

Original Research Article

Local Government Autonomy and Intergovernmental Relations: Implications for Grassroots Governance and Democratic Accountability in Nigeria

Neebani, Emmanuel Nubari Bariyoneton, Ph.D^{1*}

¹Dept. of Political Science, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt

*Corresponding Author

Neebani, Emmanuel Nubari Bariyoneton

Dept. of Political Science,
Ignatius Ajuru University of
Education, Rumuolumeni, Port
Harcourt

Article History

Received: 09.03.2026

Accepted: 04.05.2026

Published: 09.05.2026

Abstract: Local governments occupy a critical position in democratic governance as the level of government closest to the people. In decentralized political systems, they are expected to facilitate grassroots development, promote citizen participation, and enhance democratic accountability. However, in many developing countries, particularly Nigeria, local government autonomy remains constrained by institutional and political factors embedded within intergovernmental relations. This study examines the relationship between local government autonomy and intergovernmental relations and its implications for grassroots governance and democratic accountability in Nigeria. The paper adopts Democratic Governance Theory as its analytical framework and employs a qualitative research design based on secondary data sources, including scholarly publications, government documents, and policy reports. The study identifies key constitutional and institutional challenges that undermine local government autonomy, particularly the operation of the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA) and the dominance of state governments over local councils. Empirical insights from Rivers and Bayelsa States illustrate how fiscal dependence and political interference weaken grassroots governance despite substantial federal allocations. The findings reveal that although decentralization policies aim to strengthen local governance, weak institutional frameworks and limited fiscal autonomy hinder their effectiveness. The study concludes that strengthening local government autonomy through constitutional reforms, improved fiscal decentralization, and enhanced citizen participation is essential for improving grassroots governance and democratic accountability in Nigeria.

Keywords: Local Government Autonomy, Intergovernmental Relations, Grassroots Governance, Democratic Accountability, Decentralization.

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

INTRODUCTION

Local governments occupy a strategic position in democratic governance as the tier of government closest to the people. In both developed and developing political systems, they are entrusted with the responsibility of delivering essential public

services, promoting grassroots development, and facilitating citizen participation in governance processes. The relevance of local governments has increased globally due to the growing emphasis on decentralization as a mechanism for improving governance outcomes and strengthening democratic

Citation: Neebani, Emmanuel Nubari Bariyoneton (2026). Local Government Autonomy and Intergovernmental Relations: Implications for Grassroots Governance and Democratic Accountability in Nigeria. *Glob Acad J Humanit Soc Sci*; Vol-8, Iss-3 pp-51-63.

accountability (Olowu & Wunsch, 2019; Smoke, 2021). Decentralization, broadly defined, refers to the transfer of political, administrative, and fiscal authority from central governments to subordinate levels of government. It is premised on the assumption that local authorities are better positioned to understand and respond to the specific needs of their communities, thereby enhancing efficiency, equity, and responsiveness in service delivery (Faguet, 2018; World Bank, 2022). In practice, however, the success of decentralization depends significantly on the nature of intergovernmental relations, which determine how power, resources, and responsibilities are distributed among different tiers of government. Intergovernmental relations encompass the formal and informal interactions between federal, state, and local governments in a federal system. These interactions include fiscal transfers, administrative coordination, policy implementation, and political oversight. While cooperative intergovernmental relations can enhance policy coherence and national development, asymmetric power relations often result in dominance by higher tiers of government, thereby undermining the autonomy of local authorities (Arowolo, 2020; Ezeani, 2021).

In Nigeria, the federal structure constitutionally recognizes local governments as the third tier of government. The 1999 Constitution of Nigeria assigns local governments responsibilities such as primary education, primary healthcare, rural infrastructure, and local economic development. Despite this formal recognition, the operational reality reflects significant constraints on local government autonomy, particularly in fiscal and administrative domains. A major institutional mechanism shaping intergovernmental relations in Nigeria is the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA), established under Section 162(6) of the Constitution. This arrangement mandates that allocations from the federation account meant for local governments be channeled through state governments. Although intended to promote coordination and equitable distribution, the SJLGA has been widely criticized for facilitating state control over local government finances, often leading to fund diversion, delays, and reduced financial independence of local councils (Adeyemi, 2020; Ojo, 2022). Furthermore, political interference by state governments—manifested through the dissolution of elected local councils and replacement with caretaker committees—undermines democratic governance at the grassroots level. Such practices weaken institutional accountability, erode public trust, and limit the capacity of local governments to function as effective agents of development (Oni & Adebayo, 2021; CLEEN Foundation, 2023).

Empirical evidence from states such as Rivers and Bayelsa indicates that despite substantial federal allocations, local governments often struggle to deliver basic services due to fiscal dependence and administrative subordination. This paradox highlights the gap between constitutional provisions and practical realities in Nigeria's intergovernmental system. Given these challenges, this study interrogates the nexus between intergovernmental relations and local government autonomy, with a focus on how these dynamics shape grassroots governance and democratic accountability. By situating the analysis within Democratic Governance Theory, the study provides insights into the structural and institutional barriers limiting effective decentralization in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the constitutional recognition of local governments as a distinct tier of governance in Nigeria, their ability to function autonomously and effectively remains highly constrained. This contradiction between formal constitutional status and operational reality constitutes a major governance challenge that has persisted over time. One of the central problems is the nature of intergovernmental relations, which is characterized by vertical imbalance and state dominance. Although federalism ideally promotes power-sharing and institutional independence, in practice, state governments exercise significant control over local government administration. This is particularly evident in the management of local government finances through the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA). The lack of direct fiscal autonomy limits the capacity of local governments to plan and implement development projects independently, thereby undermining their responsiveness to local needs (Ojo, 2022; World Bank, 2022). In addition to fiscal constraints, political interference represents another critical challenge. The frequent dissolution of democratically elected local government councils and the appointment of caretaker committees by state governments weaken democratic structures at the grassroots level. This practice not only violates the principles of democratic governance but also disrupts continuity in policy implementation and reduces accountability to local populations (Ezeani, 2021; CLEEN Foundation, 2023). Moreover, administrative dependence further compounds the problem. Local governments often lack the institutional capacity and decision-making authority required to perform their constitutionally assigned functions. This results in poor service delivery, inadequate infrastructure development, and limited citizen engagement in governance processes. Consequently, grassroots governance remains weak, and the expected benefits of decentralization—such

as improved efficiency, participation, and accountability—are not fully realized.

