

# DECENTRALIZATION AND EFFECTIVENESS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC POLICY IN NIGERIA

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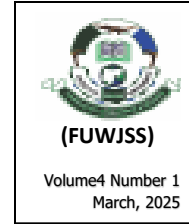
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## Abstract

This study examines the impact of decentralization on local governance and public policy in Nigeria, focusing on its role in enhancing local autonomy. It investigates the constitutional, fiscal, administrative, and political dimensions of decentralization to identify key factors influencing the effectiveness of local governance. Using secondary data sources, this study synthesizes scholarly articles to examine the impact of decentralization on local governance and public policy in Nigeria. The method provides an in-depth understanding of how decentralization affects local autonomy, governance effectiveness, and public policy, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities it presents. Findings indicate that decentralization plays a crucial role in improving local governance and promoting effective public policy in Nigeria. The study highlights the need for both immediate and long-term reforms to enhance local autonomy, strengthen governance structures, and reduce the dependence on federal allocations. By addressing the challenges of political interference, corruption, and weak institutional capacity, the study offers policy recommendations to ensure the successful implementation of decentralization and improve service delivery, accountability, and local governance outcomes. The study concludes that strengthening local governments through autonomy, fiscal decentralization, and enhanced capacity will significantly improve the delivery of public services and policy outcomes.

**Keywords:** Decentralization, local government, public policy, fiscal autonomy, Nigeria

## Introduction

Decentralization has emerged as a pivotal governance reform designed to enhance political participation, accountability, and service delivery at the

grassroots level. Decentralization involves the transfer of power, authority, and resources from central governments to subnational units, including states, regions, and local governments (Rondinelli 2023). This process is often implemented with the aim of fostering democratic governance, improving efficiency in public service delivery, and promoting local autonomy. However, the degree to which decentralization achieves these objectives varies significantly across different contexts, shaped by political, economic, and institutional factors.

In Nigeria, decentralization has been a key policy mechanism employed to strengthen local governance, enhance public service delivery, and encourage democratic engagement (Agagu, 2004). The country's federal structure inherently provides for the delegation of responsibilities to lower tiers of government, with the local government system playing a crucial role in governance. However, the implementation of decentralization in Nigeria has been fraught with challenges, raising questions about its effectiveness in achieving its intended goals. Issues such as weak institutional capacity, corruption, political interference, and inadequate fiscal autonomy have impeded the success of decentralization efforts (Arowolo, 2010). These constraints highlight the complexity of governance at the subnational level and the persistent struggles to establish a truly decentralized system that empowers local governments.

The concept of decentralization in Nigeria gained prominence following the 1976 Local Government Reforms, which sought to strengthen local governance by granting greater autonomy to local governments (Olowu, 2020). These reforms introduced a uniform local government system across the country and aimed to promote participatory governance by involving citizens more directly in decision-making processes. Despite these efforts, the effectiveness of local governments has been significantly hindered by political and bureaucratic challenges. Weak institutional structures, excessive central government control, and political elite capture have continued to undermine the effectiveness of decentralized governance. These issues have led to inconsistencies in policy implementation, limited financial independence for local governments, and a general lack of accountability in service delivery.

Despite multiple policy interventions aimed at addressing these challenges, the impact of decentralization on local governance and public policy in Nigeria remains mixed. Some scholars argue that decentralization has facilitated local decision-making, enhanced accountability, and improved public service delivery (Ekpo & Ndebbio, 2018). Others contend that weak fiscal decentralization, over-reliance on federal allocations, and the failure to grant meaningful autonomy to local governments have significantly limited the benefits of decentralization (Ezeani, 2016). This

debate underscores the complexities surrounding the implementation of decentralization in Nigeria and the varying outcomes observed across different regions and administrative units.

A critical examination of Nigeria's decentralization experience reveals the interplay of political, economic, and administrative factors that shape its effectiveness. Political dynamics, including intergovernmental relations, party politics, and governance structures, have played a significant role in determining how decentralization policies are implemented. Economic constraints, particularly inadequate financial resources and revenue generation challenges at the local government level, have further restricted the ability of decentralized institutions to function effectively. Additionally, administrative inefficiencies, lack of capacity-building initiatives, and corruption have exacerbated governance challenges at the grassroots level.

