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## Local Government, and Grassroots Challenges: Understanding the Complexities of Local Governance in Nigeria

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### Abstract

Local Government represents the magnificent edifice upon which state and central tiers of administration are built upon. Its proximity to local dwellers makes it the most important level of government readily available to the indigenes in their respective localities. The main objective of the study was to interrogate problems associated with local governance. The study deployed a library approach, it systematically reviewed relevant literature. The study is premised on the Localist theory Framework, adopted a Library approach, drawing data from secondary sources. It identified key challenges facing local governments, including leadership deficit, low revenue base, corruption, autonomous crises, neglect of border communities, and lack of initiatives. The study recommended intentional governance and allied measures to address these challenges, emphasizing their importance in resolving local troubles. By highlighting these issues, the study provides valuable insights into the complexities of local governance in Nigeria, underscoring the need for effective leadership, accountability, and strategic initiatives to drive development and improve the lives of citizens. The findings and recommendations of this study have significant implications for policy and practice, emphasizing the need for a more nuanced understanding of local governance challenges and the importance of context-specific solutions. It concluded that the barriers afflicting grassroots governance must be removed for the much needed development at the local parlance to be emplaced.

### Keywords

Complexities, Localism, Local Government, Local Troubles, Navigating.

## Introduction

It is incontrovertible that National Government in any sovereign state, be it a federation or a unitary arrangement, cannot shoulder the humongous task of development, without sub-national political units, particularly local government. This underscores the reason the creation of local government areas across nations and cultures to birth development though the provision of services, aimed at meeting the peculiar needs of the people at the grassroots (Odo, 2024). Local government is the third tier of government responsible for providing services to the citizens at the grass roots, engaging in Public process and exerting rights and obligations.

In nexus with the above, there is no doubt that local government system in Nigeria was conceived as part of the deliberate efforts to adequately address the developmental challenges of the rural dwellers in order to bring government closer to rural people, with a view to preventing rural urban migration (Ezeh, 2022). To provide a better structure for effective rural governance and service delivery to rural communities, the Muritala /Obasanjo, Junta drove a profound reform initiative, that revolutionized the local government system in the year 1976, championed by Justice Ayo Erikafe (Tobi and oikhala, (2021) According to Tobi and oikhala (2021;113):

In contemporary Nigerian state, most citizens first identify with their ethnic nationality, before Identifying themselves as members of the country. Therefore, it is not strange that both main and minor ethnic nationalities are quick to banish whoever affect their ethnic identities. This proclivity has inherent advantages of birthing development from localities.

Nigeria's federal system comprises three tiers of government: federal, state, and local. The 1999 Constitution (as amended) empowers local governments to manage grassroots affairs, including providing essential services like healthcare, education, water, and sanitation. With 774 local government areas (LGAs) across the

country, each governed by a council led by a chairman and councilors, the scope for local governance is vast. Unfortunately, local governments grapple with several grassroots challenges that impede their effectiveness. These include inadequate funding and financial autonomy, poor infrastructure and service delivery, corruption and mismanagement, weak institutional capacity, political interference, ethnic and communal tensions, and limited citizen participation. These challenges contribute to poor living standards, stunted local economic growth, weakened trust in government institutions, and increased poverty and insecurity at the grassroots (Ezeh, 2022, Raji A.A & Habeebullah A.A, 2022).

Effective local governance requires addressing these interconnected challenges through reforms, capacity building, and enhanced citizen participation. Strengthening local governments can drive inclusive development, improve service delivery, and foster national stability. This exploration of local government and grassroots challenges in Nigeria will analyze the root causes of these challenges, examine successful grassroots initiatives and models, and discuss potential reforms and strategies for improvement, aiming to contribute insights into enhancing local governance and grassroots development in Nigeria (Ezeh, 2022).

## Research Methodology

This study adopts a Library Research Approach as its cornerstone methodology, delving into existing literature to explore the intricacies of local governance in Nigeria. By systematically reviewing academic journals, government publications, and policy documents, we aim to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the challenges hindering effective grassroots development.

