



Democratic Accountability and Service Delivery in Local Governments in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between democratic accountability and service delivery in Nigerian local governments. Despite their constitutional role as the tier of government closest to the people, many local governments failed to deliver essential services effectively due to weak accountability structures, corruption, political interference, and limited institutional capacity. The study aimed to assess the level of democratic accountability in Nigerian local governments, evaluate the effectiveness of service delivery at the grassroots level, and examine the extent to which democratic accountability influenced the quality and responsiveness of public services. The research adopted a qualitative content analysis methodology based on secondary data obtained from peer-reviewed journals, government publications, policy reports, and other credible academic sources. Findings

revealed that democratic accountability within Nigerian local governments remained weak, largely due to excessive state government control, limited financial autonomy, and weak citizen oversight. These factors contributed to poor service delivery, reflected in inadequate healthcare, deteriorating infrastructure, poor educational facilities, and limited access to basic amenities. Although democratic accountability mechanisms such as elections and public scrutiny had the potential to improve transparency and responsiveness, their effectiveness was often constrained by institutional and political challenges. The study therefore recommended constitutional reforms to strengthen local government autonomy, credible and regular local government elections, enhanced financial transparency and public oversight mechanisms, and sustained capacity-building programmes for local government officials to improve governance and service delivery outcomes.

Keywords: Democratic accountability, service delivery, local government, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Democracy is an ancient vehicle, first conceived in Athens, Greece, in the 5th century, that was conceptualised and executed with the ultimate intention of empowering the people and giving the citizenry leverage over the government. While modern democracy has evolved from its Athenian predecessor, the spirit of the concept holds true.



Democratic accountability, as a by-product of the concept of democracy, expanded on the previously stated ideal by stating that not only is the government, elected and appointed leaders to act in their capacity as leaders with the people in mind, but also that they are held wholly accountable for their activities in office. They should be able to provide a full account of what they performed with their power and authority; thereby not only being accountable but also transparent.

These ideas of democracy and democratic accountability are both essential when it comes to service delivery in the local government levels, particularly in a developing country like Nigeria (Akuche & Akindoyin, 2024). Their integration serves as the foundation for good governance and sustainable development. As the tier of government closest to the people, local governments are meant to act as “nurseries of democracy,” allowing for direct citizen participation, enhanced transparency, and the efficient provision of essential services like primary healthcare and education.

The Local Government represents the tier of government closest to the Nigerian populace; however, many residents fail to benefit from its intended services. This is evident in poor environmental conditions, crumbling public school facilities, inadequate market infrastructure, and a shortage of healthcare centres. Inefficiencies in service delivery have undermined citizens' confidence in government institutions. In some

areas, council officials are even known to harass residents instead of performing their service duties (Ferdous, Islam, and Das, 2022). The central issue concerns how effectively essential goods and services are delivered to local communities in a timely and sufficient manner. While the constitution assigns service delivery roles across all three tiers of government, states and local governments bear primary responsibility for providing fundamental services such as education, healthcare, housing, water supply, and waste management.

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the constitutional mandate and theoretical framework for local governments to serve as agents of development, the practical reality in Nigeria is starkly different. Persistent challenges such as weak institutional capacity, political interference, inadequate funding, and poor monitoring mechanisms have resulted in widespread inefficiency and mismanagement. These challenges are compounded by low levels of accountability, where local officials often prioritise personal or political interests over public welfare, and citizens lack the mechanisms or confidence to demand transparency. Consequently, the gap between policy intentions and actual service delivery continues to widen, leaving communities underserved and frustrated. This study, therefore, seeks to investigate the extent to which democratic accountability mechanisms—or the lack thereof—affect the effectiveness of service delivery in Nigerian local

governments, with a focus on identifying systemic barriers and proposing practical solutions for improved governance outcomes.

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

2. To assess the level of democratic accountability in local governments in Nigeria.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of service delivery in local government areas in Nigeria.
4. To examine the impact of democratic accountability on the quality and responsiveness of service delivery in local governments

1.3 CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Democracy

Democracy originates from the Ancient Greek word *dēmokratía* (δημοκρατία), formed from *dēmos* meaning “people” and *kratos* meaning “rule” (Schwartzberg, 2014). At its most basic level, it refers to a system of government in which political authority rests with the people of a state. In minimalist interpretations, democracy is defined primarily by the selection of leaders through competitive elections. Broader or maximalist interpretations, however, extend the concept to include the protection of civil liberties and human rights alongside electoral competition. The term itself emerged in the mid-fifth century BCE to describe the political arrangements of certain Greek city-states,

most notably Athens (Dahl et al., 2026; Przeworski, 2024).