Another dimension of the problem is the growing disconnect between citizens and local government institutions. When local governments are perceived as extensions of state governments rather than independent entities, public trust diminishes. This weakens mechanisms of democratic accountability, as citizens are less able to hold local officials responsible for governance outcomes (Arowolo, 2020; Oni & Adebayo, 2021). There is also a significant gap in the literature regarding the contemporary dynamics of intergovernmental relations and their practical implications for grassroots governance in Nigeria, particularly with recent reforms and political developments. Many existing studies focus on theoretical or historical perspectives without adequately addressing current realities and empirical evidence from specific states such as Rivers and Bayelsa.

Against this backdrop, the problem this study addresses is the persistent lack of effective local government autonomy in Nigeria, despite decentralization policies and constitutional provisions. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how intergovernmental relations influence local government autonomy, identify the institutional constraints limiting such autonomy, and assess the implications for grassroots governance and democratic accountability.

Research Questions

1. How do intergovernmental relations influence local government autonomy in Nigeria?
2. What institutional challenges limit local government autonomy?
3. How does local government autonomy affect grassroots governance and democratic accountability?

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this study are to:

1. Examine the nature of intergovernmental relations in Nigeria.
2. Analyze the extent of local government autonomy within Nigeria's federal system.
3. Assess the implications of local government autonomy for grassroots governance.
4. Evaluate the impact of intergovernmental relations on democratic accountability.

Conceptual Clarifications

1. Local Government Autonomy

Local government autonomy refers to the extent to which local authorities exercise independent decision-making powers, implement

policies, and manage resources within their constitutionally defined jurisdictions without undue interference from higher levels of government. It is a fundamental principle of decentralization and democratic governance, as it enables local institutions to respond effectively to the needs and preferences of their communities (Olowu & Wunsch, 2019; Smoke, 2021).

In Nigeria, local government autonomy is shaped by a complex interplay of constitutional provisions, political practices, and intergovernmental relations. The 1999 Constitution of Nigeria formally recognizes local governments as the third tier of government and assigns them specific responsibilities. However, the operational reality reveals significant constraints, particularly due to state government dominance and the institutional framework of fiscal federalism (Arowolo, 2020; Ojo, 2022).

Local government autonomy can be understood through three interrelated dimensions:

- **Political Autonomy:** This refers to the capacity of local governments to elect their leaders through democratic processes and to make binding policy decisions within their jurisdictions. In Nigeria, this dimension is often weakened by the frequent dissolution of elected councils and the appointment of caretaker committees by state governments, thereby undermining democratic legitimacy (Oni & Adebayo, 2021; CLEEN Foundation, 2023).
- **Fiscal Autonomy:** Fiscal independence entails the authority of local governments to generate revenue internally and to control the allocation and expenditure of financial resources. In Nigeria, this aspect is severely constrained by the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA), which centralizes local government funds under state control. This arrangement limits financial discretion and weakens accountability (World Bank, 2022; Adeyemi, 2020).
- **Administrative Autonomy:** This dimension involves control over personnel management, organizational structures, and internal administrative processes. In practice, local governments in Nigeria often depend on state governments for policy decisions and administrative approvals, thereby reducing efficiency and responsiveness (Ezeani, 2021).

Overall, the erosion of these dimensions of autonomy has significant implications for governance outcomes. When local governments lack

independence, their capacity to deliver services, implement development projects, and uphold democratic accountability is severely compromised.

2. Intergovernmental Relations

Intergovernmental relations (IGR) refer to the network of formal and informal interactions, cooperation, and coordination mechanisms among different levels of government within a political system. In federal systems, IGR plays a crucial role in ensuring policy coherence, resource distribution, and administrative coordination (Arowolo, 2020; Faguet, 2018).

In Nigeria, intergovernmental relations are constitutionally structured but practically characterized by asymmetry and hierarchical dominance. The federal government allocates revenues to states and local governments through a centrally managed revenue-sharing formula, while state governments exercise significant oversight over local councils (Ojo, 2022).

The key features of intergovernmental relations in Nigeria include:

- **Fiscal Interactions:** These involve the allocation and distribution of revenues from the federation account. Although local governments are entitled to a share of national revenue, the SJLGA system allows state governments to mediate and often control these funds, thereby creating fiscal dependency (World Bank, 2022).
- **Administrative Oversight:** State governments maintain supervisory authority over local governments, including approval of budgets, monitoring of projects, and control over personnel matters. While intended to ensure accountability, this oversight often translates into excessive interference (Ezeani, 2021).
- **Policy Coordination Challenges:** Effective governance requires coordination among different tiers of government. However, conflicting interests, unclear responsibilities, and weak institutional frameworks often hinder cooperation and lead to policy inconsistencies (Smoke, 2021).

These dynamics indicate that intergovernmental relations in Nigeria are not purely collaborative but are often characterized by power imbalances that undermine local government autonomy and effectiveness.

3. Grassroots Governance

Grassroots governance refers to governance processes that emphasize the active involvement of citizens, community-based organizations, and local

stakeholders in decision-making, policy formulation, and development initiatives at the local level. It is a core component of participatory democracy and is essential for ensuring that governance is responsive, inclusive, and accountable (Olowu & Wunsch, 2019; World Bank, 2022).

