

Local Government Autonomy and Service Delivery in Abaji Area Council, Federal Capital Territory, Abuja NIGERIA

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[0165] Abstract

An explicit constitutional amendment that recognizes local governments as a level of government would give them a distinct legal status and practical autonomy. Local governments standing inside Nigeria's federal structure would be strengthened by this change, which grants them authority over governance, finances, and service delivery. This recognition would also protect local governments from arbitrary interference by state governments by ensuring that they have the constitutional authority to determine what is best for their local constituents. This study assesses Local Government Autonomy and Service Delivery in Abaji Area Council Federal Capital Territory Abuja. Grounded in Governance Theory which highlights the importance of networks, partnerships, and decentralization in achieving effective governance and service delivery. Two research hypotheses were postulated and employing a survey design and quantitative methodology, data were collected from 381 respondents across ten political wards using structured questionnaire and regression analysis. The results that, fiscal autonomy has a major effect on Abaji Area Council FCT Abuja service delivery. The study also showed that operational autonomy has a significant effect on service delivery in Abaji Area Council's FCT Abuja. The study recommends that, Implement constitutional changes to guarantee that Abaji Area Council receives allocations directly; eliminate joint state-local accounts to stop money from being diverted; and increase Abaji Area Council's revenue base so that it can absorb internally generated revenue through markets, property rates, and digital systems. Increase administrative autonomy by guaranteeing that Abaji Area Council handles her hiring and advancements impartially and independently.

Keywords: Autonomy, Fiscal, Local Government, Operational and Service delivery

Introduction

Public organizations in Nigeria including the local governments are constitutionally, saddled with responsibilities that require effective leadership and financial autonomy for effective service delivery. Local governance remains a pivotal mechanism for grassroots development in Nigeria. The constitutional third tier Local Government Areas (LGAs) was designed to bring governance closer to the people, fostering responsiveness, accountability, and efficient service delivery (Ekikeudu, Opara, Okorie, Edet, Eja, Onyema, Akwaji, Njoku, Abunimye, Bassey, Odinka, and Isokon, 2024). However, systemic challenges especially inadequate autonomy has impeded this vision. State governments often wield excessive control over LGAs' finances and personnel, undermining their capacity to plan and execute local development initiatives which have the potential of improving economic growth and development (Eteng et al., 2025b; Ajisebiyawo&llawagbon, 2025; Njoku & Nwakwuribe, 2014; Ahmed, 2024, Shotayo, 2024).

The Supreme Court's landmark July 2024 ruling, which mandates direct federal allocation to LGAs and prohibits state diversion of local funds, offers a fresh opportunity to reassess LGAs Abaji Area Council

in particular capacity to leverage autonomy for improved governance and service delivery (Ajisebiyawo&Ilawagbon, 2025). Yet, legal pronouncements alone are inadequate. Studies by scholars such as, Nwaeze, Njoku and Nwaeze, (2014), Ajisebiyawo&Ilawagbon (2025), Ajisebiyawo&Ilawagbon (2025) shows that financial autonomy positively influences service delivery, but implementation inconsistencies such as joint state local accounts and politicized appointments continue to hamper outcomes.

Empirical evidences and recent records showed that, Abaji Area Council, one of six councils in the Federal Capital Territory, encapsulates this national dilemma. Despite its strategic position and growing population, it struggles to deliver quality public services due to constraints in fiscal and administrative autonomy (Amaramiro&Njoku, 2019; Nwobashi, 2024; Ajisebiyawo&Ilawagbon, 2025). According to Cornelius, Tobechei, Chiedozi, Arua, Otu&Aloh, (2023) Nwobashi (2024), Tijani&Alasan (2024), Adeleye, Medeyese, Okelola (2024) local governments in Nigeria, Abaji Area Council inclusive is faced deficient service delivery ranging from poor Primary Health care service with high maternal mortality rate, shortage of water supply, water storage and treatment facilities. The situation is almost the same in primary education sector, the quality of primary education is assumed to be low and the enrolment, retention, transition and retention is also low. This study, therefore, interrogates the effect of local government autonomy and service delivery in Abaji Area Council, assessing the extent to which constitutional provisions of fiscal autonomy and administrative practices have enhanced or constrained the council's performance in service delivery. This study draws on empirical data, relevant theories and recommendations tailored for Abaji's unique context.