Through this approach, we seek to glean valuable insights into the evolution of local governance in Nigeria, the impact of decentralization, and the persistent obstacles to grassroots development.

Our analysis of existing data will enable the identification of patterns, themes, and relationships pertinent to local government challenges, including issues of funding, capacity, and citizen participation.

Moreover, this Library Research Approach allows us to contextualize Nigeria's local governance experience within broader theoretical frameworks and international best practices. By synthesizing findings from diverse sources, we strive to achieve a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding local governance in Nigeria, ultimately informing strategies for improvement and reform.

In applying this methodology, we rely on the richness and accuracy of existing literature, giving careful consideration to the credibility and relevance of sources. We are confident that the insights garnered from this study will contribute meaningfully to the discourse on local governance and grassroots development in Nigeria, laying a foundation for evidence-based policymaking and informed academic inquiry into the multifaceted challenges of local governance in Nigeria.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

#### **Local Government**

It is extremely difficult to advance a monolithic and universally accepted definition for concepts in behavioral sciences or humanities, and as such, the term "Local Government" has not subjected itself to a single and all satisfying conceptualization, largely because the term has been extensively interrogated by scholars. Local government refers to the tier of government that is closest to the people and is responsible for providing essential services and making decisions that affect the daily lives of citizens at the 1976 Local Government reforms In Nigeria, Local Government is defines thus;

A Government at the local level, that is run by representative council. The council has the power

to make decisions within its specified boundary. Local government is a vital institution promoting grassroots development, providing essential services, and improving quality of life for local communities in Nigeria, crucial for the country's overall progress (Oyediran, 1988).

The above definition harps on democratization, by placing premium an elected or selected representatives, charged with the tasks of running the affairs of local political entity. Ogun (1988) is of the opinion that local government is an entity created by law by which local communities within a definite area organized to manage their own affairs,

The United Nations Division of Public Administration (UNPA, 1998) inclines that

Local government is a sub division of a nation (or a federal system, a state) which is constituted by law and had substantial control of local affairs, including the power to impose taxes or exact labour for specific purposes, the governing body of such an entity is elected or otherwise locally selected.

This definition has been upheld and expatiated on by a number of scholars, notable among them being Whelan (1970:59) who posits that:

Each Unit of Local Government in any system, is assured to possess the following Characteristics, a given territory, actual population, an institutional structure, a separate legal identity, a range of powers and functions authorized by delegation, from the appropriate central or intermediate legislature and lastly, within the context of such delegation, autonomy subject always to the test of reasonableness.

Local government refers to the tier of government that operates at the grassroots level, closest to the people, with the primary objective of addressing the needs and aspirations of local communities. It is a system of governance where elected representatives and officials work together to provide essential services, promote development,

and improve the quality of life for residents within a defined geographical area.

In Nigeria, local government is the third tier of government, established under the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, with 774 local government areas (LGAs) across the country. The local government is headed by a chairman or a sole administrator, who is elected or appointed to oversee the affairs of the local government.

The primary functions of local government include:

- Providing basic services such as healthcare, education, sanitation, and water supply
- Maintaining law and order, and ensuring public safety
- Promoting economic development, agriculture, and rural development
- Encouraging community participation and involvement in governance
- Managing local resources, including land, water, and natural resources
- Providing support for vulnerable groups, such as women, children, and the elderly

Local governments are expected to operate with a degree of autonomy, with the power to make decisions, raise revenue, and implement policies that cater to the needs of their local communities. However, in practice, local governments in Nigeria often face challenges such as inadequate funding, corruption, and interference from state and federal governments, which can limit their effectiveness and impact (Oyediran, 1988)

Effective local government is critical to the development of Nigeria, as it provides an opportunity for grassroots participation, promotes accountability, and helps to address the unique needs and challenges of local communities. By strengthening local governments, Nigeria can promote more equitable and sustainable development, improve service delivery, and enhance the quality of life

for its citizens (Enemuo, 2023). Local government is a vital institution for promoting grassroots development, providing essential services, and improving the quality of life for local communities in Nigeria. Its effectiveness is crucial to the country's overall development and progress (Odo, 2014)

From the foregoing, it is apparent that the essence of local government is to orchestrate grassroots development. Odo (2014) sees grassroots development as the development of the rural dwellers in decisions that affects their lives. In this wise, grassroots development is a strategy of addressing the basic needs of the rural population. Enemuo (2023:335) points out the following as the rationale or justification for local government;

It serves as platform for local initiative among rural dwellers or inhabitants.