Accountability

Accountability can be said to be the acknowledgement and acceptance of responsibility by an individual, organisation, or other entity for its actions and decisions. It is a commitment to act with honesty and ethical consideration toward others, as well as a readiness to be evaluated based on one's performance and conduct. Accountability extends beyond internal operations to include obligations toward stakeholders such as shareholders, employees, and the wider community within which the organisation operates (Kenton, 2025).

Service Delivery

Service delivery is the process through which services are designed, organised, and provided in order to meet the expectations of customers or clients. It emphasises the importance of quality, specialised expertise, and continuous innovation to improve stakeholder/citizen satisfaction and overall value. More broadly, service delivery also involves the planning and management of how clients receive and experience services. This includes establishing and implementing guiding principles, standards, and policies, within existing constraints, to shape every aspect of an organisation's interactions with its customers (Lin et al., 2012; Jenkins, 2026).



Local Governments in Nigeria

Local government is governance carried out at the grassroots level and represents the lowest tier of administration within a country (Amah, 2018). It is a legally recognised political subdivision of a nation-state that is granted authority to manage local affairs, including the ability to levy taxes or mobilise labour for specific community purposes. Ideally, such governing bodies are constituted through democratic processes and operate through representative councils created by law to exercise defined powers within particular geographical areas. However, in practice, local government administrators are not always elected; they may also emerge through appointment or selection. Generally speaking, local government can therefore be described as a system of governance operating within a limited geographical area of a state, enjoying a degree of autonomy and possessing authority over certain administrative and fiscal responsibilities. The system is designed to organise towns and communities in ways that promote law and order, provide essential social services, and encourage citizen participation in collective efforts aimed at improving living conditions. Among its core responsibilities are the promotion of local economic development, delivery of public services, and the protection of the environment. Because it functions closest to the people, local governance influences everyday aspects of community life such as education, welfare services, markets, recreation, cultural activities, and other social engagements.

Consequently, local governments are typically responsible for services including public parks and recreational facilities, local policing, housing, emergency and healthcare services, fire protection, transportation systems, waste disposal, street maintenance, sewer systems, and other community infrastructure (Amah, 2018).

The 1976 Local Government Reform brought about significant and far-reaching changes in the administration of local government in Nigeria. The reform was designed to restructure and modernise the system of local governance, with the intention of making it one of the most effective in Africa. Among its key objectives was the extension of the federal principle by bringing government closer to the grassroots, while also ensuring uniformity in the structure and operation of local government administration throughout the federation. These objectives were largely realised when the provisions of the reform were incorporated into the 1979 Constitution of Nigeria, which marked an important constitutional and democratic milestone in the development of local government in the country (Fowowe, 2021). Furthermore, the establishment and recognition of local government institutions in Nigeria were firmly entrenched in Section 7(1) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended), which provides that:

The system of local government by democratically elected local government councils is under this Constitution guaranteed...



As of 2026, Nigeria is made up of 774 constitutionally recognised Local Government Areas (LGAs). Each LGA is managed by an elected council, headed by a chairman and supported by councillors, and is tasked with providing essential local services such as primary education, healthcare, and waste management. While the 1999 Constitution guarantees the autonomy of local governments, this independence is frequently constrained or undermined by state authorities. While on paper, constitutionally, local governments are guaranteed autonomy, at the very least fiscally, the reality is far from ideal.

1.4 Challenges of Local Governments in Nigeria

Modern local governments in Nigeria are hindered by multiple factors that not only undermine their authority and autonomy but also disrupt their activities during the dispensation of their functions, including gaps in the constitution, ongoing political manipulation of local elections, excessive interference, and arbitrary control over local government finances, particularly by state governments. Zango and Mohammed (2025) further writes that undue involvement in local political, administrative, traditional, and minor affairs further compounds the problem. These challenges have led to negative outcomes that directly affect local governments' ability to operate independently and efficiently, undermining their efforts to promote development through effective service delivery and the

implementation of relevant projects within their jurisdictions.