Research Hypotheses(a)There is no significant effect of fiscal autonomy and Service Delivery in Abaji Area Council. (b) There is no significant effect of operational autonomy and Service Delivery in Abaji Area Council.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Local Government Fiscal Autonomy in Nigeria Finance is the bedrock of any meaningful development. Accordingly, the 4 schedule, section 7 of the 1999 constitution mandated local government to collect rates, radio, markets, park fees, etc as internal revenue spelt out under the forth schedule. They have been given powers to collect from their citizens as internal revenue to assist in the provision of services they are to provide in line with the constitution or law (Amaramiro&Njoku, 2018; Anayochukwu&Ani, 2021; Tijani&Alasan, 2024).

Financial autonomy is the ability of local governments to use their financial power freely while staying within the parameters of the law or constitution. This is so that the local government can fulfill its constitutionally or legally given financial power and responsibilities in a satisfactory manner without excessive intervention or hindrance from higher authority or from inside (Anayochukwu&Ani, 2021). This definition makes the case for LGs having sufficient legal financial autonomy in order to provide services in an effective and efficient manner. In the absence of performance, the constitution or law might not be able to provide LGs with even sufficient autonomy as the populace longs for progress. Since a democracy does restrict the use of power, autonomy must be kept to a minimum (Shebbs&Njoku, 2016; Michael, 2024).

The comparative performance of Nigerian local governments is not particularly noteworthy on a balance sheet. According to Tijani and Alasan (2024), the majority of local governments only exist to pay salaries because they rely on federal funding, which is typically taken out of sources for primary school teacher salaries. Local governments are not receiving even the ten percent of the state's internally generated revenue that is required. All things considered, the incapacity of local governments to fulfill the financial obligations of their constitutional duties is one of the numerous paradoxes that tend to undermine them. The high expense of putting the division of powers into practice also threatens the sovereignty of local governments (Ajisebiyawo&Ilawagbon, 2025) and (Eteng et al., 2025a)

Therefore, financial viability should be linked to the pursuit of autonomy. The autonomy of local governments should not be interpreted as granting them sovereignty, nor should the chairman be compared to state governors as a "local governor." However, the grassroots populace should benefit from local government authority. The chairman and council members shouldn't have the only authority. Local government in Nigeria, including the Abaji Area council, can only be truly autonomous, according to Apalando (2024), "when popular structures, organizations, and supportive values have been created to sustain, propagate, and perpetuate fair representation, constant dialogue, openness of policy making, public accountability, and collective self-defense" (Ahmed, Abdulkadir& Ado, 2018).

Local Government and Operational Autonomy in Nigeria The nation's constitution made it plain where it stood on local government autonomy. For example, the 1999 overthrow of the military and the inauguration of a democratic government highlighted some of the inconsistencies in local government autonomy. According to Musa, Angbulu, and Tolu-Kolawole (2024), the 1999 Constitution's clauses pertaining to local government management generated ambiguity. By recognizing and guaranteeing the local government as a third tier of government, the 1999 Constitution grants the state the authority to control it through its provisions in sections 7 and 8. Together with Section 8, Section 7 states that: The Constitution guarantees the system of local government by democratically elected councils, and as a result, the government of each State shall, subject to Section 8 of this Constitution, ensure their existence under a law which provides for the establishment, structure, composition, finance, and functions of such councils (Ajisebiyawo&Ilawagbon, 2025).

Cornelius et al. (2023) explain that these clauses imply that local government cannot carry out the duties enumerated in section 1 schedule 4 of the Constitution until a bill has been passed by the House of Assembly. According to Pieate and Ukere (2024), the Constitution's Fourth Schedule also stipulates that "the functions of the Local Government Council to also include participation of such Council in government of a state as in respect of the following matters, education, agricultural materials resources, healthcare, and any other function to it by the State House of Assembly."

The Nigerian Constitution's Sections 7 and 8 of 1999 make it abundantly evident that the state is the source of local government's existence, while also stating that it must be respected as a third level of government. This clause lacks clarity (Anyebe, 2017). Some state governors have suspended elected council chairmen and others have stripped them of their positions based on constitutional ambiguity. The local government councils were dissolved in large numbers.

