

Decentralization and Local Governance in Nigeria: Enhancing Policy Responsiveness and Service Delivery Through Local Government Autonomy

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Abstract: The 1999 Constitution of Nigeria establishes Local Government Areas (LGAs) as the third tier of government, with direct responsibility for frontline services like primary healthcare, basic education, and sanitation. However, LGAs remain the weakest link in the federal system, constrained by overlapping functions with state ministries, fiscal dependence through state-managed Joint Accounts, insufficient administrative capacity, and irregular elections that erode local accountability. These structural issues have resulted in chronic service delivery failures across the country. This study evaluates how devolving genuine political, administrative, and fiscal power to LGAs can improve policy responsiveness and service delivery. Drawing on comparative evidence from Kenya's devolution and Brazil's participatory budgeting, the analysis is grounded in theoretical perspectives of agency theory, participatory democracy, and public choice. The findings indicate that LGAs are better positioned to address community needs when equipped with clear mandates, reliable funding, professional staff, digital tools, and robust accountability mechanisms. Nigerian examples, such as Kaduna's open budget portal and Lagos's waste management partnerships, demonstrate this transformative potential. The study concludes with a phased 36-60 month implementation roadmap, emphasizing that decentralization is not merely a technical exercise but a political economy challenge requiring broad-based coalitions for sustainable reform.

Keywords: Decentralization, Local Governance, Service Delivery, Nigeria, Policy Responsiveness, Intergovernmental Relations.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's federal architecture, meticulously structured across three tiers federal, state, and local was fundamentally designed to bridge the gap between the government and the governed, ensuring efficient and responsive service delivery.¹ As the tier closest to the people, the 774 constitutionally recognized Local Government Areas (LGAs) were entrusted with the critical mandate of providing essential services that define everyday life: primary healthcare, basic education, water and sanitation, local roads, and environmental management.² This institutional design promised a governance model that was

not only accessible but also acutely attuned to the diverse and localized needs of Africa's most populous nation.³

Yet, decades after the restoration of democratic rule, this promise remains largely unfulfilled. Instead of being vibrant hubs of grassroots development, Nigeria's LGAs are widely regarded as the weakest link in the federal chain, characterized by systemic failure and profound operational deficiencies.⁴ Citizens across the country continue to grapple with dilapidated health centres, overcrowded classrooms, chronic water shortages, and impassable local roads a stark testament to the breakdown in local governance.⁵ This disconnect between

constitutional intent and lived reality raises urgent questions about the structure of Nigerian federalism and the viability of its local governance institutions.⁶

The core of this problem lies in a pervasive centralization of power and resources at the state level, which has effectively stifled local autonomy.⁷ Despite their constitutional status, LGAs operate under the overwhelming shadow of state governments. Critical challenges include the routing of statutory federal allocations through state-controlled Joint Accounts, which creates fiscal uncertainty and dependency; persistent ambiguities in legal mandates that lead to debilitating overlaps with state ministries; a severe deficit in administrative and technical capacity; and the corrosive practice of replacing elected councils with appointed caretaker committees, which utterly erodes local political accountability.⁸ These structural constraints have reduced many LGAs to little more than administrative appendages of state governments, unable to function as effective agents of development.⁹

The consequences of this institutional failure are dire and disproportionately borne by the most vulnerable segments of society. The absence of functional LGAs exacerbates poverty, fuels social dissatisfaction, and undermines the legitimacy of the state itself.¹⁰ It is within this context of unmet potential and pressing need that this study is situated. This paper argues that a genuine devolution of power encompassing political, administrative, and fiscal authority to Local Government Areas is not merely an option but a necessity for enhancing policy responsiveness and improving service delivery in Nigeria.¹¹

This research contends that when LGAs are empowered with clear mandates, predictable funding, professional administration, and robust accountability mechanisms, they are uniquely positioned to leverage their proximity to the people to achieve more responsive and efficient outcomes.¹² The study draws on comparative insights from successful decentralization experiments, such as Kenya's county system, to illuminate a viable path forward for Nigeria.¹³ Furthermore, it analyzes the Nigerian experience through established theoretical lenses, including agency theory, which highlights the principal-agent dilemmas in local governance, and participatory democracy theory, which underscores the value of citizen engagement in decision-making processes.¹⁴

