

Assessment of local government autonomy and governance: A case study in Nigeria

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper critically examines opportunities and problems confronting the Nigerian local government system. To assess why the practice of complete local government autonomy and governance is difficult in Nigeria and suggest measures that may help improve the collaboration between the federal, state, and local government authorities in Nigeria.

Research methodology: 300 questionnaires were administered to the staff of the Nkanu-West Local Government Area in Enugu State, and 276 were returned giving a response rate of 92 percent. The Marxist theory was adopted as the theoretical framework.

Results: Results show that state interference in local affairs contributes to a lack of local government autonomy and governance, and the constitutional provisions portend intractable inter-government problems which make the local government a whipping child and less autonomous.

Limitations: Nkanu-West local government is the only local government covered by the study.

Contribution: The outcome of the study will be a contribution to the existing literature in the area of local government autonomy and governance.

Keywords: *Autonomy, Constitutional autonomy, Nkanu-west local government area, Nigeria*

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1. Introduction

An inalienable feature of any discussion of the functions of local government under the exclusive and concurrent lists in the constitution is the analysis of the intergovernmental relations and their implications to the newly found authority for the local government system. Since the question of relative autonomy for local government in Nigeria is a recent phenomenon at least from the point of view of official legitimation. Jurisdictional hindrance of their official operations and/or responsibilities to both the citizens and central, regional, or state governments were hitherto comparatively uncontentious. This position was understandable, as these local authorities were by and large creations of the regional and later state governments. They, therefore, carried on such functions as were assigned to them by the regional/state governments. By the same token, their autonomy varied in degree and pattern from state to state. Being the derivative of state government, they were deemed to be tied to the “apron string”, as it were, of the state governments. This is another way of saying that they were mere extensions of state governments. Thus, Nigerian Federalism was, during this period, practically a two-tier federal structure. Yielding to internal and external pressures to reform the federal structure at least along with modern patterns, the federal government embarked upon nationwide reforms, which henceforth gave it a tier status within the Nigerian Federal Structure. The lawful predisposition of the autonomy and powers of the local government was a prominent feature of this reform, which became the third tier of the federal government.

Being recognized as the third tier of the government in 1976, the local government became the front burner of local peculiarities and problems. Subsequent reforms in 1988 and 1991 further strengthened the autonomy of local government. These reforms introduced the presidential system of government as it was at federal and state levels. The development was regarded as a test tube for the nation's grassroots democracy. Today, there are calls for the creation of additional local governments. Therefore, the focus of this research work is to critically examine local government autonomy and governance in Nigeria with particular reference to the problems and prospects in Nkanu West Local Government Area in Enugu state. In the light of the above, this work is set to address the following problem,

- Why is it difficult to practice enduring autonomy in Nigeria's local government system?
- To what extent is local government autonomy and governance practiced in Nigeria?
- What measures can be adopted to check state interference in local governments affairs in Nigeria?

Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are:

- To find out why the practice of complete local government autonomy and governance is difficult in Nigeria.
- To investigate the level of autonomy in Nigeria's local government system as it concerns Nkanu west local government area.
- To suggest measures that can be adopted to check state interference in the local affairs in Nigeria.

Significance of the study

This study has both empirical, theoretical, and academic significance.

- Empirically: The outcome of this will enable the population of Nkanu west to come to terms with why Nkanu west has been unable to enjoy local government autonomy and governance.
- Theoretically: This work is significant because it has added to the literature base on local government autonomy and governance in Nigeria.
- Academically: The outcome of the study will be a contribution to the existing literature in the area of local government autonomy and governance.