Until elections for the Councils were scheduled, Caretakers Committees were established to manage their operations (Njoku&Nwakwuribe, 2014; Egbuagu, Nnamani, and Okolie, 2024). The state's ruling party will always win all of the chairmanship and councillorship seats in any elections held by the State Independent Electoral Commission to fill these positions, depriving the opposition parties of a seat (Njoku, 2006, Michael, 2024). Ajisebiyawo and Ilawagbon (2025) claim that the federal government is holding onto some anti-autonomy policies.

As an example, the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA), which is managed by the state government, and the implementation of primary school education, this time through Universal Basic Education (UBE). The state governments typically subtract a number of things, including income tax (upfront) paid by local government personnel before sending to local government councils, and counterpart funding of projects, among other things, as they see proper. Under caretaker committee chairmanship, the situation is worse because no committee chairman has the courage to oppose the state governor who generously nominated him in the first place (Chibu, 2024).

According to studies, managerial independence that improves work schedule flexibility and employee commitment enhances accountability, efficiency, and resource utilization, fostering local empowerment (Njoku, Evans &Osigwe, 2019). However, political interference and constitutional limitations frequently impede optimal autonomous functioning, necessitating reforms for sustainable governance. There have also been reported cases of revenue collectors benefiting themselves with the

funds collected for the council, as well as the practice of giving away revenue sources to individuals based on political patronage (Abubakar, 2017; Adio, 2024).

It is difficult for many of these local governments to even pay salaries, much less start development projects. State governments typically create plans for their local governments and include them into their state plans, even when it comes to national development planning, without receiving any input at all from the local government councils (Njoku and Isigwe, 2019; Anyebe, 2017).

According to his own declaration, Tijani&Alasan (2024) defined local government autonomy as the extent of legal, administrative, and financial freedom granted to the third tier of government within the bounds of the constitution. According to Nwobashi (2024), every government has its own existence and is not subject to the authority of the others. In order for a government to be considered autonomous, it is necessary that it not only have the legal and physical presence of a legislative assembly, governor, courts, and other governmental apparatus, but also that it be an independent entity that can conduct its affairs without interference from other governments.

Shebbs and Njoku (2016) provided support for this perspective by asserting that the resources and discretion granted to the responsibility are at the heart of local government and that local autonomy is primarily concerned with the matter of obligations. Within the bounds set by the law, this assumes that local government must have the authority to make choices without outside interference (Adio, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted governance theory by renowned academics James Rosenau, Rod Rhodes, and Gerry Stoker (Rhodes, 1996; Stoker, 1998). The notion of governance places emphasis on the shift from traditional government to governance. In theory, governance extends beyond government institutions and includes a range of stakeholders in the decision-making process, such as civil society and business groups (Rhodes, 1996; Stoker, 1998). The importance of networks, partnerships, and decentralization in achieving effective governance is emphasized by this approach. Particularly relevant to governance theory is the issue of local government autonomy in Nigeria. The theory's emphasis on decentralization aligns with the idea that local governments should have greater control over their spending plans, decision-making procedures, and service delivery. Because Nigerian local governments are heavily dependent on state governments, particularly through the State and Local Government Joint Account, they currently have limited operational and budgetary autonomy.

According to governance theory, local governments should be allowed to function independently in order to better serve their constituents without excessive government interference. Governing theory also emphasizes the role of non-state actors in the governing process. When local governments are given additional authority, communities may work together with them to deliver services and participate more actively in decision-making. This participatory approach, which is supported by governance theory, ensures more inclusive governance that adjusts to the diverse needs of the population (Stoker, 1998).