Key elements of grassroots governance include:

- **Citizen Participation:** The involvement of citizens in local decision-making processes, including town hall meetings, public consultations, and community forums. Participation enhances legitimacy and ensures that policies reflect local needs (Faguet, 2018).
- **Community-Driven Development:** Development initiatives that are initiated, planned, and implemented with the direct involvement of local communities. Such approaches have been shown to improve project sustainability and effectiveness.
- **Responsive Service Delivery:** The ability of local governments to provide timely and efficient public services such as healthcare, education, water supply, and sanitation.

In Nigeria, the effectiveness of grassroots governance is significantly constrained by limited local government autonomy, weak institutional capacity, and low levels of civic engagement. Political interference and fiscal dependence reduce the ability of local governments to act as genuine agents of community development (Oni & Adebayo, 2021; CLEEN Foundation, 2023).

Furthermore, socio-economic challenges such as poverty, illiteracy, and limited access to information also hinder citizen participation, thereby weakening the foundations of grassroots governance.

4. Democratic Accountability

Democratic accountability refers to the processes and mechanisms through which public officials are held responsible for their actions and decisions by the citizens. It is a fundamental principle of democratic governance and ensures that power is exercised in the public interest (Schedler, 2019; Lindberg, 2020).

Democratic accountability operates through several mechanisms:

- **Elections:** Regular, free, and fair elections enable citizens to choose their representatives and hold them accountable for their performance.
- **Transparency:** Access to information about government activities allows citizens to monitor public officials and demand accountability.

- **Institutional Oversight:** Institutions such as anti-corruption agencies, audit bodies, and legislative committees play a critical role in ensuring accountability.
- **Civil Society Participation:** non-governmental organizations, media, and community groups contribute to accountability by advocating for transparency and exposing misconduct.

In Nigeria, democratic accountability at the local government level is weakened by several factors, including political interference, weak institutions, and limited autonomy. When local governments are not financially or administratively independent, they tend to be more accountable to state governments than to the citizens they are meant to serve (Arowolo, 2020; Ojo, 2022).

Additionally, the absence of regular local government elections in some states and the prevalence of appointed caretaker committees undermine democratic representation and reduce citizens' ability to hold local officials accountable (CLEEN Foundation, 2023).

The weakening of democratic accountability has broader implications for governance, including increased corruption, poor service delivery, and declining public trust in government institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Decentralization and Local Government Autonomy

The theoretical foundation of local government autonomy is anchored in the broader concept of decentralization, which has long been promoted as a strategy for improving governance outcomes. Classical fiscal federalism theory, as advanced by Oates (1972), posits that decentralized systems enhance efficiency by aligning public service provision with the preferences of local populations. This argument is further reinforced by later empirical studies which demonstrate that decentralization can lead to improved service delivery, increased responsiveness, and enhanced accountability when local governments possess real decision-making authority (Faguet, 2018; Smoke, 2021).

Contemporary literature, however, emphasizes that decentralization is not a uniform or automatic solution to governance challenges. Its success depends on the degree to which political, fiscal, and administrative powers are genuinely devolved to lower levels of government. Scholars distinguish between deconcentration, delegation, and devolution, noting that only the latter ensures meaningful autonomy and democratic participation (World Bank, 2022). Where decentralization is

partial or poorly implemented, it may fail to deliver expected benefits and can even reinforce existing inequalities and inefficiencies. In Nigeria, decentralization has largely taken the form of administrative deconcentration rather than full political or fiscal devolution. Although the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria formally recognizes local governments as the third tier of governance, the practical realities reveal significant constraints on their autonomy. Scholars argue that state governments exercise pervasive control over local councils, particularly in areas of finance, personnel management, and policy direction (Arowolo, 2020; Ojo, 2022).

This limited autonomy undermines the capacity of local governments to function as independent development actors. Without sufficient fiscal independence or decision-making authority, local governments are unable to design and implement policies tailored to local needs. Consequently, the potential of decentralization to enhance grassroots development and democratic governance remains largely unrealized. Recent studies further suggest that the politicization of local government administration exacerbates these challenges, as local institutions are often subordinated to state-level political interests rather than community priorities (Oni & Adebayo, 2021; CLEEN Foundation, 2023).

Intergovernmental Relations and Power Dynamics

Intergovernmental relations (IGR) constitute a critical dimension of federal governance, shaping how authority, responsibilities, and resources are distributed across different tiers of government. In theory, IGR frameworks are designed to promote cooperation, coordination, and shared responsibility in policy formulation and implementation. However, the effectiveness of these arrangements depends on the balance of power among the tiers and the strength of institutional mechanisms that regulate their interactions (Faguet, 2018; Smoke, 2021).

In Nigeria, intergovernmental relations are marked by significant vertical imbalances, with state governments occupying a dominant position relative to local governments. Fiscal relations, in particular, illustrate this imbalance. The State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA), established under the constitution, requires that federal allocations to local governments be channeled through state governments. While intended to ensure coordinated development, this arrangement has been widely criticized for enabling state governments to control, delay, or divert local government funds (World Bank, 2022; Adeyemi, 2020).

Beyond fiscal control, administrative oversight by state governments further constrains local autonomy. State authorities often exercise influence over budget approvals, project implementation, and personnel decisions within local councils. Although such oversight is justified on grounds of accountability, it frequently translates into excessive interference that undermines local initiative and innovation (Ezeani, 2021).

Another critical issue in Nigeria's IGR system is the lack of clearly defined functional boundaries among the three tiers of government. Overlapping responsibilities in sectors such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure create confusion and inefficiencies, often resulting in duplication of efforts or neglect of responsibilities (Ojo, 2022). These coordination challenges are compounded by weak institutional frameworks and limited mechanisms for conflict resolution.