By examining the intricate relationships between decentralization, local governance, and service delivery, this study aims to move beyond diagnosis to offer a concrete and actionable roadmap for reform. It seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on democratic consolidation and sustainable development in Nigeria by demonstrating how strengthened LGAs can serve as legitimate engines of grassroots development, ultimately restoring public trust and ensuring that government, at its most fundamental level, delivers on its promises to the people.¹⁵

II. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

➤ *Concept of Decentralization*

Decentralization involves the transfer of power, funds, and decision-making from the central government to sub-national units.¹⁶ In Nigeria, the 1999 Constitution (as amended) explicitly recognizes LGAs as the third tier of government with specific responsibilities.¹⁷ However, the operational reality has been one of centralization rather than devolution. For instance, while LGAs are constitutionally mandated to oversee local roads and primary healthcare, state governments frequently interfere, creating conflicts and functional overlaps.¹⁸ Thus, decentralization in Nigeria remains both a constitutional principle and a continuous struggle for operational autonomy.

➤ *Concept of Local Governance*

Local governance extends beyond formal government structures to encompass the institutions, processes, and relationships through which communities are governed at the grassroots level.¹⁹ This includes traditional leaders, civil society organizations, and community-based groups. In many Nigerian communities, traditional rulers such as emirs and obas play significant roles in dispute resolution and mobilizing communal efforts, operating alongside and sometimes in lieu of formal LGA structures.²⁰ This creates a hybrid system of governance that blends statutory institutions with indigenous authority.

➤ *Models of Decentralization*

Political Decentralization is a model that entails empowering elected local councils. However, its potential is undermined by irregular elections and the pervasive use of caretaker committees appointed by state governors, as seen in states like Oyo and Imo.²¹ Responsive Local Government Authorities (LGAs) require integrated systems for feedback and performance tracking.⁶³ This should be achieved through publicly displayed service dashboards that present key performance indicators for sectors like health, education, WASH, and roads using simple visual tools such as scorecards and traffic-light systems. Additionally, accessible Grievance Redress Mechanisms (GRMs) including hotlines, USSD codes, WhatsApp, and complaint desks are essential for citizens to report service failures, with reports managed under time-bound Service Level Agreements. Finally, to ensure accountability, LGAs must publicly report on this feedback by publishing quarterly reports on grievances received and resolved, including broadcasting summaries on community radio.

➤ *Theoretical Perspectives*

Several theories provide a lens to analyze Nigeria's decentralization challenges. Agency Theory frames LGAs as agents of both the state and the citizens.²⁴ Weak accountability mechanisms often allow these agents to serve elite interests rather than the public good, such as when contracts for public works are awarded to politically connected firms without oversight.²⁵ Participatory Democracy Theory emphasizes citizen involvement in decision-making. Pilots in Cross River

State, where communities directly prioritize projects like boreholes or school repairs through participatory budgeting, exemplify this theory's potential.²⁶ Public Choice Theory posits that government actors pursue self-interest.²⁷ This is evident in how state governors resist reforms that would diminish their control over LGA resources and patronage networks.

➤ *Relationship Between Decentralization and Policy Administration*

Effective decentralization brings decision-making closer to the people, enabling more responsive and context-sensitive service delivery. An LGA in Anambra, for example, can better identify which feeder road requires urgent grading before the rainy season than a distant state or federal ministry.²⁸ However, this relationship is mediated by institutional realities. When decentralization is undermined by fiscal dependence, political interference, and administrative weakness, policy administration fails. Conversely, when paired with stable funding, clear mandates, capable staff, and citizen engagement, decentralization leads to improved outcomes, as demonstrated by successful waste management partnerships in Lagos and open budget reforms in Kaduna.²⁹