It provides framework for mobilizing and serving popular zeal and initiations in development

It serves as fulcrum against over concentration of power at the centre which leads to tyranny

It is a two-way communication channels between the local communities or population and the national government

It is an avenue for training future political leaders

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study adopted the Localist Theory. Localist theory refers to a method of organizing a central government to preserve local autonomy. It is a range of political philosophies which prioritize the local initiatives. It supports local production and consumption of goods, local control of government and promotion of local history, local culture and local identity (Ibetan and Ndukwe, 2023). Localist theory in the context of the local government, refers to the idea of devolving power and decision making authority from central government to local communities, allowing them to take control of their own affairs and make decision that reflect their unique needs and

peculiarities. The local perspective like the traditional public administration has evolved a forceful case for autonomous selected or elected authorizes (Ezeani, 2004) Ibietan and Ndukwe (2023:135) submits that:

Localist theory draws on a wide range of movements and concerns, and it proposes that by re-localising democratic and economic relationships to the Local level, social, economic and environmental, Problems will be more definable and solution, more easily created.

It also advocates a professional reform of Local government. Notable among suggested reforms by duo of John and Stewart (In Ezeani 2004) include the introduction of a local income tax, a drive to institute proportional representation at the grassroots election and a number of others. Mandipour (2016) is of the view, that localism is on the agenda of planners and policy makers in many countries and different guises, which place on emphasis on places, communities, localities and regions as the focus of policies and practices.

From various scholarly submissions, It is apparent that, as a form of devolution, local government has a legal or locus standi, involving powers to execute indicated residual tasks over a delineated territory. The local government in Nigeria is broadly considered as a significant approbation for community development and for the delivery of social services to the people. It is assumed that this level of government is purposely designed and placed to achieve specified functions in the constitution, due to its proximity to the community dwellers, which should ordinarily boost its capacity to easily emplace development strides (Ibetan and Ndukwe,2023)

Applicability of Localist Theory to Local Governments in Nigeria

The Localist perspective is applicable to Local Government Philosophies and practices in Nigeria and the localism theory seeks to devolve power, from the federal or national government

and decentralize authority and resources in order to empower the local government and community dwellers. (Ibietan and Ndukwe,2021). With the recent affirmation of the local government financial autonomy by the Apex court on July 11, 2024, it is save to establish that the journey towards the completion of the localist philosophy is near (Ibietan and Ndukwe, 2024) In addition, the supreme court made some other far reaching decisions to reposition local government in the country. The supreme court decisions are;

Elections to be conducted to replace the appointed caretaker councils in local government executives.

Fostering and ensuring democratic governance at the local government level in the 36 states of the federation

Monthly disbursement of the federal allocation directly to respective local government from the federation account, and

Restraining the state governors access to collecting funds meant for local government council, when they refuse to ensure that local government councils are democratically emplaced.

The above decisions further highlight the need for the entrenchment of the theory of localism in Nigeria. From the localist perspective, it is apparent and understood that the development of a state can hardly be top-bottom approach, rather otherwise in this context. The theory also presupposes that, problems or challenges associated with local government have local peculiarities to the grassroots.