Political interference represents perhaps the most significant distortion of intergovernmental relations in Nigeria. The frequent dissolution of elected local government councils and their replacement with caretaker committees undermines democratic governance and institutional stability. This practice not only erodes the legitimacy of local governments but also reinforces their dependence on state authorities (Oni & Adebayo, 2021). Consequently, rather than serving as a platform for cooperative governance, intergovernmental relations in Nigeria often function as instruments of hierarchical control.

Grassroots Governance and Service Delivery

Grassroots governance is a central objective of decentralization, premised on the idea that governance should be participatory, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of local communities. It emphasizes the active involvement of citizens, community-based organizations, and other stakeholders in decision-making processes, as well as the delivery of essential public services (Olowu & Wunsch, 2019; World Bank, 2022).

The literature suggests that when local governments are empowered with adequate autonomy and resources, they can serve as effective vehicles for promoting inclusive development and improving service delivery outcomes. Decentralized governance structures are believed to enhance accountability by bringing government closer to the people, thereby facilitating citizen engagement and oversight (Faguet, 2018).

However, empirical evidence from Nigeria reveals a significant gap between theory and practice. Local governments often lack the financial resources,

institutional capacity, and administrative independence required to perform their functions effectively. As a result, service delivery at the grassroots level remains inadequate, with many communities facing persistent challenges such as poor road infrastructure, inadequate healthcare facilities, and limited access to quality education (Ezeani, 2021; Ojo, 2022). Accordingly, Furthermore, citizen participation in local governance processes is generally low. Structural factors such as poverty, illiteracy, and limited access to information constrain meaningful engagement, while political factors such as distrust in government institutions discourage participation (CLEEN Foundation, 2023). In many cases, local governments operate in a top-down manner, with limited consultation or involvement of community members in decision-making processes. The weak performance of grassroots governance in Nigeria underscores the importance of strengthening local government autonomy and enhancing institutional capacity. Without these reforms, decentralization is unlikely to achieve its intended objectives of improving service delivery and promoting inclusive development.

Democratic Accountability in Local Governance

Democratic accountability is a fundamental principle of good governance, ensuring that public officials are answerable to citizens and that power is exercised in a transparent and responsible manner. In decentralized systems, local governments are expected to enhance accountability by providing opportunities for direct citizen engagement and oversight (Schedler, 2019; Lindberg, 2020). Accountability mechanisms typically include regular elections, transparent decision-making processes, institutional oversight, and active civil society participation. When these mechanisms function effectively, they promote good governance by reducing corruption, improving service delivery, and fostering public trust in government institutions.

In Nigeria, however, democratic accountability at the local government level remains weak and inconsistent. One major challenge is the irregular conduct of local government elections in many states, often replaced by appointed caretaker committees. This undermines the democratic legitimacy of local governments and limits citizens' ability to hold officials accountable (Arowolo, 2020; Oni & Adebayo, 2021). Fiscal dependency further complicates accountability relationships. Since local governments rely heavily on funds controlled by state governments, they tend to prioritize upward accountability to state authorities rather than downward accountability to citizens. This misalignment weakens the incentives for transparency and responsiveness in local governance (Ojo, 2022). Additionally, institutional mechanisms

for accountability are often weak or ineffective. Oversight bodies may lack the resources or independence required to enforce compliance, while civil society organizations and the media face constraints in monitoring government activities at the local level (CLEEN Foundation, 2023). These limitations contribute to governance challenges such as corruption, inefficiency, and poor service delivery. Overall, the literature indicates that strengthening democratic accountability in Nigeria requires not only institutional reforms but also greater autonomy for local governments and enhanced citizen participation. Without these changes, the promise of decentralization as a tool for improving governance and development outcomes is unlikely to be realized.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Fiscal Federalism Theory as its analytical framework. Fiscal federalism provides a theoretical basis for understanding how financial resources, expenditure responsibilities, and taxing powers should be allocated among different levels of government to ensure efficiency, equity, and accountability. Classical contributions by Oates (1972) argue that decentralized fiscal systems enhance allocative efficiency because subnational governments are better positioned to identify and respond to local preferences.

Contemporary scholars have expanded this perspective by emphasizing that the effectiveness of fiscal federalism depends not merely on the formal distribution of responsibilities but on the degree of fiscal autonomy enjoyed by lower tiers of government. Fiscal autonomy enables subnational governments to mobilize resources, plan independently, and implement development policies without undue interference (Faguet, 2018; Smoke, 2021). In this sense, fiscal federalism is closely linked to democratic governance, as it strengthens accountability by aligning revenue generation and expenditure decisions with citizen preferences (World Bank, 2022).

In Nigeria, however, the principles of fiscal federalism are only partially realized. Although the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria provides for a three-tier federal structure, fiscal relations are heavily centralized. One of the most critical institutional constraints is the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA), which channels federal allocations meant for local governments through state governments. This arrangement undermines the fiscal independence of local councils and contradicts the core principles of fiscal federalism (Ojo, 2022; Adeyemi, 2020).