III. NIGERIA'S LOCAL GOVERNANCE ARCHITECTURE

➤ *Constitutional and Legal Foundations*

Nigeria's federal system comprises the federal government, 36 states, the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), and 774 LGAs. The 1999 Constitution recognizes LGAs as a distinct tier of government and outlines their functions in the Fourth Schedule, including primary healthcare, basic education, and local road maintenance.³⁰ However, the practical operation of LGAs is governed by laws enacted by state Houses of Assembly. This creates a fundamental tension between the constitutional ideal of local self-governance and the reality of state dominance, severely constraining LGA autonomy.³¹

The financial capacity of LGAs rests on three pillars, all of which are fraught with challenges.³² Statutory allocations from the Federation Account are constitutionally mandated for LGAs but are typically routed through State-Joint Local Government Accounts, where governors exercise significant discretion, leading to fiscal unpredictability.³³ Furthermore, Own-Source Revenues (OSR), which include revenues like market levies and tenement rates, remain underdeveloped due to inefficient collection systems and restrictive state policies.³⁴ Finally, program-specific transfers from federal programs in health and education provide additional funds, but these are often managed by federal or state agencies, with LGAs acting as implementing partners with little control. This financial structure renders LGAs fiscally dependent and unable to act as autonomous actors.

Regarding the accountability chain, the formal structure where accountability flows through elected officials to the public and is overseen by state assemblies and auditors-general

is broken in practice.³⁵ The substitution of elected councils with caretaker committees appointed by governors destroys local political accountability,³⁶ while a lack of staff professionalization and constant state-level interference cripple administrative capacity.³⁷ The result is an accountability system that is weak and largely ineffective.³⁷ Devolution enhances service delivery through several key mechanisms. Through proximity, LGAs can leverage their superior knowledge of local needs to identify and respond to issues like a broken borehole or an understaffed clinic more swiftly than higher levels of government.³⁸ This is reinforced by political accountability, where the closeness between elected officials and constituents makes poor performance such as unmet rubbish collection or unrepaired roads immediately visible and politically costly, thereby incentivizing responsiveness.³⁹ Furthermore, operational agility allows empowered LGAs to approve and execute small-scale projects faster than waiting for state-level bureaucracy, which is crucial for the timely maintenance of local infrastructure.⁴⁰ Finally, local decision-making fosters co-production, encouraging community ownership and prompting citizens to contribute resources and oversight, as seen with community development associations that support water point maintenance and school improvements.⁴¹ Evidence from programs like the State and Local Governance Reform (SLOGOR) confirms that coupling devolution with clear mandates and consistent funding leads to higher service coverage and satisfaction.⁴²

Despite their mandate, LGAs face severe structural constraints that impede effective service delivery. A primary constraint is role ambiguity, where overlapping functions with state ministries create confusion and duplication; for example, while LGAs are to run primary schools, state education boards control teacher hiring and salaries.⁴³ This is compounded by profound fiscal dependence, as LGAs' reliance on unpredictable statutory allocations and underdeveloped Own-Source Revenues leaves them without reliable funds to plan or execute budgets effectively.⁴⁴ Furthermore, significant administrative capacity gaps mean many LGAs lack qualified technical staff for essential functions like planning, procurement, and monitoring, which leads to poorly designed and executed projects.⁴⁵ The situation is further undermined by weak accountability mechanisms, characterized by irregular elections, opaque budgets, and ineffective audit enforcement, all of which foster a culture of impunity.⁴⁶ These issues are entrenched by a resistant political economy, where patronage networks and state-level resistance to ceding control over resources and contracts actively hinder genuine local autonomy.⁴⁷ Finally, these constraints are perpetuated by severe data deficiencies, where paper-based systems and a lack of performance metrics make it difficult to track service delivery or address citizen grievances effectively.⁴⁸

A comparative glance at Kenya's 2010 devolution model highlights Nigeria's shortcomings. Kenyan counties receive a guaranteed share of national revenue directly, have elected leadership with significant autonomy over HR and budgeting,

and are mandated to ensure citizen participation.⁴⁹ This has enabled more predictable investment in services, demonstrating

the transformative potential of clear mandates, direct funding, and strong accountability all of which are lacking in Nigeria.⁵⁰

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Local Governance: Nigeria's LGAs vs. Kenya's Counties