Understanding the impact of decentralization on local governance and public policy in Nigeria requires a comprehensive analysis of how decentralization has been implemented, the extent to which local governments have been empowered, and the challenges affecting their efficiency. This study seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by examining the effects of decentralization on governance structures, policy implementation, and service delivery at the local level. Through this analysis, the study aims to provide insights into the factors that enhance or hinder the effectiveness of decentralization in Nigeria, offering recommendations for improving governance outcomes and strengthening local government institutions. Ultimately, the findings of this study will contribute to broader discussions on governance reforms and the role of decentralization in promoting sustainable development in Nigeria.

Decentralization in Nigeria was introduced as a governance strategy to enhance local autonomy, improve service delivery, and promote participatory democracy. However, despite various decentralization reforms, local governance in Nigeria continues to face significant challenges, including weak institutional capacity, political interference, and inadequate fiscal resources (Arowolo, 2010). Many local governments remain dependent on allocations from the central government, limiting their ability to formulate and implement policies effectively (Ekpo & Ndebbio, 2018). Additionally, issues such as corruption, lack of accountability, and bureaucratic inefficiencies have hindered the expected benefits of decentralization (Ezeani, 2016).

The problem, therefore, lies in the gap between the theoretical benefits of decentralization and the practical realities of local governance in Nigeria. While decentralization is expected to enhance policy implementation and improve service delivery, its impact has been inconsistent due to structural and institutional weaknesses. This study seeks to critically analyze the extent

to which decentralization has influenced local governance and public policy in Nigeria and identify the key challenges affecting its effectiveness. The objective of the study is to: To examine the impact of decentralization on local governance effectiveness in Nigeria and to assess the level at which decentralization influenced public policy formulation and implementation at the local level. While the research question is to know: How has decentralization impact affected the effectiveness of local governance in Nigeria? And to what know the extent has decentralization influenced public policy formulation and implementation at the local level?

### **Decentralization and Local Government Autonomy in (Nigeria)**

Decentralization is widely recognized as a governance reform strategy aimed at improving the efficiency, responsiveness, and accountability of government institutions (Rondinelli, 1981). It involves the transfer of powers, responsibilities, and resources from central governments to subnational or local governments (Smoke, 2003). While some scholars argue that decentralization enhances local decision-making, service delivery, and citizen participation (Oates, 1999), others highlight challenges such as corruption, weak institutional capacity, and political interference (Faguet, 2014).

Decentralization is a multi-dimensional concept encompassing political, administrative, and fiscal dimensions. According to Cheema and Rondinelli (2007), political decentralization involves the transfer of decision-making powers to elected local authorities, administrative decentralization refers to the delegation of responsibilities to local bureaucracies, and fiscal decentralization entails the allocation of financial resources to lower levels of government. Oates (1972) formulated the “fiscal federalism theory”, which suggests that decentralization leads to more efficient provision of public goods and services because local governments are better positioned to understand and respond to local needs.

In the Nigerian context, decentralization has been formally institutionalized since the 1976 Local Government Reform, which established local governments as the third tier of government with constitutional recognition (Adeyemi, 2013). However, scholars argue that despite these reforms, local governments in Nigeria remain largely dependent on the central government for financial and policy decisions, undermining their autonomy and effectiveness (Agba et al., 2013).

The intersection of decentralization, local governance, and public policy in Nigeria is crucial for understanding the evolving dynamics of governance and how local needs are addressed within the broader framework of national administration. Decentralization, which involves transferring authority and responsibility from central government to local institutions, is a key factor

in shaping public policy that directly affects local communities. The core idea behind decentralization is that local authorities, being closer to the people, will be better equipped to respond to the specific needs of their populations, thereby improving service delivery and governance outcomes.

Local governance refers to the management of public affairs at the community level through local institutions, policies, and participatory mechanisms (Shah & Thompson, 2004). In Nigeria, local governance is primarily exercised through the local government system, which is constitutionally recognized as the third tier of government (Adeyemi, 2013). However, local governance in Nigeria has been marked by inefficiencies, weak institutions, financial dependence, and political interference (Agba, Akwara, & Idu, 2013).

According to Shiyabade & Esan-Atanda, 2024, local governance refers to the processes and structures through which local authorities and communities manage their affairs at a local level. It involves the formulation and execution of policies, laws, and regulations by local government bodies that directly impact the daily lives of citizens. Local governance is characterized by its focus on addressing local needs and priorities, promoting participatory decision-making, and enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of public services.