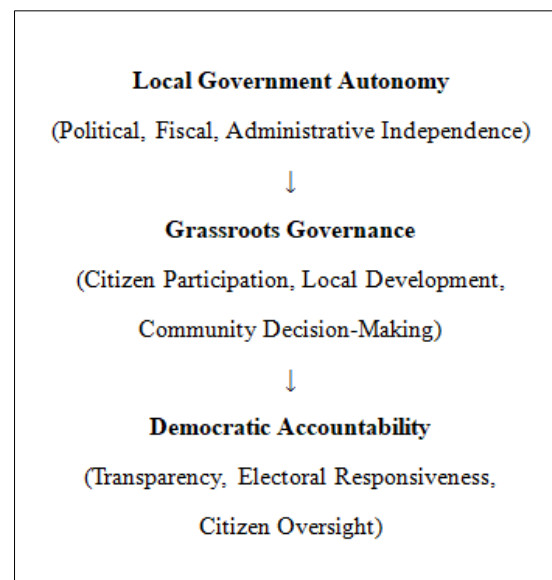
Furthermore, the limited capacity of local governments to generate internal revenue

exacerbates their fiscal dependence. As a result, local governments are unable to exercise meaningful control over their finances, thereby weakening their ability to deliver public services and promote grassroots development. Scholars argue that this fiscal dependency distorts accountability relationships, making local governments more responsive to state authorities than to local citizens (Arowolo, 2020; World Bank, 2022).

The relevance of Fiscal Federalism Theory to this study lies in its ability to explain the disconnect between constitutional provisions and practical realities in Nigeria's governance system. It highlights how centralized fiscal control and weak institutional arrangements undermine local government autonomy and limit the effectiveness of decentralization as a tool for grassroots governance and democratic accountability.

Conceptual Model of the Study

The conceptual model of this study proposes that Local Government Autonomy influences Grassroots Governance, which in turn strengthens Democratic Accountability. The relationship in this sense reflects the logic of democratic governance theory which posits that when local governments possess political, fiscal, and administrative independence, they are better positioned to engage citizens, deliver services, and remain accountable to the public. This assumption could be illustrated on a schema as below:



The model assumes that intergovernmental relations act as a moderating factor. When coordination mechanisms between federal, state, and local governments are cooperative rather than controlling, local autonomy is strengthened and grassroots governance becomes more effective.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, which is appropriate for examining complex governance issues such as intergovernmental relations and local government autonomy. Qualitative methods allow for in-depth analysis of institutional dynamics, policy frameworks, and contextual factors that shape governance outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study relies on secondary data sources, including academic literature, government publications, policy documents, reports from international organizations, and publications by civil society groups. These sources provide comprehensive insights into the structure and operation of intergovernmental relations, as well as the challenges facing local government administration in Nigeria.

Data were analyzed using content analysis, a systematic technique for identifying patterns, themes, and relationships within textual data. Through this method, relevant information was categorized according to key themes such as fiscal autonomy, political interference, service delivery, and accountability mechanisms. This approach enables the study to draw meaningful conclusions about the interaction between intergovernmental relations and local government autonomy. The use of qualitative secondary data is particularly suitable given the study's focus on theoretical and policy-oriented issues. However, it also implies certain limitations, including reliance on existing data and the absence of primary empirical evidence. Despite these limitations, the approach provides a robust foundation for understanding the structural and institutional challenges affecting local governance in Nigeria.

Dynamics of Intergovernmental Relations

Intergovernmental relations in Nigeria are characterized by complex interactions between federal, state, and local governments, particularly in the areas of fiscal relations, administrative control, and political oversight. Fiscal relations remain one of the most critical dimensions, as revenue allocation and transfers determine the capacity of local governments to function effectively. Although the constitutional framework provides for statutory allocations to local governments, the operation of the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA) enables state governments to exert significant control over these funds (Akindele, Olaopa & Ayoade, 2020; Suberu, 2021). This arrangement often leads to delays, deductions, and misallocation of resources, thereby limiting the financial autonomy of local governments and weakening their ability to deliver services.

Administrative control is another defining feature of intergovernmental relations in Nigeria. State governments exercise considerable influence over local government personnel through state-local government service commissions, which oversee recruitment, promotion, and discipline (Olaopa, 2021). While this is intended to ensure uniform standards and accountability, it often results in excessive interference, reducing the independence and efficiency of local administrations. Furthermore, political oversight, particularly in the conduct of local government elections, is heavily influenced by state governments. Elections are frequently criticized for lacking credibility and being manipulated to favor ruling parties at the state level (Oyediran, 2020). Overall, these dynamics reveal a pattern of state dominance over local governments, particularly in financial and administrative matters. This dominance undermines genuine autonomy and weakens service delivery at the grassroots level, thereby limiting the effectiveness of local governance (Akinyemi, 2022; Olowu & Wunsch, 2019).

Autonomy, Coordination, and Control in Policy Implementation

Policy implementation within a federal system requires a delicate balance between autonomy, coordination, and control. Coordination among different levels of government is essential for ensuring policy consistency, avoiding duplication of functions, and promoting national development objectives (Agranoff, 2012; Faguet, 2014). In Nigeria, intergovernmental coordination is particularly important in sectors such as health, education, and infrastructure, where responsibilities are shared across tiers of government. However, while coordination is necessary, excessive control by higher levels of government often undermines the benefits of decentralization. State governments frequently impose directives on local governments, limiting their ability to adapt policies to local conditions and innovate in service delivery (Suberu, 2021). This over-centralization contradicts the principles of decentralization and reduces the responsiveness of local authorities to community needs. Additionally, overlapping mandates and unclear functional responsibilities among federal, state, and local governments create confusion and inefficiencies in policy implementation (Elaigwu, 2018). Such ambiguities often lead to duplication of efforts, resource wastage, and conflicts among government agencies. These challenges weaken accountability, as it becomes difficult to assign responsibility for policy outcomes. The study therefore argues for a shift towards cooperative federalism, where intergovernmental relations are based on partnership, mutual respect, and shared responsibilities rather than hierarchical control. This approach would enhance policy effectiveness and

improve governance outcomes (Olowu & Wunsch, 2019).