Democratic Accountability: Democratic accountability is the obligation of public leaders, elected officials, and administrators to justify their actions and decisions to citizens through reasoned, evidence-based, and truthful communication. It entails the use of logic, scientific reasoning, and transparency to ensure that government authority aligns with the social contract, respects individual rights, and fosters informed public deliberation. Citizens, in turn, exercise oversight by evaluating truth claims, forming opinions, and holding institutions and leaders responsible for policy outcomes, thereby maintaining the balance of power and legitimacy essential to liberal democracies (Koliba, 2025).

Service Delivery in Nigerian Local Governments

Local government, as the third tier of governance, plays a vital role in creating a supportive and enabling environment for communities through the effective delivery of services. Its significance within a state is considerable, serving as a key arm of government. Being the level of government closest to the grassroots, local authorities bear the primary responsibility for providing essential social services that improve citizens' quality of life. These services extend throughout the country, bringing citizens closer to government and ensuring development across all segments of society.

This decentralisation of governmental power streamlines administrative activities and acts as a crucial incentive for good governance and sustainable development. Local governments provide an effective mechanism for delivering essential goods and services to communities in a faster, more accessible, and efficient manner. Yet in Nigeria, their effectiveness remains limited, particularly in service delivery, due to challenges such as political interference, corruption and mismanagement, bureaucratic delays, insecurity, political instability, and inadequate funding, among others, since the Fourth Republic (Akuche & Akindoyin, 2024; Jamo & Yakasai, 2017).

Nigeria is a hub of diversity, making the range of issues experienced by local governments before, during, and even after service delivery multifaceted and equally diverse. These challenges stem not only from the country's complex ethnic, cultural, and religious composition but also from variations in economic development, infrastructure, and administrative capacity across regions. Consequently, local governments must navigate a wide spectrum of social, political, and logistical factors, which often complicates planning, implementation, and monitoring of essential services, ultimately affecting the consistency and quality of service delivery. Therefore, simply assigning one challenge to encompass the complexity of the grassroots would understate the issues occurring for the localities. Hence why a number of problems are highlighted.

1.5 THEORETICAL REVIEW

This study adopted the Principal-Agent theory to analyse the findings, alongside using the Good Governance theory to gain further insight into the study.

According to Bendickson et al. (2016) and Zhang and Papagiannidis (2026), the Principal-Agent theory emerged in the early 1970s, with economists Stephen Ross and Barry Mitnick formally developing it to address conflicts that occur when an agent makes decisions on behalf of a principal under conditions of asymmetric information. The theory was further advanced in 1976 by Michael Jensen and William Meckling, who applied it to analyse corporate ownership, building on insights from information economics and earlier observations by Smith (1776) regarding the separation of ownership and control.

On the other hand, the Good Governance theory, according to Minogue, Polidano, and Hulme (1998) provides a framework of fundamental principles for the effective functioning of any government, regardless of its structure. These principles encompass accountability, oversight, responsiveness, transparency, public participation, economy, and efficiency, among others. In essence, the theory is designed to embody these key tenets and additional related principles.

The Good Governance theory is characterised by participation, transparency, the rule of law, responsiveness, broad consensus, equity and

inclusiveness, accountability, effectiveness and efficiency, and strategic vision (Ekundayo, 2017). The theory serves as a guiding framework for developing nations to emulate, for the sake of serving deliverables to citizens in a fair and timely manner. While the idea and concept of good governance is as old as human consciousness, the theory of Good Governance formally emerged in the late 1980s and gained significant traction in the 1990s, driven primarily by international financial institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and so forth, before the theory gained traction in other fields like politics and economics (World Bank, 1992; Kaufmann & Kraay, 2002; International Monetary Fund, 2007).

Basic Tenets of the Theories

The Principal–Agent theory, often referred to as the Agency Problem or Agency Theory, describes the relationship in which a principal delegates authority to an agent to carry out specific tasks or actions. Because the principal and agent typically possess different information, conflicts may arise during task execution, a situation known as the principal–agent problem. Originally popularised by economists to explain the behaviour of profit-maximising firms, the theory has since been applied more broadly to contexts characterised by information asymmetry and uncertainty within organisations. These include politics, research, healthcare, government institutions, and education (Kara et al., 2006; Bovens et al., 2014).