The application of governance theory makes it clear that Abaji Area Council needs more operational and financial autonomy in order to enhance its responsiveness, accountability, and community involvement for effective and efficient service delivery. Furthermore, by ensuring that decisions are made at the Abaji Area council, which is closest to the people, the theory provides a framework for comprehending why granting Abaji Area council greater authority (fiscal and operational autonomy) is essential for promoting effective service delivery.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research approach using a survey research design to investigate Local government autonomy and service delivery, focusing specifically on fiscal autonomy and operational autonomy. The survey design was chosen to enable the systematic collection of numerical data from a large group of respondents, thereby facilitating the analysis of patterns and relationships between variables relevant to the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The population of the study comprised entire residents/citizens within Abaji FCT Abuja. This population was considered appropriate given that they

are direct beneficiaries of the service delivery by Abaji Area Council Management. A target population of 58, 642 was identified (2006, National Population Census). Using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table, a sample of 381 respondents was selected to ensure representativeness and statistical reliability. Stratified random sampling was employed across the ten political wards to ensure respondents were proportionately represented within the sample. Two strata were created: one for urban and rural political wards. Random sampling was then applied within each stratum to eliminate bias and ensure that a diverse set of experiences and perceptions were captured. Data were gathered through a structured questionnaire specifically developed for this study. The questionnaire consisted of close-ended questions covering key areas such as fiscal autonomy, operational autonomy and service delivery. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" was used to measure respondents' levels of agreement with various statements related to their experience with Abaji area council and service delivery.

Prior to full deployment, the questionnaire was subjected to a pilot test with 40 respondents from a neighbouring Kwali area council of the Abaji area council to assess its reliability and clarity. The feedback obtained led to minor revisions in the phrasing of some items. The reliability of the instrument was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a coefficient of 0.83, indicating high internal consistency. The final questionnaire was administered physically to the respondents. All ethical protocols were observed, including informed consent, anonymity, and voluntary participation. Simple linear regression was used in testing the two hypotheses respectively.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section tests the hypotheses of the study using simple linear regression through SPSS computer package (Version 24.0) in order to draw inferences and establish relationship and degree of magnitude between the independent or predictor variables Local government autonomy (fiscal autonomy and operational autonomy) and dependent or criterion variable service delivery.

Hypothesis I

There is no significant effect of fiscal autonomy on Service Delivery in Abaji Area Council.

Table 1 REGRESSION OUTPUT MODEL SUMMARY

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	RStd. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.346 ^a	.198	.196	.2560877	1.230

a. Predictors: (Constant), Fiscal Autonomy

b. Dependent Variable: Service Delivery

Source: SPSS Output, 2025

Table 1 shows the summary of the simple regression analysis. The empirical findings show that R, the coefficient of correlation stood at 0.346 which indicates a weak correlation between fiscal Autonomy and leadership ability to deliver services. R², the coefficient of determination stood at 0.198 indicating that about 19.8% of the total variation in service delivery is explained by variations in fiscal autonomy. The adjusted R² being 0.196 also indicates that fiscal autonomy will still explain 19.6% of the variations in leadership ability to deliver services in Abaji Area Council even if other variables were added to the study.

Table 2 REGRESSION OUTPUT COEFFICIENTS^A

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.524	.088		8.703	.000
	Fiscal Autonomy	.286	.024	.346	5.790	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Service Delivery

Source: SPSS Output, 2025

Table 2 shows the outcome of the fiscal Autonomy on ability to deliver services in Abaji Area Council. The coefficient of funding stood at 0.286 which is positive. This implies that an increase in fiscal Autonomy would lead to an increase in service delivery in Abaji Area Council. However, the significance of this can be judged from the t statistics and its significance. The t statistics of “fiscal Autonomy” stood at 5.79 with a significance value of 0.000. The significance being less than 0.05 indicates that the relationship depicted in the regression model is significant at 95% confidence level. This implies that the study does not have enough statistical evidence to accept the null hypothesis.

Based on the preceding analyses, the study rejects the null hypothesis (H_{01}) which states that there is no significant effect of fiscal autonomy on Service Delivery in Abaji Area Council; and accepts its alternate hypothesis (H_{11}) which states that, there is significant effect of fiscal autonomy on Service Delivery in Abaji Area Council.

Hypothesis II

H_{02} : There is no significant effect of operational autonomy and Service Delivery in Abaji Area Council.

Table 3 REGRESSION OUTPUT MODEL SUMMARY

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	RStd. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.483 ^a	.233	.231	.2677312	1.265

a. Predictors: (Constant), Operational Autonomy

b. Dependent Variable: service delivery

Source: SPSS Output, 2025

Table 3 shows the summary of the simple regression analysis. The empirical findings show that R, the coefficient of correlation stood at 0.483 which indicates a moderate correlation between operational autonomy and service delivery. R^2 , the coefficient of determination stood at 0.233 indicating that about 23.3% of the total variation in service delivery is explained by variations in operational autonomy. The adjusted R^2 being 0.231 also indicates that operational autonomy will still explain 23.1% of the variations in service delivery in Abaji Area Council even if other variables were added to the study.