2. Literature review

Local Government Authority (LGA) in Nigeria is a product of decentralization and established by law ([Okafor, 2010](#)). The term local government is defined by [Mtasigazya \(2019\)](#) as the public authorities including appointed and elected officials operating at the local level to promote local democracy and development. Local governments are closer to the people and different authors ([Eyitayo & Alani, 2019](#); [Mnyasenga & Mushi, 2015](#); [Adeyemo, 2005](#); [Ezeani, 2012](#); [Saaleh & Stanley, 2011](#); [Tony, 2011](#); [Ugwuanyi, 2014](#); [Osakede, Ijimakinwa, & Adesanya, 2016](#); [Azelama, 2008](#); [Abada, 2007](#); [Andrews, 2012](#); [Ogban, 2011](#); [Oguntuase, 2012](#); [Anikeze, 2012](#); [Okolie & Eze, 2006](#); [Orewa & Adewumi, 1983](#); [Charlton, 1985](#)) have defined local government as that part of the government charged with managing local affairs and is democratically elected to function within their defined jurisdiction. They also identified features of local government with autonomy.

Autonomy, according to Longman dictionary of contemporary English, connotes the right of self-government or management of one's affairs". [Wolman, Mcmanmon, Bell, & Brunori \(2010\)](#) defined local autonomy as a system of local governance whereby LGAs have an important role to play in the economy and the intergovernmental system, have discretionary powers with the means to act within their defined jurisdiction. Another author, [Abada \(2007\)](#), argues that local government autonomy and governance in Nigeria's LGAs possess the power to decide within their competence and jurisdiction without interference by external authorities. But the draft constitution of 1999 contradicted the autonomy of the LGAs as a meaningful tier of government. [Onyishi & Obi \(2004\)](#) is of the view that this provision of the constitution would lead to intractable inter-government problems in which the LGA is the "whipping child". Constitutional loopholes or contradictions tend to provide the impetus for the unscrupulous state officials to nurse the inordinate desire for hedging in the LGA. [Ige \(1996\)](#) cited in [Akpan and Ekanem \(2013\)](#) stated that the recurring abuse of the provisions concerning local government in the 1979, 1989, and 1999 Constitutions, especially by the state government, refreshed

agitations for local government autonomy and governance. In conclusion, the guidelines on new reforms indicated that federal and state governments significantly reduced the autonomy of the LGAs.

3. Research methodology

Theoretical framework

There exists a range of prominent theorists who have produced extensive interaction in the area of local government in plural societies or states. The Nigerian state is pluralistic and considering the objective of this study, which is to examine the extent of local government autonomy and governance, the Marxist theory has been adopted as the theoretical framework.

The Marxist analysis describes local government as an instrument of the federal and state government, which works either as a direct means of securing legitimacy for the ruling class or securing praetorian compliance through suppression. The theory argues that local government is a key part of the capitalist society. Being part of the whole capitalist state which is a relatively autonomous instrument of class domination, helps the state in performing its primary role. As [Engels \(1942\)](#) succinctly put it, the state is a product of society at a certain stage of development, it is the admission that this society has become entangled in an insoluble contradiction with itself, that it has split into irreconcilable antagonism which it is powerless to dispel. [Cockburn \(1977\)](#), using Marxist theory attempts to demonstrate in his book that even an initially left inclined local authority, is obliged by the nature of capital to suppress agitation for more egalitarian policies. The analysis of the autonomy of local government in Nigeria in terms of the interest of capital and pushing this argument, draw greatly on the studies of Marxist orientation. The local government autonomy and governance in this class society are, therefore, more apparent than real for the local government remains the instrument of the dominant classes for exploitation and suppressing the subordinate classes ([Nwangwu & Ononogbu, 2016](#)).

It is within the context of the specific character or nature of the neo-colonial state of Nigeria that one can understand and explain the ugly incidence whereby the state uses local government as one of its agents of suppression. It is based on this context that the realization of the objectives for the guidelines for local government reforms in Nigeria has been constrained by several factors such as personnel problems, the problem of corruption, the loss of autonomy, financial problems, etc.