Application of the Theories to the Study

The Principal–Agent theory and Good Governance theory provide a useful framework for analysing democratic accountability and service delivery in local governments in Nigeria. From the perspective of Principal–Agent theory, citizens act as principals who delegate authority to elected local government officials and administrators, who serve as agents responsible for delivering public services such as healthcare, education, sanitation, and infrastructure. However, problems such as information asymmetry, weak monitoring mechanisms, and conflicting interests may cause agents to prioritise personal or political gains over the needs of the citizens, thereby reducing the effectiveness of service delivery. Democratic accountability mechanisms—such as elections, transparency, public oversight, and institutional checks—are therefore necessary to ensure that these agents act in accordance with the interests of the principals. Complementing this perspective, Good Governance theory emphasises key principles such as accountability, transparency, participation, responsiveness, and the rule of law as essential conditions for effective governance. When these principles are upheld within local government institutions, they strengthen democratic accountability, reduce corruption and mismanagement, and ultimately improve the quality and efficiency of public service delivery to communities.



In addition to the Principal-Agent Theory, the Good Governance Theory is applied to provide further insight into the study of democratic accountability and service delivery in local governments in Nigeria. While the principal-agent framework explains the relationship between citizens (principals) and elected officials (agents), Good Governance theory broadens the analysis by emphasising key principles such as transparency, accountability, rule of law, responsiveness, effectiveness, and citizen participation. This study therefore uses Good Governance theory to assess whether local government institutions operate in a manner that promotes inclusive decision-making and efficient service provision.

1.7 METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this study is content analysis, with a focus on secondary data sources. This approach was adopted because it allows for a systematic and objective evaluation of existing literature on democratic accountability and service delivery in local governments across Nigeria, emphasising administrative gaps, governance challenges, and mechanisms for improving public service outcomes. Data were sourced from a wide range of credible materials, including peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, official publications, institutional documents, bulletins from local government websites, and relevant articles retrieved from ResearchGate, Google Scholar, and other national and international repositories.

Selection criteria prioritised relevance, credibility, and currency, while historical reports and policies were also considered to provide context on the evolution of local governance and service delivery frameworks.

1.8 DISCUSSION

The study found that democratic accountability within Nigerian local governments is generally very weak, marked by pervasive corruption, limited transparency, and ineffective service delivery. Local governments operate under heavy top-down control from state authorities, with minimal autonomy and insufficient community oversight, leaving elected officials largely unanswerable to citizens. Hassan (2024) writes that since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, the provision of social services at the local government level has steadily declined due to rampant corruption, fragile institutions, and inadequate oversight. Key services, including healthcare and potable water, remain insufficient, primary education is severely neglected with teachers frequently striking over unpaid wages, and public infrastructure suffers from poor maintenance. Although local governments are intended to serve as catalysts for grassroots development, the reality is a system characterised by chronic underperformance driven primarily by corruption and lack of accountability. Public accountability is at its lowest point within the local government sector, prompting recommendations for the institutionalisation and strict enforcement of ethical standards in local



administration and the establishment of a credible electoral process (Ugbudu & Vihiyor, 2025).

Although the 1976 Local Government Reform was designed to establish an effective and productive system at the grassroots level in Nigeria, evidence suggests that accountability and good governance have yet to be fully realised. The Nigerian Constitution, while recognising Local Governments as a distinct third tier of government, simultaneously places them under the control of state authorities, leaving elected officials largely unaccountable to the rural communities they are meant to serve. As Victor (2009) observes, many of the corruption crises perpetuating poverty at the grassroots can be traced to these constitutional limitations. This arrangement has effectively transformed Local Governments into extensions of state governments, fostering subservience and dependency, as development projects often await state directives before implementation (Adeyemi, 2013). The resulting system encourages allegiance to political godfathers rather than the electorate, undermining public accountability and contributing to widespread electoral malpractice, which Idike (2016) identifies as a root cause of political corruption across Nigeria. Empirical findings therefore highlight that meaningful political accountability and citizen empowerment at the local level remain unattainable without constitutional reforms that grant genuine autonomy to Local Governments (Osuebi, et al.,

2019; Adeyemi et al., 2018; Sherif, Farouk, and Aliyu, 2021).

Similarly, when it comes to service delivery in Nigerian local governments, the study found that service delivery in Nigerian Local Government Areas (LGAs) is largely ineffective and below expected standards, marked by deteriorating infrastructure, insufficient healthcare facilities, and generally weak provision of essential services. Although LGAs represent the level of government closest to the people, their ability to function effectively is constrained by widespread corruption, limited financial independence, interference from state governments, and a shortage of skilled and competent personnel (Akuche & Akindoyin, 2024).