Local governance is the process by which local institutions, actors, and communities engage in decision-making and service delivery (World Bank, 2001). It involves public participation, accountability, and decentralization (Smoke, 2003). According to Olowu and Wunsch (2004), effective local governance ensures that public resources are managed transparently and that policies reflect the needs of local communities. The theoretical underpinnings of local governance include fiscal federalism theory, which argues that local governments should have autonomy over financial resources (Oates, 1999), and public choice theory, which emphasizes citizen participation and competition among local governments for better service delivery (Tiebout, 1956).

Local governance is essential for grassroots development, service delivery, and citizen participation in Nigeria. Despite the constitutional recognition of local governments, their effectiveness is hindered by financial dependence, corruption, and political interference. Strengthening financial autonomy, reducing political control, and enhancing institutional capacity are crucial for improving local governance in Nigeria.

### **Public Policy in Nigeria**

Public policy refers to government decisions, actions, and strategies aimed at addressing societal issues through laws, regulations, and programs (Dye, 2017). In Nigeria, public policy plays a crucial role in governance,

economic development, and social welfare. However, policy formulation and implementation are often challenged by bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, lack of continuity, and weak institutional frameworks (Ikelegbe, 2006).

Public policy is defined as a set of government actions designed to address societal problems (Anderson, 2011). According to Dye (2017), public policy is “whatever governments choose to do or not to do.” It encompasses policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. In Nigeria, public policy is influenced by political, economic, and social factors, often shaped by both democratic governance and military rule (Ikelegbe, 2006).

### **Key Areas of Public Policy in Nigeria**

- i. **Economic Policy:** Nigeria's economic policies have focused on industrialization, poverty reduction, and fiscal management. The Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) in 1986 introduced economic liberalization and privatization (Obadan, 2003). More recent policies such as the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP) (2017–2020) aimed at diversifying the economy from oil dependency (Akinyemi, 2016). However, scholars argue that economic policies have been undermined by poor implementation, corruption, and reliance on oil revenues (Ekpo, 2013).
- ii. **Social Policy:** Social policies in Nigeria address education, healthcare, and welfare. Programmes such as Universal Basic Education (UBE) and the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) were introduced to improve access to essential services (Adepoju, 2005). However, funding shortages and mismanagement have limited their effectiveness (Akinyemi, 2016).
- iii. **Governance and Anti-Corruption Policies:** Nigeria has implemented several anti-corruption policies, including the establishment of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) (Ogundiya, 2010). Despite these measures, corruption remains a significant barrier to policy success (Akinyemi, 2016).
- iv. **Environmental Policy:** Nigeria has enacted environmental policies such as the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) Act to address pollution and climate change (Nwosu, 2017). However, weak enforcement has hindered progress in environmental sustainability (Ikelegbe, 2006).

Public policy plays a significant role in Nigeria's governance, economic development, and social progress. However, challenges such as policy

inconsistency, corruption, and weak institutional capacity hinder effective implementation

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study will explore several key theoretical frameworks that underpin the understanding of decentralization's influence on local governance and public policy in Nigeria. These theories provide a comprehensive foundation for the analysis of this phenomenon. The Theory of Decentralization (Rondinelli & Cheema, 1983) forms the theoretical framework for this study. The Theory of Decentralization examines the transfer of power, authority, and resources from central governments to subnational units, such as local governments. Rondinelli and Cheema (1983) identified four main forms of decentralization:

**Political Decentralization:** The transfer of political power to local governments to foster democratic participation.

**Administrative Decentralization:** The delegation of administrative decision-making to local institutions to improve service delivery.

**Fiscal Decentralization:** The distribution of financial resources to local governments to enhance their functionality.

**Economic/Market Decentralization:** The delegation of responsibilities to private sectors and NGOs to supplement government actions.

This theory is particularly relevant to Nigeria as it addresses the various dimensions of decentralization and the challenges encountered in each aspect of this process.

### **The Local Governance Theory (Ostrom, 1990)**

Elinor Ostrom's Local Governance Theory highlights the critical role of local institutions in managing resources and providing services. According to this theory, local governments, by virtue of their proximity to the population, are in a better position to understand community needs and respond accordingly. However, the theory also identifies challenges such as elite capture, weak accountability mechanisms, and inadequate institutional capacity—issues that are widespread in Nigeria's local governance framework.

### **The Public Choice Theory (Tiebout, 1956)**

Public Choice Theory suggests that decentralization fosters competition among local governments, leading to improved service delivery and more

efficient allocation of resources. Tiebout (1956) argued that when citizens can "vote with their feet" by moving to jurisdictions offering better services, local governments are incentivized to be more responsive and accountable. In Nigeria, however, the lack of autonomy and heavy reliance on federal allocations hinder the competitive aspects of local governance.