Study setting

The study was carried out in the Nkanu west local government. It is one of the 3 LGAs carved out from the Nkanu local government. Nkanu west comprises 13 administrative sub-units/council areas, which are Agbani, Akpugo, Amuri, Ugboauka, Nara, Obe, Ozalla, Mburumbu, Ubahu, Amodu, Akegbe-Ugwu, Umueze, and Nkerefi. Nkanu west local government headquarters is located at Agbani.

It is worth noting that Nkanu west local government is principally a rich agricultural area. For this reason, the citizens are predominantly artisans, farmers, and traders ([Nwaliwa, 2006](#)). The local government has many big markets where people from different states converge to buy some agricultural products, although, these markets are not well organized to boost the economy of the local government. This is because their market days come up every four days. Also, the LGA has a high literacy rate and highly placed individuals. Despite this, the poverty level is still high. Furthermore, Nkanu west has many entrepreneurs who are mostly based in urban areas. The local government also has few cottage industries such as palm kernel processing industries, oil, rice mills, and Garri processing industries.

Study population

The local government has six (6) departments namely: Department of Works, Health, finance, agriculture, social welfare, and personnel department. These departments have a total workforce of six hundred (600). 300 hundred study participants were conveniently selected from the workforce capacity.

Sampling technique

A stratified random sampling technique was used to select respondents to be included from each department. The use of this technique enabled the researchers to minimize bias while picking those who met the purpose of this research.

Sample size

Fifty (50) respondents were chosen from each of the departments, giving a total of three hundred (300) respondents. Out of the 300 questionnaires sent out, two hundred and seventy-six (276) were properly completed and returned and twenty-four (24) were unreturned. Therefore, our research was based on the 276 returned questionnaires.

Data collection and analysis

A total of three hundred (300) semi-structured and tested questionnaires were issued out to the different departments, but only 276 were returned as shown in figure 1. The study analysis is based on the 276 questionnaires returned. Data collected on the questionnaires were entered into Excel and then transferred to SPSS version 25 for analysis.

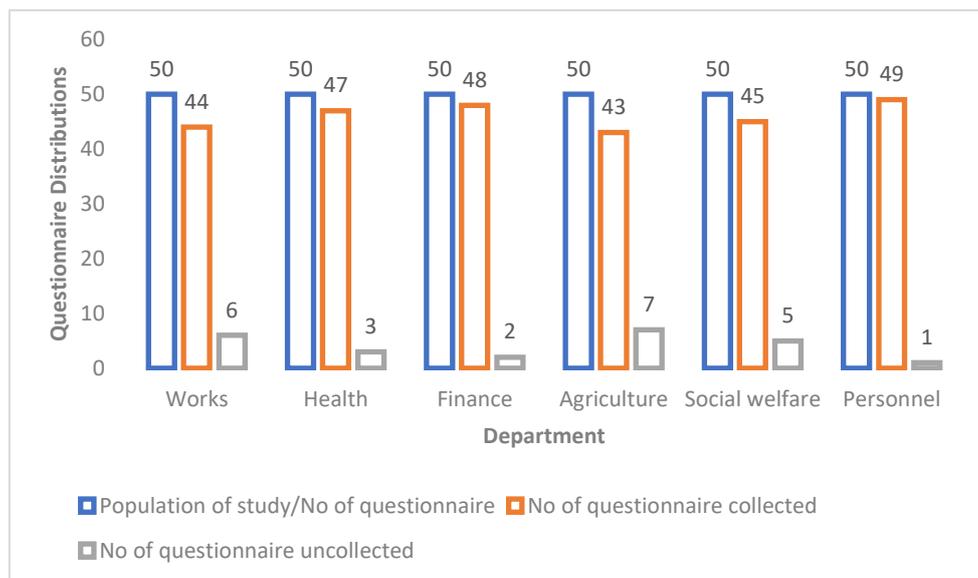


Figure 1. Questionnaire distributions.

4. Results and discussion

The data generated from the questionnaires in respect to local government autonomy and governance in Nigeria were summarized and analyzed as presented in the figures below.