Dimension	Nigeria (LGAs)	Kenya (Counties)
Legal Status	Recognized in constitution, but powers constrained by state laws.	2010 Constitution guarantees devolution; counties are autonomous units of government.
Elected Leadership	Elections irregular; many LGAs run by state-appointed caretaker committees.	Governors and county assemblies directly elected every 5 years.
Fiscal Transfers	Funds from Federation Account routed through state-managed Joint Accounts.	Guaranteed minimum of 15% of national revenues transferred directly to counties.
Control over Revenues	Weak OSR base (market levies, fees) with state restrictions.	Counties can raise local taxes (property rates, user charges).
Administrative Autonomy	Limited HR autonomy; state ministries control key staff (teachers, health workers).	Substantial HR autonomy; counties recruit and manage staff for devolved functions.
Accountability Mechanisms	Oversight by state assemblies; weak enforcement and transparency.	Citizen participation mandated (public hearings, participatory budgeting, audits).

➤ *Policy and Legal Reform Options*

The first step to reform is unequivocally defining LGA mandates to eliminate overlaps with states through a precise functional assignment.⁵¹ This includes granting LGAs full responsibility for managing frontline primary healthcare facilities, including dispensaries and health posts, while states focus on specialist care, training, and setting standards. In basic education, LGAs should be empowered to manage school infrastructure, community engagement, and supplies, with states ensuring curriculum quality and standards. Furthermore, LGAs must be given sole authority over WASH and environmental sanitation, including rural water points and rubbish collection, as well as clear control over feeder and community roads, while states manage inter-local connections. This clarity of roles must be supported by publicly available Service Charters at each LGA and facility that outline performance standards such as the frequency of waste collection and clinic operating hours and provide clear channels for citizens to lodge grievances when standards are not met.⁵²

➤ *Strengthen Local Democratic Accountability*

Local legitimacy hinges on regular, credible elections and strong ethical standards. The pervasive use of unelected caretaker committees must end through legislation that mandates a fixed electoral cycle for LGAs and establishes minimum standards of transparency for State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs).⁵³ Furthermore, conflict-of-interest and asset disclosure rules for local officials must be strengthened and enforced by bodies like the Code of Conduct Bureau. Publishing contract awards and implementing e-procurement systems, as piloted in Kaduna and Lagos, can reduce opportunities for self-dealing and rebuild public trust.⁵⁴

A coherent reform package for strengthening local governance should integrate institutional, fiscal, and

governance measures into a unified framework.⁵⁵ This begins with instituting regular and credible elections by mandating a fixed four-year electoral cycle and limiting caretaker committees to a strict three-month interim period. Concurrently, fiscal transparency and autonomy must be established by remitting statutory allocations directly to LGA accounts, bypassing state Joint Accounts, and mandating the public publication of LGA budgets and expenditure data. To bolster integrity, systems must be implemented to enforce asset disclosure and conflict-of-interest regulations for local officials, alongside publishing all contract awards on public notice boards and online portals. Furthermore, direct citizen engagement should be required through the development and publication of Service Charters by all LGAs, the implementation of citizen report cards and grievance redress mechanisms (GRMs), and the scaling of participatory budgeting models. Finally, professionalization must be achieved by investing in training for LGA staff in planning, procurement, and digital management, granting LGAs greater HR autonomy to manage frontline staff, and linking a portion of funding to performance-based indicators in key sectors like health, education, and sanitation.

Robust oversight is critical to prevent leakages and build trust, which requires a multi-faceted approach.⁵⁶ This includes establishing independent audit units for LGAs that utilize risk-based methodologies and publicly release their reports to ensure accountability. Furthermore, implementing open contracting through e-procurement platforms is essential; these platforms should publish bids, awards, contracts, and payment records for all LGA projects, from borehole drilling to classroom construction. Finally, moving beyond a culture of secrecy to one of openness necessitates mandating that LGAs proactively disclose budgets, performance reports, and project information via public notice boards, SMS, and community radio.

