detached from traditional and religious institutions.

The present local government administrative system operating in Nigeria was a result of the 1976 Local Government Reform. The 1976 reform caption "Guidelines for Local Government Reform" aimed to entrust political responsibilities to where it is most crucial and beneficial, that is, the people, and to ensure social and economic development of and the effective date of service to the respective local population scattered in the country". (Orewa & Adewunsi, 1983). The Local Government Reform supposed all its predecessors and has a great difference from the previous. (Nwadike, 1997:87). The reform was comprehensive and was able to change the local government orientation from the field administration of the State government to being semi-autonomous local government structures that were responsible to the local people (electorates). Ademolekun (2002:302). The reform places Local Government as the Third Tier of the government under the Constitution. Therefore, Local Government derived its powers to function from the Constitution of the Land.

Other local government reforms, such as those implemented in 1988 and 1991, were not as comprehensive or detailed. Instead, they focused on creating more local government councils from existing ones. The contemporary local government administrative system is enshrined in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as amended.

However, the present local government administration in Nigeria, especially in Imo State, operates outside the framework established by the constitution. In Imo State, local government administration has not aligned with the constitutional framework over the past decade. They have been governed by appointed public officers, rather than those elected by the people.

Local Government Administration in Imo State Nigeria from 2000 to 2024

Imo State is one of the five State in the South-East Region of Nigeria. It is one of the thirty-six States enshrined in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended. The State has population of about four million people. (NBS, 2023). Imo State is popularly called the Eastern Heartland has its capital in Owerri. The people of the State speak mostly Igbo language as their indigenous language and English as official or formal means of communication. The people of the State mostly Christians with Muslim and African traditional religion in minority. The socio-economic dynamic of the State varying from civil and public service, service sector, agriculture, trade and commerce, Education, Hospitality, Real Sector are all thriving.

The Local Government in Imo State are twenty-seven. They are listed below according to their three Senatorial district location: (a) Imo West- Orlu zone have twelve local government areas: (1) Ideato North, (2) Ideato South, (3) Orlu, (4) Orsu, (5) Oru West, (6) Oru East, (7) Isu (8) Njaba, (9) Ohaji/ Egbema, (10) Oguta, (11) Nwangele, (12) Osu.

Imo East - Owerri zone with nine local government, namely: (1) About Mbaise, (2) Ahiazu Mbaise, (3) Ezinihite Mbaise, (4) Ngor - Opala, (5) Ikeduru (6) Mbaitolu, (7) Owerri Municipal, (8) Owerri North (9) Owerri West. Imo North- Okigwe zone has six local governments: (1) Okigwe, (2) Onuimo, (3) Ehime Mbano, (4) Isiala Mbano, (5) Obowo (6) Ihite Uboma.

The Local government administration in Imo State, from the inception of this current civil rule, has experienced a diverse administrative system away from the popular democracy participation in the local government areas. The leadership of the local government have been the product of controversial elections or appointments from the Governor. The best democratically organized local government was at the time of the reign of the Achike Udenwa between 1999 and 2007. In the reign of Ikedi Ohakim from 2007 to 2011, the local government administration used a sole Administrator system, which is an undemocratic method of democratic rule. It was toward the end of his government that he conducted one of the controversial local government elections in August 2010, where his party won the entire local government chairmanship seats and 305 Councillorship seats in Imo State. However, the reign of this cream of Leaders in Imo State was short-lived in 2011 when the new government of Rochas Okoroacha came into reign. The ousted chairmen of local government under the chairperson of Ruby Emele challenge their removal from office in the court. The protracted legal battle between these chairmen and the government of Rochas Okoroacha gave rise to another democratic illegality, from the Mayorial Administration to the Interim Administration. For Eight years in the Government House of Imo State, Okoroacha failed to conduct free and fair local government elections that would have strengthened democracy in the local government council for local people in Imo State.

The government of Imo State, not India, in 2019 made promises to resolve existing legal matters in the local government administration. However, due to the abrupt end of the government following a Supreme Court verdict, these promises were not fulfilled. Instead, an interim local government chairmanship administration was put in place for seven months.

The same Supreme Court verdict led to the administration of Senator Hope Uzodinma as the Executive Governor of Imo State, who took office on January 15, 2020. Despite promises to conduct elections in the 27 local government areas and 305 wards, no elections were held during Uzodinma's first term, which ended on January 14, 2024. Instead, an interim caretaker administration remained in place.

Local government governance continued undemocratically until the Supreme Court ruled that councils without democratic governance would cease to receive monthly allocations from the Federal Accounts and Allocation Committee (FAAC). This led to elections being conducted in local government administrations across Nigeria, including Imo State. However, these elections were marred by controversy, with many won by allies of the governor.