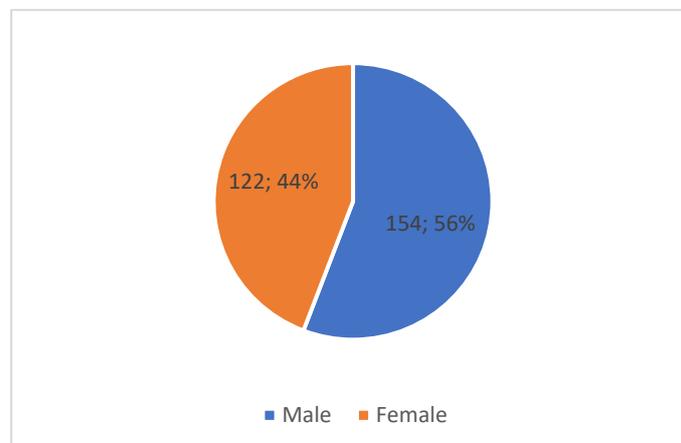


Figure 2. Personal Data / Gender (Source: Researcher's Survey January 2021)

From Figure 2 above, 154 (56%) respondents are male, while 122 (44%) are female. The figure shows that there are more males than females among the respondents from the various departments in the local government.

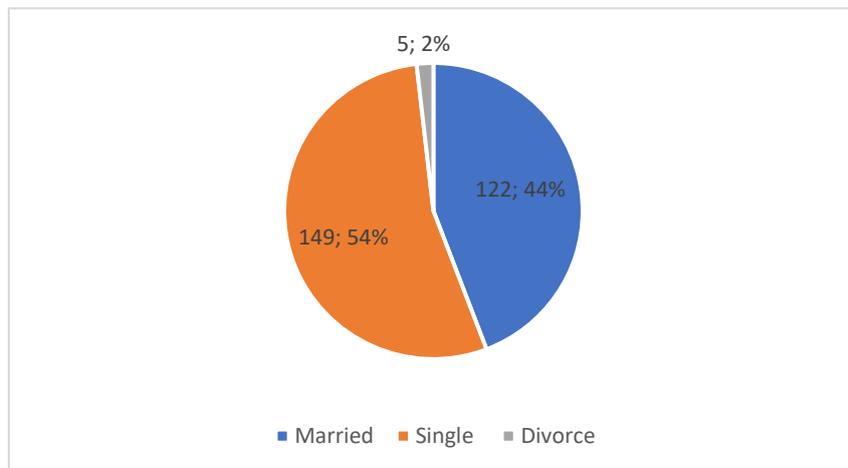


Figure 3. Marital status (Source: Researcher’s Survey January 2021)

The above Figure 3 shows that 122 (44%) respondents are married, 149 (54%) are single while 5 (2%) respondents are divorced. This figure shows that majority of the respondents are single.

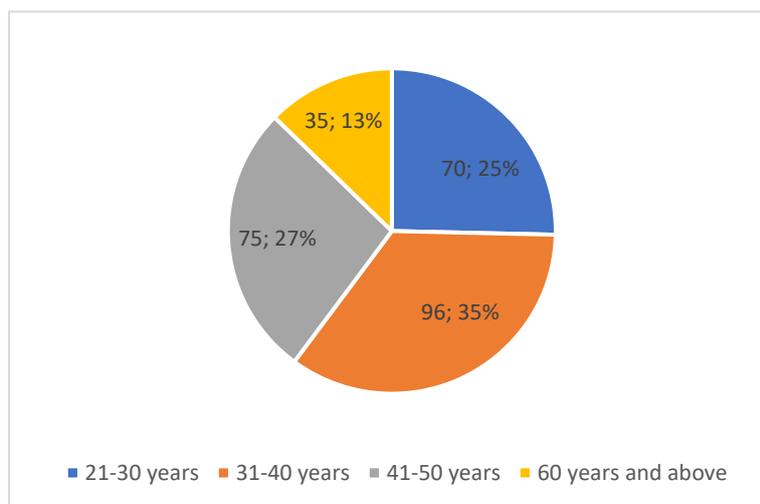


Figure 4. Age distribution of respondents (Source: Researcher’s Survey January 2021)

Figure 4 depicts that 70 (25%) of the respondents fell within the age limit of 21-30 years, 96 (35%) were within the age range of 31-40, 75 (27%) fell within the age of 41-50, while 35 or 13% are those respondents whose ages fell within the age range 60 years and above.