### **Local Troubles of Local Government in Nigeria**

Local Governments in Nigeria grapple with a deluge of local challenges, which tend to affect their operational efficiency, thereby debarring them from achieving the goals for which they are set up. The following are some of the local troubles that local governments face in Nigeria:

**Leadership Deficit:** One of the most intricate local troubles afflicting local government areas across states and geo-political zones remains leadership deficit. This does not imply leadership vacuum, but rather, it speaks to effectiveness and productivity of leaders. It explains a situation where an organization, community, locality or country lacks effective leadership, resulting in a lack of direction, vision and guidance (Van Hoozer, 2021) Okibe (2020:178) insists that:

Leadership in Local government administration in Nigeria is either generally engulfed in dilemma or, particularly suffused In controversies. While the rationales for creating local government has remained indisputable, especially in Nigeria, the issue of Leadership in the administration of the system is conceived as a Potent factor that vitiates the intended objectives for adopting the third tier of government.

The above submission further indicts the leadership of local government councils in Nigeria. It is enmeshed in political patronage, clientage and prebendalism (Kayode, 2021)

**Poor Revenue Base of Local Government:** With the exception of few economically viable states of federation with robust local channels, vast majority of local governments in the country, lack requisite revenue based to run effectively, as they heavily depend on monthly allocation for survival (Oladimeji, 2025) (Odo 2014:16) insists that

Though one of the criteria for creating local government is economic viability, most local governments created after the 1976 local government reforms in Nigeria have come to be solely dependent on their Monthly allocation from federation account to run their affairs.

This local trouble stifles local government productivity in terms of service delivery and actualization of the justification of the local government establishment (Okibe, 2020, Oladimeji, 2025)

**Communal Clashes:** The spate of communal and inter-communal clashes across local governments in Nigeria cannot be downplayed, as one of the local troubles in Nigeria. The prevalence of communal conflicts has grossly hindered rural development in Nigeria, and engendered endemic multi-dimensional problems at the grassroots or localities (Okpa, etal, 2023) In the view of Okeke etal (2020), inter communal conflict exists in almost all the geo-political zones in Nigeria, and this has sent many innocent citizens to their early graves and destroyed property, worth several billions amidst other dire consequences, including the phenomenon of internally displaced persons (IDP'S ). In recent months in Osun State, South West, Nigeria, crisis rocked Esa Oke, in Obokun Local Government over a chieftaincy dispute, four people died, and a score of others seriously wounded, as gun men stormed the ancient city, shooting sporadically, inflicting serious injuries on residents of the town (Vanguard, February 5, 2025). For decades, Ifon and Ilobu, two proximate towns in two distinct local government areas, have been at loggerheads over land. Same issues still rock Ife and Modakeke communities also in Osun state (Vanguard January 14, 2025)

**Neglect of Boundary Communities:** The remoteness of boundary communities from state capitals in Nigeria, tends to exacerbate the marginalization of these vulnerable communities According to Bamigbola (2024:22)

A critical look at the communities in rural areas across states in Nigeria, shows that those on border fringes with other states, are facing alienating infrastructural deficit. These border communities situated in respective local governments, often find themselves neglected and overlooked during the distribution of essential amenities the lack of adequate roads, reliable electricity and basic healthcare facilities are some of the major challenges the residents endure daily.

Residents of most border communities often lament that the only time they feel a sense of belonging from the three tiers of government, is during elections, when politicians and electoral officials remember there are a number of polling units in such communities, when elections are over, residents return to their squalor or squalidness and politicians to their impenetrable mansions until next elections (Adegbulu, 2021). This absence of governance in boundary communities is a local problem afflicting local government in Nigeria.

**Redundant Employment:** There have been reports from studies that local governments often employ workers their budgets and facilities cannot accommodate. The indiscriminate employment of party stalwarts to please party god fathers at the detriment of socio-economic development of the councils impedes appreciable service delivery at the grassroots (Odesanya, 2021). Many cronies are employed without the required qualifications and are not often allotted tasks to perform, order than receive undeserved wages (Hassan, 2020,)

**Corruption:** Corruption is endemic in the local government administration like other sectors in Nigeria (Oladimeji, 2025) As a matter of incontestable fact, corruption is etched and ossified in local governments in Nigeria and this goes beyond financial venality. It is perpetrated by a “mixture” of local government bureaucrats and the insidiously venal and thieving political office holders (Akinola, 2013, Oladimeji, 2025) According to Ode and Nkakamma (2017:104)

In Nigeria, most public officials misappropriate and embezzle funds and make illegal acts of converting or diverting public finds into private use. It is lucid that prebendalism is very much prevalent in the social and political fabrics of Nigeria. The extent of prebendalism’s stronghold on the Nigerian bureaucracy is such that, it prevents the nation from being able to birth the much needed developmental strides.