The recent local government elections across Nigeria, viewed in light of the Supreme Court's judgment affirming local government administrative and financial autonomy, have raised significant concerns. The Supreme Court's ruling stipulated that funds from the federation account would be withheld from the 774 local government councils lacking democratically elected leadership. In response, many state governments, previously operating without functional democratic structures at the local level, hastily organized elections to comply with the court's directive. However, in numerous states, the ruling party secured all chairmanship and councillorship positions, often in what were perceived as deeply flawed electoral processes. These elections were widely described as mere selections by those in power, rather than genuine democratic exercises. This situation raises serious questions about the actual implementation of the Supreme Court's verdict.

Impacts of Good Governance on Local Government Administration in Nigeria

Local government administration has profound impacts on both local populations and the broader governmental structure, from the federal to the sub-national levels. These impacts, when viewed through the lens of good governance and national development, include:

- Establishing a Tangible Government Presence in Rural Communities:
- Facilitating Leadership Recruitment and Participation:
- Promoting Grassroots Democratization:
- Driving Rural Development:
- Creating Jobs and Wealth for Local Residents:
- Establishing a Tangible Government Presence in Local Communities:

Government presence, in essence, is the manifestation of governmental activities through programs and projects at all levels. These activities, spanning areas such as social, economic, and political development, significantly impact local communities. For instance, well-organized government events and ceremonies can stimulate local economies and foster a sense of civic engagement. However, in the absence of functional and legitimate leadership, the coordination and execution of such activities falter. Contractors and vendors lack clear directives, hindering economic activity. Therefore, elected representatives play a vital role in ensuring that government functions smoothly and effectively.

Recently, numerous local government headquarters have fallen into disrepair, with buildings locked and grounds overgrown due to the absence of legitimate, locally elected leadership. Staff members have also experienced delays in receiving their entitlements, including monthly salaries, leading to reduced productivity at both the local and national levels.

Conversely, when leadership is established through a competitive and transparent democratic process, the local government council experiences a surge in activity. The presence of an active executive chairman fosters economic activity and encourages business. The functioning of local government ministries, agencies, and departments facilitates intergovernmental interactions, saving time, energy, and resources that would otherwise be spent travelling to the state capital for services.

Leadership Recruitment and Participation in the Local Government Councils

The functional administration of local government councils plays a pivotal role in leadership development, training, and political evolution within the country. At the grassroots level, the periodic transition of power facilitates leadership rotation within wards for councillorship positions and across the entire council area for chairmanship and deputy chairmanship roles. These positions provide valuable opportunities for political recruitment and leadership training for local residents aspiring to public office. Elected local government leaders, as representatives of the people, are expected to address community needs and expectations. A primary duty is maintaining peace and security within their localities. They also serve as a crucial link between the government and the people, disseminating information on government policies and programs from the federal to the local levels.

Meaningful citizen participation in the democratic process, particularly through elections, is essential for political progress. Free and fair elections allow individuals to choose their representatives, fostering political engagement and accountability. Over time, this process promotes political cohesion as communities become familiar with the electoral cycle and actively seek opportunities to present candidates for leadership positions.

However, the current practice in some states, where governors appoint caretaker committees, interim chairmen, or sole administrators to manage local governments, is detrimental to the development of functional local governance. This practice hinders leadership development, limits opportunities for training, and stifles the discovery of new talent in public administration.

Grassroots Democratization of Local People in Rural Areas

Democracy is an ongoing process, not a static destination. It requires fairness, transparency, and the consistent application of rules to ensure order and participation. Local government elections provide opportunities for citizens to exercise their democratic rights and influence local decision-making. These elections encourage communities and clans to organize, unite, and present candidates who represent their interests. Candidates, aware of their mandate from the people, are more likely to prioritize community development and ensure that the benefits of governance are distributed equitably.

Unfortunately, this ideal democratic system is largely absent in local government councils in Imo State and in some other states across Nigeria. For example, Anambra State has not held local government council elections in the past twenty years. This lack of democratic governance at the grassroots level impedes political integration and acculturation, hindering the development of a robust democratic culture from the bottom up. The health and integrity of Nigeria's democratic process are compromised when local governments fail to practice full democratic governance.

General Rural Development in Local Government Areas

Sustainable rural and urban development requires deliberate planning, execution, and investment. For a nation to achieve comprehensive development, all levels of government and citizens must actively participate. However, in Nigeria, development initiatives often exist primarily on paper, with limited tangible impact on people's lives. Nigeria's status as the world's poverty capital, despite its abundant resources, underscores the need for more effective development strategies. A significant factor contributing to this is the lack of uniform development across the 774 local government areas. Collaborative efforts in agricultural development and production involving federal, state, and local governments are crucial for realizing economic potential. Weak economic development at the local level inevitably translates to weak state and national economies.