Table 4 REGRESSION OUTPUT COEFFICIENTS

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.655	.091		9.256	.000
	Operational Autonomy	.240	.024	.483	5.968	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Service delivery

Source: SPSS Output, 2025

Table 4 shows the outcome of the operational autonomy on service delivery in Abaji Area Council. The coefficient of operational autonomy stood at 0.24 which is positive. This implies that an increase in operational autonomy would lead to an increase in service delivery in Abaji Area Council. However, the significance of this can be judged from the t statistics and its significance. The t statistics of “operational autonomy” stood at 5.986 with a significance value of 0.000. The significance being less than 0.05 indicates that the relationship depicted in the regression model is significant at 95% confidence level. This implies that the study does not have enough statistical evidence to accept the null hypothesis.

Based on the preceding analyses, the study also rejects the null hypothesis (H_{02}) which states that there is no significant effect of operational autonomy and Service delivery in Abaji Area Council; and accept its alternate hypothesis (H_{12}) which states that, there is significant effect of operational autonomy and Service delivery in Abaji Area Council.

Discussion of Finding

The Abaji Area Council's autonomy (fiscal and Operational) and service delivery were the subjects of the study. A number of important revelations were drawn from the data analysis, and these are covered below. The results pertaining to the first hypothesis show that fiscal autonomy has a major effect on Abaji Area Council service delivery. These results are consistent with empirical research on local government financial autonomy in Nigeria by Osakede, Ijimakinwa, and Adesanya (2016) and Ajisebiyawo&Ilawagbon (2025), which found that local government in Nigeria, lacks fiscal autonomy, which hinders effective and efficient service delivery at the local level. And that the only way to provide effective local government services in Nigeria is to give local councils complete financial autonomy over matters that are statutorily assigned to them, abolish the state/local government joint account, and appoint open officials to lead local council operations. Additionally, Okpata&Njoku (2008) pointed out that complete autonomy for local government councils will guarantee that people are appropriately mobilized for good governance and constructive change at the local level in Nigeria. Furthermore, research by Tijani&Alasan (2024), Ajisebiyawo&Ilawagbon (2025), and Cornelius et al. (2023) showed that giving local governments less authority had a detrimental effect on the standard of service delivery in Nigeria's LG system.

The study also showed that the Abaji Area Council's operational autonomy and service delivery have a big impact. According to Njoku's (2007), Okebaram&Njoku's (2011), and Anayochukwu&Ani's (2021) claims, LG councils in Nigeria are unable to declare autonomy, particularly when it comes to funding and personnel issues. These issues hinder the effective execution of their duties (service delivery). LGs must effectively address these if they want to have a greater beneficial influence on the communities. Furthermore, studies by Shebbs and Njoku (2016), Nwobashi (2024), Njoku and Isigwe (2019), Anyebe, 2017, Apalando (2024), (Ahmed, Abdulkadir& Ado, 2018), and Cornelius et al. (2023) confirmed that there is a connection between good service delivery and LG's complete autonomy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite encouraging laws and case law, the Abaji Area Council's ability to provide services is hindered by its lack of financial and administrative autonomy. Theories and empirical evidence show that while autonomy is important, it is not enough; political will, institutional ability, grassroots involvement, and implementation are also crucial. Identifying and creating new associations and structures as well as existing ones should be the main goal of grassroots democracy. For the concepts of local self-autonomy and effective service delivery to be realized, Abaji Area Council must share governmental authority. It is necessary to save the Abaji Area Council, from its current ill state. The Abaji Area Council's revenue-generating areas and operational procedures should not be encroached upon by the federal or state governments.

Recommendations (a) Implement constitutional changes to guarantee that Abaji Area Council receives allocations directly; eliminate joint state-local accounts to stop money from being diverted; and increase Abaji Area Council's revenue base so that it can absorb internally generated revenue through markets, property rates, and digital systems. (b) Increase administrative autonomy by guaranteeing that Abaji Area Council handles her hiring and advancements impartially and independently.

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