IV. ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEMS FOR RESPONSIVE LGAS

➤ *Human Resources*

LGA effectiveness is hampered by a deficit of skilled personnel. Reforms must prioritize merit-based recruitment for technical cadres (engineers, public health officers, M&E specialists) and grant LGAs greater autonomy to hire and manage frontline staff like teachers and nurses within national qualification frameworks.⁵⁷ Continuous professional development through standardized training programs is essential to build capacity in planning, procurement, and digital administration.⁵⁸

➤ *Planning and Budgeting*

LGAs must transition from ad-hoc project selection to evidence-based, participatory planning. This involves developing annual LGA Development Plans through consultations with community organizations and ward

forums.⁵⁹ Budgeting should adopt program-based formats, linking expenditure to quantitative outcomes (e.g., "increase safe water access from 50% to 70% of households") rather than just listing projects, to enhance transparency and accountability.⁶⁰

➤ *Procurement and Contract Management*

As a corruption-prone area, LGA procurement needs stringent reform. Introducing standardized bidding documents and framework agreements for routine maintenance can reduce discretion.⁶¹ Performance should be tracked against clear Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) such as: Average days from advert to award, Number of bidders per tender, Share of contracts awarded through open competition, Cost savings compared to engineer's estimates, Percentage of contracts verified by the community. Publishing these metrics publicly allows for real-time monitoring by citizens and oversight bodies.⁶²

Table 2: LGA Procurement Performance Scorecard (Sample Q1 2025)

Procurement KPI	Target	Performance (Q1 2025)	Status
Average days from advert to award	< 30 days	45 days	X Behind target
Number of bidders per tender	> 4 bidders	2 bidders	X Below target
Share of open competitive procurement	> 70%	40%	Weak competition
Cost savings vs. estimate	> 10%	5%	Limited savings
Contracts verified by community	> 80%	50%	Low verification

Responsive Local Government Authorities (LGAs) require integrated systems for feedback and performance tracking, which are essential for demonstrating accountability.⁶³ This should be achieved through publicly accessible service dashboards that display key performance indicators for sectors such as health, education, WASH, and roads using simple visual tools like scorecards and traffic-light systems to indicate performance status.⁶⁴ Furthermore, accessible Grievance Redress Mechanisms (GRMs) including channels such as hotlines, USSD codes, WhatsApp, and complaint desks must be established to allow citizens to report service failures, with these reports managed under time-bound Service Level Agreements to ensure timely resolution.⁶⁵ Finally, to maintain transparency, LGAs should regularly publish quarterly reports detailing grievances received and resolved, while also broadcasting summaries through community radio to keep the public informed and demonstrate concrete action.⁶⁵

Table 3: Quarterly Grievance Redress Report (Hypothetical LGA, Q1 2025)

Service Area	Complaints Received	Resolved Within SLA	Pending cases	Resolution Rate
Primary Healthcare	120	95	25	79%
Basic Education	85	60	20	71%
Water & Sanitation	150	100	40	67%
Local Roads	60	40	15	67%
Waste Management	200	150	30	75%

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broadcasting summaries through community radio to keep the public informed and demonstrate concrete action.⁶⁵

➤ *Sector Deep Dives: Delivery Models and Metrics*

For Primary Healthcare (PHC), LGAs should be granted decision rights over facility management, community health worker deployment, and local outreach. The delivery model should involve the direct disbursement of quarterly facility funds tied to performance scores, alongside partnerships with private firms for specialized maintenance. Key performance indicators to track include the facility readiness index, drug stock-out days, skilled birth attendance rate, immunization completion, and CHW coverage.⁶⁵

In Basic Education, decision rights should empower LGAs to oversee teacher attendance, school maintenance, and to support school-based management committees. The delivery model entails disbursing school improvement funds directly to school accounts with community oversight, while utilizing ed-tech solutions and community scorecards. Critical KPIs for this sector are the teacher attendance rate, pupil-textbook ratio, classroom usability, and learning outcomes.⁶⁶ Concerning Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH), LGAs should lead on borehole siting, sanitation bylaws, and managing small-town water systems. This can be achieved through a delivery model that establishes service agreements with operators, uses GIS for asset mapping, and trains local water stewards. Performance should be measured by the functional water point rate, safe feces disposal coverage, and WASH compliance in schools and clinics.⁶⁷