Implications for Grassroots Governance

The limited autonomy of local governments in Nigeria has significant implications for grassroots governance. When local authorities lack the financial and administrative independence to make decisions, their ability to engage communities and respond to local needs is severely constrained (Akindele *et al.*, 2020; Ayoade, 2019). This situation discourages citizen participation and weakens the foundation of bottom-up development, which is essential for sustainable governance. One major consequence of weak grassroots governance is the erosion of public trust in government institutions. When citizens perceive that local governments are ineffective or merely extensions of state authorities, they are less likely to participate in governance processes or support development initiatives (Olowu & Wunsch, 2019). This lack of trust undermines social cohesion and reduces the legitimacy of government actions. In addition, poor service delivery is a common outcome of limited local autonomy. Local governments are responsible for providing essential services such as primary healthcare, education, and sanitation, but their capacity to do so is often hindered by inadequate funding and excessive control from higher levels of government (Olaopa, 2021). As a result, many communities experience persistent developmental challenges. Furthermore, weak grassroots governance creates opportunities for elite capture, where political and economic elites dominate decision-making processes and divert resources for personal gain (Smoke, 2015). This not only exacerbates inequality but also undermines the principles of participatory governance and accountability.

Implications for Democratic Accountability

The dominance of higher levels of government in Nigeria's intergovernmental framework has profound implications for democratic accountability. When decision-making authority is concentrated at the state or federal level, citizens are unable to effectively hold local officials accountable for governance outcomes (Suberu, 2021; Akinyemi, 2022). This disconnect weakens the relationship between citizens and their representatives, which is central to democratic governance. One key implication is that elections at the local level lose their significance. When local officials have limited power and are heavily influenced by state governments, electoral outcomes do not necessarily translate into meaningful governance changes (Oyediran, 2020). This undermines the credibility of democratic processes and discourages political participation. Moreover, transparency declines in contexts where accountability mechanisms are weak.

When local governments are more accountable to state authorities than to citizens, there is less incentive to disclose information or justify decisions to the public (Olaopa, 2021). This lack of transparency creates an environment conducive to corruption and mismanagement. Conversely, genuine local government autonomy strengthens downward accountability, where officials are directly answerable to the people they serve. This enhances transparency, promotes citizen engagement, and improves governance outcomes (Faguet & Pöschl, 2018). Therefore, strengthening local autonomy is essential for deepening democratic accountability in Nigeria.

Empirical Analysis: FAAC Allocations and Local Governance (2019–2024)

A key factor affecting local government autonomy in Nigeria is the distribution of revenue through the Federation Account Allocation Committee (FAAC). FAAC distributes revenue derived from oil exports, taxes, and other federally collected revenues among the federal, state, and local governments in accordance with constitutional provisions (Central Bank of Nigeria [CBN], 2024; National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2024).

Recent data indicate a significant increase in federal allocations in recent years. Total FAAC revenue rose from ₦9.18 trillion in 2022 to ₦10.9 trillion in 2023 and ₦15.26 trillion in 2024, with local governments receiving approximately ₦3.77 trillion in 2024 (Office of the Accountant-General of the Federation [OAGF], 2024; BudgIT, 2024).

FAAC Allocations to Selected States (2024)

State	FAAC Allocation (₦ Billion)
Rivers	349.9
Bayelsa	200+
Lagos	531.1
Delta	450.4

These figures show that oil-producing states such as Rivers and Bayelsa receive some of the highest allocations in the country due to the 13% derivation principle embedded in Nigeria's fiscal federalism (Revenue Mobilisation Allocation and Fiscal Commission [RMAFC], 2023; NBS, 2024).

In the first half of 2024 alone, Rivers State received about ₦197.23 billion while Bayelsa received ₦157.73 billion from FAAC (OAGF, 2024).

At the local government level, allocations are distributed among the 774 local councils across Nigeria. For example, in July 2024:

- Rivers State's 23 local governments received approximately ₦12.37 billion collectively (FAAC Communiqué, July 2024).

- Bayelsa State's 8 local governments received approximately ₦3.66 billion (FAAC Communiqué, July 2024).

These allocations are intended to support grassroots development projects such as rural infrastructure, healthcare services, sanitation programs, and local economic initiatives (World Bank, 2022; UNDP, 2023). However, empirical studies indicate that many local governments do not directly control these funds due to the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA) system. Instead, state governments often determine the final distribution of resources to local councils, thereby weakening fiscal autonomy (Ojo, 2022; Adeyemi, 2020; Arowolo, 2020).

Case Discussion: Rivers and Bayelsa States Rivers State

Rivers State is one of Nigeria's largest oil-producing states and consistently ranks among the top recipients of federal revenue allocations. In 2024, it was among the three highest recipients of FAAC allocations nationally (BudGIT, 2024; OAGF, 2024).

Despite the availability of substantial resources, studies show that local governments in Rivers State remain heavily dependent on the state government for financial disbursement and project execution (Oni & Adebayo, 2021; CLEEN Foundation, 2023). Development projects at the grassroots level often require approval or administrative backing from state authorities, limiting the autonomy of local councils.

In addition, political dynamics within the state have influenced local government administration, particularly through the frequent use of caretaker committees instead of democratically elected councils. This practice undermines democratic legitimacy and weakens accountability structures at the local level (Akinyemi, 2022; Suberu, 2021).

Bayelsa State

Bayelsa State presents a similar pattern. Although it has only eight local government areas, the state receives substantial federal allocations due to its oil production status and derivation entitlements (RMAFC, 2023).

However, the capacity of local governments to independently implement development programs remains limited. Many local government councils in Bayelsa rely heavily on state government transfers for project funding and administrative approval (Ojo, 2022; World Bank, 2022).