For instance, Imo State's overall development is hindered by the lack of active participation from its 27 local government councils in economic production and development. If these councils were actively engaged in rural development initiatives, such as cottage industries, agricultural processing, and value chain development, the development would extend beyond urban centres. The current high rate of rural-urban migration is partly due to the collapse of governance at the grassroots, exacerbated by insecurity and the absence of functional local institutions. Visionary local government leadership can stimulate local economies by promoting agriculture, trade, transportation, and cottage industries, creating employment and empowering local residents.

Security of Local People's Lives and Properties in the Local Government Areas.

In recent times, rural communities in Imo State and across many other states in Nigeria have witnessed an alarming surge in insecurity. Numerous local government areas have been overrun by non-state actors engaged in criminal activities such as kidnapping, illicit trade, and gunrunning, all aimed at generating illegal revenue. Consequently, many residents are unable to return to their villages, hindering communal activities like marriages and burials. This situation has triggered mass rural-urban migration, leading to overcrowding in cities like Owerri. While urban centers are not immune to these crimes, the impact is particularly devastating in rural areas. Nigeria has reportedly lost two trillion naira in kidnapping ransom payments in 2024, with three thousand lives lost to this crime (NBS, November 2024). Although the national security apparatus is undoubtedly strained, the absence of effective local governance structures rooted in the communities they serve significantly exacerbates the problem.

A functional local government administration, originating from the grassroots level, would enable communities, through their elected counsellors, to collaborate with the government and establish security outreach programs. This would facilitate information gathering and sharing with security

agencies, enhancing local security. The current dysfunction at the grassroots level has created a vacuum, allowing criminal elements to terrorize citizens through kidnapping, robbery, arson, and other violent acts.

Jobs and Wealth Creation in Local Government Areas

The potential for job creation in rural areas, particularly in agricultural production, processing, mining, transportation, and other resource-based industries, remains largely untapped. For instance, in Imo State and other Southeast states, the palm oil industry and its value chain are stagnant. Palm trees and other economically viable resources, which could generate wealth and employment, are neglected. Yet, these natural resources form the economic backbone of countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand, which derive significant foreign exchange earnings from agricultural exports. These countries actively support rural production and market access. In Nigeria, the situation is markedly different.

The current local government governance structure does not foster job creation. The necessary environment for sustainable development is lacking. Rural infrastructure is deficient, jeopardizing business survival. Consequently, many businesses close or relocate to urban centers where security and infrastructure are more reliable. Local governments, when genuinely representative of the people, are more likely to prioritize these essential amenities.

Gap in literature

The study highlighted a significant gap between the constitutional provisions for local government autonomy and the reality of state-level interference, particularly in Imo State. It Investigated the specific mechanisms through which state governments circumvent constitutional provisions. It further analysed the legal and political factors contributing to this discrepancy. This study also suggested that the lack of democratically elected local governments hinders development, service delivery, and security.

Conclusion

Effective local government administration in Nigeria, conducive to good governance and national development, remains elusive without genuine citizen participation. The foundation of Nigeria's democratic journey lies in opening all levels of governance to popular participation, both as voters and candidates. This flow of participation must extend from the top to the bottom, with local government serving as the crucial grassroots level.

The functionality of local government has profound consequences for both local populations and higher levels of government. Its positive impacts include fostering democratic self-governance, community cohesion, political bridge-building, consensus-building, electoral participation, and socio-economic and political stability. Local government structures can also serve as a training ground for aspiring politicians and contribute to national security.

When governance is truly rooted in the local community, leaders are accountable and responsive to the people. Conversely, appointed officials, lacking a direct mandate, prioritize their patrons over the community's needs. Projects and programs often fail to address local needs because they lack community input from inception. Leaders elected through democratic processes, having engaged in negotiations and campaigns, are more likely to implement policies that reflect the community's priorities.

The continued evolution of power through democratic participation fosters national cohesion. The rotational system of elective positions, such as chairman and deputy chairman, promotes understanding and cooperation among communities. This system allows each community to develop a sense of political agency and build strategic alliances.

A healthy democratic system, from the top down, will lead to tangible socio-economic development and improved living standards. Therefore, the Supreme Court's 2024 ruling on local government administrative and financial autonomy must be vigorously implemented. The Federal Government and the National Assembly should enact legislation that ensures truly independent local governments, as mandated by the Constitution. This legislation should prohibit the use of interim chairmen, caretaker committees, or sole administrators and mandate that all local government officials be elected through free and fair elections conducted by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC).

Currently, Nigeria's governance structures, particularly at the local level, are ambiguous. The democratic system has deviated from its intended path. Some states employ a centralized French model, while others follow a British model. The National Assembly should establish a uniform local government administration system across all 774 local councils in Nigeria.

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