### **The Principal Agent Theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976)**

The principal-Agent Theory delves into the dynamics between central and local governments, where the central government (principal) delegates authority to local governments (agents). The effectiveness of decentralization is contingent on trust, transparency, and accountability in this relationship. In Nigeria, however, corruption, political interference, and poor oversight often create agency problems, undermining the implementation of effective public policies at the local level.

These theories provide a rich framework for analyzing decentralization in Nigeria. The Decentralization Theory enhance the study as it explores the various forms of decentralization and their potential impacts on governance. The Local Governance Theory also highlights the significance of local institutions and autonomy in achieving effective governance. The Public Choice Theory examines how decentralization can improve service delivery and accountability in local governance and lastly, the principal-Agent Theory addresses the challenges in delegation and accountability within decentralized systems.

By drawing on these theories, this study will critically assess the impact of decentralization on local governance and public policy in Nigeria, offering insights into both the benefits and limitations of the decentralization process in the country.

### **Research Methodology**

The research methodology for this study on "Decentralization and its Impact on Local Governance and Public Policy in Nigeria" provides a structured framework for the exploration and analysis of decentralization's effects on governance and public policy implementation. The section outlines the research design, target population, sampling methods, data collection strategies, data analysis techniques, and ethical considerations, ensuring a comprehensive approach to studying this critical issue.

### **Decentralization and Local Governance**

Local governance refers to the mechanisms, processes, and institutions through which local authorities interact with citizens to deliver public services (Shah & Thompson, 2004). Decentralization is expected to enhance



local governance by improving accountability, transparency, and citizen participation (World Bank, 2001).

Decentralization's impact on local governance can be observed through its ability to empower local government institutions, allowing them to take charge of their own resources and service delivery mechanisms. In Nigeria, the shift towards decentralization was intended to strengthen local governance, enabling local governments to be more responsive and flexible in addressing the needs of their communities. Local authorities, such as local government councils, are tasked with managing essential services like healthcare, education, and infrastructure development, directly affecting citizens' lives. However, the practical implementation of decentralization in Nigeria faces significant barriers, including financial dependence on the federal government, insufficient institutional capacity, and political interference.

However, empirical studies suggest that decentralization has mixed effects on local governance. In a cross-country study, Faguet, (2014) found that decentralization improved local governance in Bolivia by increasing citizen engagement and service delivery efficiency. Similarly, Crook and Manor (1998) argue that decentralization in India and Ghana led to greater public participation and improved responsiveness to local needs. However, in Nigeria, decentralization has been hampered by corruption, elite capture, and weak institutional capacity (Khemani, 2001). For instance, Agba et al. (2013) found that local governments in Nigeria often suffer from mismanagement of funds, limiting their ability to provide basic services effectively.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of local governance under decentralization is influenced by political dynamics. Smoke (2003) notes that where local governments lack genuine autonomy due to political interference from higher levels of government, decentralization fails to achieve its intended benefits. In Nigeria, state governments often control local government funds through joint accounts, limiting the financial independence of local authorities (Adeyemi, 2013).

### **Decentralization and Public Policy**

The relationship between decentralization and public policy lies in how local governments craft and implement policies tailored to their communities' needs. In theory, decentralization enables local authorities to design and implement policies that are more appropriate for local contexts. For instance, local governments in Nigeria are better positioned to understand the unique socio-economic challenges faced by their constituencies and can develop policies in areas such as health, education, poverty alleviation, and infrastructure development (Adeyemi, 2013).

Decentralization also influences public policy formulation and implementation by shifting decision-making authority closer to local communities. According to Bardhan (2002), decentralized policy-making allows for more context-specific solutions to local problems, improving service delivery in sectors such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure.

In contrast, some scholars argue that decentralization can lead to policy fragmentation and inconsistencies across regions. Prud'homme (1995) warns that decentralization may result in disparities in service provision, as wealthier regions can implement better policies than poorer ones. This has been observed in Nigeria, where wealthier states such as Lagos and Rivers have been more successful in implementing public policies compared to poorer states in the North (Olowu & Wunsch, 2004).

Additionally, the success of decentralized policy implementation depends on institutional capacity. Studies show that countries with strong local institutions tend to benefit more from decentralization (Faguet, 2014). In Nigeria, however, weak institutional frameworks have hindered effective policy implementation at the local level (Khemani, 2001). For example, a study by Agba et al. (2013) revealed that local government health policies in Nigeria often fail due to inadequate funding, poor coordination, and political interference.