Consequently, the effectiveness of grassroots governance in the state is largely shaped by the broader political and fiscal environment, rather than by autonomous local decision-making processes. This dependence undermines participatory governance and weakens service delivery at the community level (Olowu & Wunsch, 2019; UNDP, 2023).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study strongly reinforce the central propositions of Fiscal Federalism Theory, particularly its emphasis on decentralization and local autonomy as key drivers of efficiency, responsiveness, and improved governance outcomes (Oates, 1972; Faguet, 2014). Evidence from the Nigerian context suggests that where local governments possess a reasonable degree of autonomy, they are better positioned to respond to community needs, deliver essential services, and promote participatory governance. This aligns with the theoretical expectation that subnational governments, being closer to the people, have better information about local preferences and are therefore more capable of allocating resources efficiently.

However, the study also reveals a significant disconnect between the theoretical ideals of Fiscal Federalism and the practical realities of governance in Nigeria. While the theory assumes a rational and cooperative distribution of powers and resources across levels of government, the Nigerian experience is characterized by political interference, institutional weaknesses, and persistent power struggles among tiers of government (Suberu, 2021). These challenges undermine the effectiveness of decentralization and constrain the capacity of local governments to function as truly autonomous entities.

A critical dimension of this disconnect is rooted in the constitutional and institutional framework governing local government administration. The 1999 Constitution (as amended) formally recognizes local governments as the third tier of government and assigns them key responsibilities under the Fourth Schedule, including primary education, primary healthcare, sanitation, and rural infrastructure. Section 7(1) guarantees the existence of democratically elected local government councils, suggesting a commitment to grassroots democracy. However, the same provision empowers state governments to legislate on the structure and functions of local governments, thereby creating a structural contradiction. In practice, this dual arrangement has enabled state governments to exercise considerable control over local councils, limiting their political and administrative independence.

Fiscal relations further illustrate this challenge. The establishment of the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA) under Section 162(6) has significantly constrained the financial autonomy of local governments. Although intended to facilitate coordination and equitable distribution of resources, the joint account system has, in practice, enabled state governments to control and, in some cases, divert funds meant for local governments. This often results in partial disbursement of allocations and inadequate funding for grassroots development projects, thereby weakening service delivery and undermining the objectives of decentralization (Akindele, Olaopa & Ayoade, 2020).

Recent judicial developments, particularly the 2024 Supreme Court ruling affirming the financial autonomy of local governments and mandating direct allocation of funds, represent an important step toward strengthening local governance. The ruling also prohibits the dissolution of democratically elected local councils by state governments. Nonetheless, implementation challenges persist due to entrenched administrative practices and existing constitutional ambiguities, especially the continued operation of the joint account system. This underscores the broader finding that constitutional recognition alone is insufficient to guarantee genuine autonomy; rather, political will and institutional reforms are crucial.

Empirical evidence from Rivers and Bayelsa States further illustrates the practical implications of weak local government autonomy. In Rivers State, local governments have historically experienced significant political interference, particularly in budgetary decisions, project implementation, and leadership selection. The recurrent use of caretaker committees instead of elected councils has weakened democratic accountability, as local officials become more accountable to state authorities than to the citizens or the people. Similarly, in Bayelsa State, local governments face financial dependence on state governments despite receiving statutory allocations from the Federation Account Allocation Committee (FAAC). The operation of the joint account system has limited direct access to funds, thereby constraining the implementation of development projects such as rural infrastructure, sanitation, and local economic initiatives. In both states, local governments often function more as administrative units focused on salary disbursement rather than as active agents of development. These findings highlight the broader implications of intergovernmental relations for grassroots governance and democratic accountability. The dominance of state governments over local authorities contradicts the principles of decentralization and weakens the link between citizens and their representatives. Consequently,

citizen participation is reduced, service delivery is compromised, and opportunities for elite capture increase. This situation reinforces upward accountability to state authorities rather than downward accountability to the, thereby undermining democratic governance at the grassroots level.

Key Findings

The analysis of existing literature and policy documents reveals several critical findings:

- **Limited Fiscal Autonomy of Local Governments:** Local governments in Nigeria lack meaningful fiscal independence due to the operation of the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA). This system enables state governments to control the allocation and utilization of funds meant for local councils, thereby restricting their financial discretion and weakening service delivery capacity (Ojo, 2022; World Bank, 2022).
- **Excessive Administrative and Political Control by State Governments:** State governments exert significant influence over local government administration, including budget approvals, personnel decisions, and policy implementation. The frequent dissolution of elected councils and the appointment of caretaker committees further undermine political autonomy and democratic governance at the grassroots level (Oni & Adebayo, 2021; CLEEN Foundation, 2023).
- **Weak Grassroots Governance and Service Delivery:** The combined effect of fiscal dependence and administrative control limits the ability of local governments to deliver essential services effectively. Many local communities continue to experience poor infrastructure, inadequate healthcare, and limited access to education. In addition, low levels of citizen participation reduce the responsiveness of local governments to community needs (Ezeani, 2021; Olowu & Wunsch, 2019).
- **Undermining of Democratic Accountability:** Democratic accountability is weakened by irregular local government elections, lack of transparency, and limited institutional oversight. Fiscal dependency on state governments further distorts accountability relationships, making local governments more answerable to state authorities than to citizens (Arowolo, 2020; Lindberg, 2020).

These findings collectively indicate that the challenges facing local government autonomy in

Nigeria are deeply rooted in the structure and operation of intergovernmental relations.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between local government autonomy and intergovernmental relations in Nigeria, highlighting their implications for grassroots governance and democratic accountability. The analysis demonstrates that, although the 1999 Constitution formally recognizes local governments as the third tier of government, political interference and institutional constraints have significantly limited their autonomy. Key structural barriers include the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA) and the extensive authority of state governments over local administration, which restrict financial independence, constrain administrative decision-making, and undermine effective service delivery. These challenges are particularly evident in states such as Rivers and Bayelsa, where local councils often operate with minimal capacity to implement development initiatives or respond to community needs.