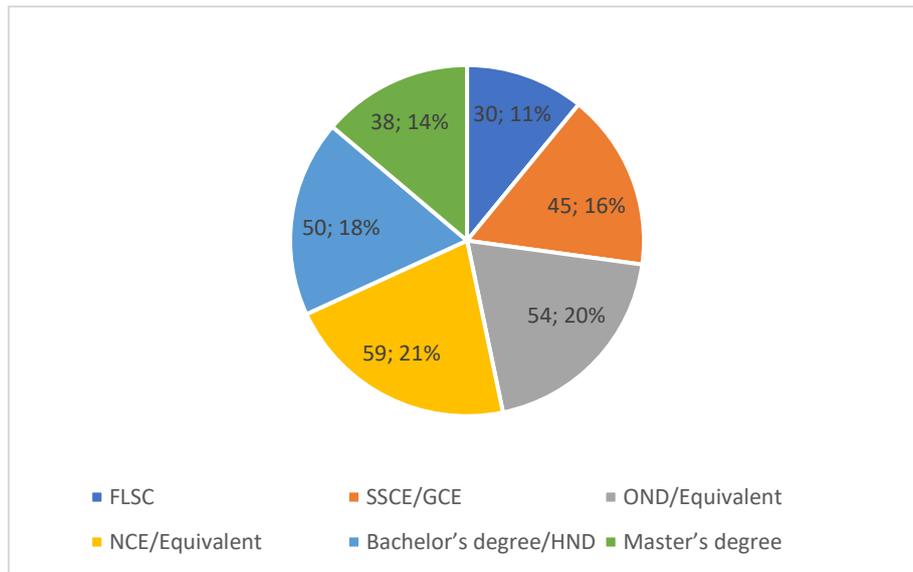


Figure 5. Educational Qualification of Respondents (Source: Researcher's Survey January 2021)

From the Figure 5 above, 30 (11%) of the respondents had the first school leaving certificate, 45 or 16% respondents were those with SSCE or GCE, 54 (20%) were holders of the OND/Equivalent, NCE/Equivalent was 59 (21%). Those having Bachelor's degrees were 50 or 18% while 38 (14%) were those respondents with the Master's Degree. From this figure, we discovered that those with NCE/Equivalent had the highest despondence of 59 or 21.3 %.

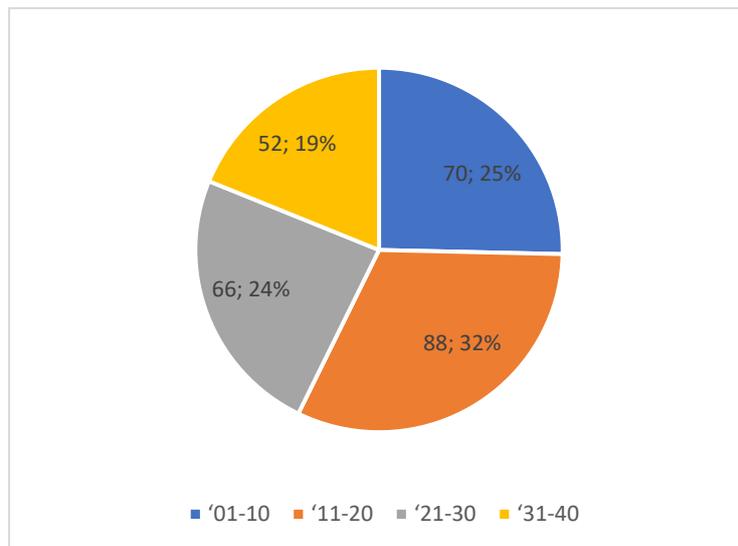


Figure 6. Length of Service in Years (Source: Researcher's Survey January 2021)

Figure 6 above depicts that length of service distribution of respondents 70 or 25% was respondents that fell within the length of service 01-10, 88 or 32 % were those respondents that fell within the length of service 11-20, 66 or 24% were those respondents that fell within the length of service 21-30, while 52 or 19% were those that fell within the length of service years 31-40 years.