Decentralization suggests that while it has the potential to improve local governance and public policy, its success depends on institutional capacity, financial autonomy, and political will. In Nigeria, decentralization has been limited by financial dependence, corruption, and weak governance structures, reducing its effectiveness in improving public service delivery.

### Challenges and Opportunities

While decentralization offers several opportunities for improving local governance and public policy, it also presents significant challenges that must be addressed for it to be successful. These include:

- **Financial Limitations:** Local governments' reliance on federal allocations and the limited capacity to generate their own revenue make it difficult for them to fulfill their responsibilities and implement effective policies.
- **Institutional Weakness:** Many local governments suffer from weak administrative structures, lack of skilled personnel, and insufficient training, making it difficult for them to manage and execute policies efficiently.
- **Political Interference:** The concentration of power at the state and federal levels often limits the autonomy of local governments, undermining their ability to make independent decisions and implement policies effectively.

- **Corruption:** Corruption at the local level is a major obstacle to the effective implementation of decentralization. It diverts resources away from their intended use, leading to poor governance and diminished public trust.

Despite these challenges, decentralization offers several key opportunities:

- **Improved Service Delivery:** With greater control over resources and service delivery mechanisms, local governments can tailor policies to address specific local needs more effectively.
- **Enhanced Citizen Engagement:** Decentralization allows for more inclusive governance by involving local communities in decision-making processes. This leads to policies that better reflect local priorities and needs.
- **Political Stability:** Decentralized governance can contribute to greater political stability by addressing local grievances and reducing feelings of marginalization.

In a nutshell, the relationship between decentralization, local governance, and public policy in Nigeria is complex but holds the potential for significant improvements in governance. While decentralization can empower local governments and improve service delivery, it requires addressing several challenges such as financial constraints, institutional weaknesses, political interference, and corruption. By strengthening local governments and ensuring they are adequately resourced and accountable, decentralization can help Nigeria create more responsive, inclusive, and effective public policies that meet the diverse needs of its population.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper examines the intricate relationship between decentralization, local governance, and public policy in Nigeria. Decentralization offers a significant opportunity to improve governance and public policy outcomes, but its success hinges on overcoming challenges such as institutional weaknesses, financial dependence, and political interference. Therefore, the Nigerian government must adopt comprehensive reforms to strengthen local governance systems and empower local governments to better serve their communities.

The Nigerian government should initiate legal and constitutional reforms to grant local governments greater autonomy in decision-making, budgeting, and policy execution. Additionally, state governments must reduce political and financial interference, allowing local governments to operate independently and better address local needs.

To reduce reliance on federal transfers, the government should increase funding allocations to local governments and enhance revenue-generating mechanisms. It is also essential to establish transparent and accountable financial management systems to prevent corruption and ensure proper allocation of resources.

Ongoing training and capacity-building programs should be implemented for local government officials to enhance their ability to formulate and execute effective policies. Furthermore, recruitment for local government positions should prioritize merit-based criteria to ensure qualified individuals are employed, rather than those appointed based on political loyalty.

Public engagement mechanisms, such as town hall meetings, participatory budgeting, and community feedback platforms, should be strengthened. Civil society organizations and the media must play an active role in monitoring local government performance and holding officials accountable.

Political interference and corruption must be reduced by empowering anti-corruption agencies to ensure transparency and accountability in local government operations. Strict penalties should be enforced for officials found guilty of mismanaging public funds or engaging in corrupt activities.

Finally, local governments should prioritize critical services such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure development to improve citizens' quality of life. Introducing performance-based funding models, where additional resources are allocated based on effectiveness in service delivery, will incentivize better governance and service provision.

Decentralization holds considerable potential to improve governance and the quality of public policies in Nigeria, particularly when effectively implemented. However, realizing these benefits requires addressing key challenges, including weak institutional capacity, political interference, and over-reliance on federal funding. By adopting the recommended reforms, Nigeria can create a more resilient, accountable, and efficient local governance system that fosters sustainable development and democratic values.

In conclusion, strengthening local governments through autonomy, fiscal decentralization, and enhanced capacity will significantly improve the delivery of public services and policy outcomes. The Nigerian government must commit to these reforms to unlock the full potential of decentralization, thereby contributing to improved governance, reduced corruption, and more inclusive development across the country.

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