For Solid Waste Management (SWM), LGAs require decision rights to set collection routes, regulate tariffs, and enforce anti-dumping laws. An effective delivery model involves partnering with micro-franchises of small waste haulers, implementing pay-as-you-throw schemes, and integrating recycling cooperatives. Key indicators for success include collection coverage, schedule adherence, complaint resolution rate, and landfill diversion via recycling.⁶⁸ Local Roads and Public Works, LGAs should be responsible for the regular maintenance of feeder roads and the implementation of climate-resilient designs. The recommended delivery model employs labour-based methods and multi-year framework contracts for grading and small bridges, while incorporating community verification of work quality. Essential KPIs to monitor are cost per km maintained, contract timeliness, and the number of passable days per year.⁶⁹ A consolidated LGA Service Delivery Dashboard should be implemented to track performance against these KPIs across all sectors, providing a clear, public-facing overview of LGA performance.⁷⁰

V. LOCAL GOVERNANCE TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION

➤ *Digital Transformation for Local Governance*

Digital tools have the potential to revolutionize LGA transparency, efficiency, and citizen engagement through a suite of key interventions.⁷¹ This transformation can be driven by the implementation of open budget portals, which are online platforms for publishing LGA budgets, expenditure reports, and project details in accessible, machine-readable formats. This push for transparency is complemented by e-procurement systems, digital platforms designed to manage the entire tender process from announcements to bid submissions and contract awards thereby reducing paperwork and opportunities for gatekeeping. Furthermore, the adoption of geo-enabled M&E, utilizing geo-tagged photos, satellite imagery, and drones, provides a powerful means to verify project completion and monitor the condition of assets such as road passability and waste collection routes. To ensure inclusive citizen engagement, civic tech systems—including mobile platforms like USSD and SMS alongside online tools are essential for facilitating participatory budgeting and gathering feedback, particularly in regions with low internet connectivity. Crucially, as LGAs undergo this digital transition, implementing basic but essential cybersecurity and data protection measures is fundamental to safeguarding operations and citizen information.

A successful local government reform must be implemented through a phased and adaptive roadmap over 36 to 60 months.⁷² The initial phase should focus on establishing foundational enablers and securing quick wins by aligning state laws with constitutional mandates, mandating budget and procurement transparency, and launching open budget portals alongside piloting grievance redress mechanisms and participatory budgeting in select LGAs. The subsequent phase must concentrate on building robust systems and capacity through the introduction of formula-based and performance-linked grants, training LGA staff on public financial management and procurement, digitizing procurement systems, implementing geo-enabled monitoring and evaluation, recruiting technical cadres, and publishing quarterly service dashboards. The final phase should prioritize scaling and sustaining reforms by expanding results-based sectoral grants, institutionalizing independent audits, scaling community scorecards, digitizing own-source revenue collection, and embedding participatory budgeting across all LGAs, with independent reviews conducted at years 3 and 5 to refine the model.

It is critical to recognize that such reform is not merely technical but deeply political, requiring astute stakeholder management and coalition-building.⁷³ Success depends on engaging key actors including state governors, state assemblies, LGA officials, traditional leaders, civil society organizations, public service unions, local businesses, and the media by offering mutual benefits, such as increased overall revenue for

governors and greater autonomy for LGAs, while leveraging CSOs and traditional leaders as watchdogs and legitimizing agents.⁷⁴

Furthermore, effective local governance must be inclusive, adopting gender-responsive budgeting to address the specific needs of women and girls, ensuring representation of women, youth, and persons with disabilities in ward committees and budgeting forums, providing accessible grievance channels in local languages and formats, and designing targeted service delivery interventions for marginalized groups.⁷⁵

VI. CONCLUSION

Nigeria's Local Government Areas have failed due to excessive state control and a lack of funding and accountability. This study concludes that the only solution is a major devolution of political, administrative, and financial power to the LGAs. This requires legal reform, building accountability, and learning from successful examples in Nigeria and Kenya. Ultimately, this transformation is a political challenge that needs a broad coalition of support to succeed. By empowering LGAs, Nigeria can turn them into effective engines for development and restore public trust.

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