At the local government level, the prevalence of corrupt practices is damning. The level at which public financial resources are misappropriated and siphoned is worrisome. In the view of Ognonna (2000) corrupt practices in local government and elsewhere is illicit, unethical and exploitative. He further noted that in practical terms, political and bureaucratic corruption is habitually associated with acceptance of graft or bribe, it is more corrosive than that, it embodies fraud, nepotism favoritism and misappropriation of funds arising from occupying “Juicy” administrative and political positions (Ogbonna, 2000)

**Lack of Initiatives:** This implies the absence or inadequate self- motivated action or decision making. It involves falling to take steps or make a decision, even there is a clear need or opportunity. This antipathy towards birthing hampers local government from achieving the justifications for their existence (Oladimeji, 2025)

**Challenges of Democratization:** In a democracy, leadership succession is expected or assumed to follow some clear democratic process. Without doubt, the whole essence of democracy is theoretically and philosophically premised on representation and accountability culture, but in reality in the Nigerian context, local governments are mere appendages and stooges in the hands of state governments (Bashir, and Mohammed, 2012). The practice of appointing rather than conducting free, fair and credible elections is at variance with principles and practices of modern democracy.

## **Conclusion**

The systematic review of literature on grassroots governance in Nigeria paints a dismal picture, revealing a plethora of challenges that hinder effective governance and development at the local level. The prevailing leadership deficit, characterized by inept and self-serving leaders, sets the tone for a system that is more prone to mismanagement and corruption. Poor revenue

generation and allocation further exacerbate the problem, limiting the capacity of local governments to deliver basic services and drive development.

Communal clashes and neglect of boundary communities underscore the deep-seated issues of inequality and marginalization, which often lead to social unrest and instability. Redundant employment, often driven by patronage and nepotism, burdens local government resources, diverting funds away from critical development projects. Corruption, a cancer that eats away at the fabric of governance, remains a major obstacle to progress, siphoning resources meant for development.

The dearth of initiatives and innovative approaches to address local challenges is striking, with many local governments relying on traditional and often ineffective methods of governance. The challenges of democratization, including electoral malpractices and imposition of leaders, further undermine the legitimacy and effectiveness of local governments.

These myriad challenges, as revealed by the literature, stall the much-clamored-for development at the grassroots level. The consequences are evident: poor living standards, inadequate infrastructure, and a general sense of disillusionment among citizens. The disconnect between local governments and the people they serve is palpable, with many communities feeling abandoned and disenfranchised.

Addressing local government challenges in Nigeria requires a multifaceted approach. The country's local governments face numerous issues, including inadequate funding, corruption, and lack of autonomy. To tackle these problems, President Bola Tinubu has urged state governors to comply with the Supreme Court's ruling on local government autonomy, emphasizing that autonomy without funding is meaningless.

**Financial Autonomy:** Granting local governments financial autonomy is crucial. The

Supreme Court has ruled that local governments should receive their allocations directly from the Federation Account, bypassing state governments.

**Capacity Building:** Training local government officials in project management, data-driven decision-making, and digital finance systems can enhance their effectiveness.

**Transparency and Accountability:** Implementing robust accountability mechanisms, including regular audits and public disclosure of financial transactions, can help curb corruption.

**Community Engagement:** Encouraging citizen participation in local governance through town hall meetings and participatory budgeting can foster transparency and accountability.

**Infrastructure Development:** Prioritizing infrastructure development, such as roads, water, and sanitation, can improve living standards.

Implementing these solutions requires a concerted effort from government, civil society, and citizens. Strengthening local government autonomy is essential for promoting grassroots development and effective service delivery in Nigeria

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