The study also emphasizes that local government autonomy is essential for responsive governance. When councils possess political, fiscal, and administrative independence, they can better engage citizens, implement development projects, and promote participatory governance. However, in Nigeria, intergovernmental relations—frequently dominated by state governments—have limited these outcomes. Excessive control over finances, personnel, and local elections constrains innovation, reduces transparency, and weakens downward accountability to citizens.

Recent judicial developments, especially the Supreme Court ruling affirming local government financial autonomy, represent an important step toward addressing these challenges. Nonetheless, sustainable reform requires more than judicial intervention; it necessitates constitutional amendments, institutional restructuring, and strengthened accountability mechanisms to ensure genuine autonomy.

Ultimately, effective grassroots governance in Nigeria depends on achieving a balance between local autonomy, intergovernmental coordination, and democratic accountability. Strengthening local government institutions, ensuring predictable funding, promoting citizen participation, and fostering cooperative federalism will enhance service delivery, deepen democratic practices, and contribute to sustainable national development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the foregoing analysis, which reveals persistent constraints on local government autonomy arising from the structure of intergovernmental relations in Nigeria, there is a compelling need for comprehensive and institutional reforms. The findings demonstrate that constitutional ambiguities, fiscal centralization, and political interference have collectively weakened grassroots governance and democratic accountability. Addressing these challenges requires deliberate policy actions aimed at restructuring the legal, fiscal, and administrative frameworks that govern local government operations.

Furthermore, strengthening local government autonomy is not merely a constitutional or administrative issue; it is a fundamental requirement for achieving effective service delivery, inclusive development, and citizen-driven governance. Reforms must therefore focus on enhancing fiscal independence, promoting democratic practices at the local level, and establishing clear and cooperative intergovernmental relationships. Without such reforms, the objectives of decentralization will remain largely unattained. Against this backdrop, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Amend constitutional provisions to guarantee local government autonomy.
2. Reform or abolish the State Joint Local Government Account.
3. Clarify roles among federal, state, and local governments.
4. Promote citizen participation mechanisms.
5. Establish independent oversight institutions.

REFERENCES

- Olowu, D., & Wunsch, J. (2019). *Local governance in Africa: The challenges of democratic decentralization*. Cambridge University Press.
- Oni, S., & Adebayo, F. (2021). Democratic governance and local government performance in Nigeria. *Journal of Political Studies*, 15(4), 233–250.
- Adeyemi, O. (2020). Fiscal federalism and local government autonomy in Nigeria. *Journal of Public Administration and Policy Research*, 12(3), 45–58.
- Adeyemi, O. O. (2020). *Local government administration in Nigeria: A pragmatic approach*. Concept Publications.
- Akinyemi, O. (2022). Political interference and local government administration in Nigeria. *African Governance Review*, 8(1), 77–91.
- Arowolo, D. (2020). Intergovernmental relations and local government autonomy in Nigeria.

- International Journal of Public Administration*, 43(6), 512–525.
- Arowolo, D. (2020). Intergovernmental relations in Nigeria: An assessment of fiscal federalism and local government autonomy. *African Journal of Public Administration*, 12(2), 45–60
 - BudgIT. (2024). *State of states report 2024: Fiscal analysis of Nigerian states*. BudgIT Foundation.
 - Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN). (2024). *Annual statistical bulletin*. CBN.
 - CLEEN Foundation (2023). *Local governance and accountability in Nigeria: Policy report*. CLEEN Foundation.
 - CLEEN Foundation. (2023). *Democracy and governance report on local government elections in Nigeria*. Lagos: CLEEN Foundation.
 - Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
 - Ezeani, E. O. (2021). *Local government administration in Nigeria: Issues and challenges*. Zik-Chuks Publishers.
 - FAAC Communiqué. (July 2024). Federation Account Allocation Committee monthly distribution report. Abuja: Office of the Accountant-General of the Federation.
 - Faguet, J. P. (2018). Decentralization and governance. *World Development*, 53, 2–13
 - Lindberg, S. I. (2020). *Democracy and elections in Africa*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
 - National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). (2024). *Nigerian public finance statistics report*. NBS.
 - Oates, W. E. (1972). *Fiscal federalism*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
 - Office of the Accountant-General of the Federation (OAGF). (2024). *FAAC monthly disbursement reports (2022–2024)*. Federal Government of Nigeria.
 - Ojo, E. (2022). State-local fiscal relations and local government autonomy in Nigeria. *Journal of African Public Policy*, 10(2), 101–118.
 - Ojo, J. S. (2022). Fiscal federalism and local government autonomy in Nigeria. *Journal of African Governance*, 14(1), 78–95.
 - Olowu, D., & Wunsch, J. S. (2019). *Local governance in Africa: The challenges of democratic decentralization*. Lynne Rienner.
 - Oni, S., & Adebayo, P. (2021). Political interference and local government performance in Nigeria. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 39(3), 421–438.
 - Revenue Mobilisation Allocation and Fiscal Commission (RMAFC). (2023). *Annual report on revenue allocation in Nigeria*. RMAFC.
 - Schedler, A. (2019). The concept of democratic accountability. In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Accountability*. Oxford University Press.
 - Smoke, P. (2021). Rethinking decentralization: Assessing challenges to a popular public sector reform. *Public Administration and Development*, 41(1), 1–12.
 - Suberu, R. (2021). Federalism and political restructuring in Nigeria. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 51(3), 1–24.
 - UNDP. (2023). *Human development report: Local governance and development in Nigeria*. New York: United Nations Development Programme.
 - World Bank (2022). *Decentralization and subnational service delivery in Africa*. World Bank.
 - World Bank. (2022). *Decentralization and service delivery in developing countries: Nigeria country report*. World Bank.