Effective service delivery is a central element of good governance and a key responsibility of local governments in Nigeria, which are expected to provide essential services at the grassroots level. However, several structural and administrative challenges significantly undermine their ability to perform this role effectively. One major constraint is political interference, where higher-level political actors influence local decision-making, often leading to resource misallocation, patronage appointments, and policy decisions that prioritise political interests over community welfare (Banko, 2020; Ifaka, 2021). Closely related to this is corruption and mismanagement, which manifest through embezzlement, bribery, nepotism, and weak accountability systems, ultimately diverting public resources away from



sectors such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure (Tinuoye, 2023).

In addition, bureaucratic inefficiencies—including excessive administrative procedures, red tape, and limited institutional capacity—slow down policy implementation and compromise service delivery (Asaju & Ayeni, 2020). Insecurity further aggravates these challenges by disrupting infrastructure development, discouraging investment, and forcing the closure or abandonment of schools and healthcare facilities in affected communities (Nweke, 2023). Political instability, characterised by frequent leadership changes and policy discontinuity, often results in abandoned projects, poor resource allocation, and weakened accountability structures (Tinuoye, 2023). Finally, insufficient funding remains a persistent issue, as local governments rely heavily on irregular federal allocations while facing weak internally generated revenue systems and financial mismanagement. Collectively, these constraints severely limit the capacity of local governments to deliver essential services and meet the developmental needs of their communities.

Finally, in terms of the impact of democratic accountability on the quality and responsiveness of service delivery in local governments, the study found that democratic accountability within local governments—promoted through electoral processes and public oversight—generally enhances the quality and responsiveness of service delivery by ensuring that government

actions reflect the needs and expectations of citizens. It encourages transparency, curbs corrupt practices, and places greater pressure on officials to provide services more efficiently. However, the effectiveness of these accountability mechanisms is frequently constrained by limited institutional autonomy, persistent political interference, and weak administrative capacity (Tonwe, Aihie, & Igiebor, 2021; Akuche & Akindoyin, 2024; Ozoemena, Mbah, & Nkwo, 2025).

1.9 CONCLUSION&

RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the study revealed that weak democratic accountability significantly undermines service delivery in Nigerian local governments. Although constitutionally recognised as the third tier of government, local governments operate with limited autonomy and are heavily influenced by state authorities, resulting in corruption, political interference, and poor institutional performance. These challenges, alongside bureaucratic inefficiencies, insecurity, and inadequate funding, have contributed to the persistent failure to provide essential services at the grassroots level. While democratic accountability mechanisms such as elections and public oversight can improve transparency and service responsiveness, their effectiveness remains constrained by structural and institutional weaknesses. Given these findings, the study therefore recommends:

1. **Constitutional Reform for Greater Local Government Autonomy:**

The National Assembly should initiate amendments to the Nigerian Constitution that grant greater administrative and financial autonomy to local governments. In particular, reforms should address the State–Local Government Joint Account system to ensure that federal allocations are transferred directly to Local Government Councils. This would reduce excessive state government control, strengthen local accountability, and allow councils to independently plan and implement development projects that directly address community needs.

2. **Conduct of Credible and Regular Local Government Elections:**

State governments and State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs) should ensure the consistent conduct of transparent, free, and credible local government elections. This will discourage the prolonged use of caretaker committees and ensure that local officials are democratically elected and accountable to the electorate. Credible elections would strengthen democratic accountability and encourage officials to prioritise public welfare in their service delivery efforts.

3. **Strengthening Financial Transparency and Public Oversight:**

Local Government Councils, in collaboration with the Office

of the Auditor-General for Local Governments, should institutionalise stronger financial accountability mechanisms. These should include regular public disclosure of budgets and expenditures, periodic independent audits, and the establishment of community monitoring forums where citizens can track projects and review the use of public funds. Such measures would enhance transparency, reduce corruption, and improve public trust in local governance.

4. **Capacity Building for Local Government Officials and Staff:**

The Federal Ministry responsible for Local Government Affairs, in partnership with institutions such as the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS) and other public administration training bodies, should organise regular capacity-building programmes for local government officials and staff. These programmes should focus on ethical governance, public financial management, and effective service delivery strategies, thereby improving administrative competence and strengthening institutional performance at the grassroots level.

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