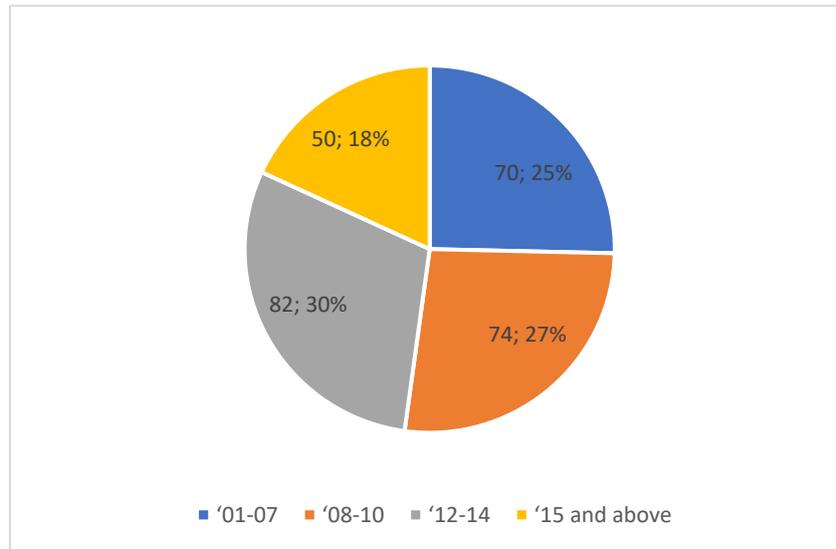


Figure 7. Salary grade level (Source: Researcher’s Survey January 2021)

In figure 7, 70 or (25%) of the respondents were in salary grade levels 01-07, 74 or 27% of the respondent in grade levels 08-10, 82 or 30% were in grade levels 12-14 while those in grade level 15 and above were 50 in number representing 18%

Substantive data

A five-point Likert scale was used for making analysis. The mean scores and percentage were calculated. The decision rule was to accept the item that has a mean score of 3.50 or above. The formula used for calculating mean scores is found below

$$\text{Mean } (\bar{X}) = \frac{\sum FX}{\sum X}$$

Where F is the five-point Likert scale score ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

Question 1: Do you agree that the poor management of Nkanu west local government could not guarantee its autonomy?

Table 1. Poor management and autonomy

Options	F	X	%	FX
Strongly agree	5	94	34.0	470
Agree	4	88	31.9	352
Undecided	3	9	3.3	27
Disagree	2	55	19.9	110
Strongly disagree	1	30	10.9	30
Total	15	276	100%	989

$$\text{Mean } (\bar{X}) = 3.58$$

The decision rule is to accept where the mean score is 3.50 and above and to reject where the mean score is less than 3.50. From the analysis made in table 1 above, 94 respondents strongly agreed and 88 agreed that the poor management of Nkanu west local government could not guarantee its autonomy. 9 respondents were undecided, 55 disagreed and 30 strongly disagreed with this view. The percentage of the respondents who supported this view was 65.9% as opposed to 34.1 % of those who disagreed and those who were undecided on this point. The mean score is 3.58. So, we accept that the poor management of Nkanu west local government could not guarantee its autonomy.

Question 2: Do inadequate financial resources and a reasonable degree of discretion a constraint to local government autonomy and governance.

Table 2. Inadequacy of finances versus local government discretion

Option	F	X	%	FX
Strongly agree	5	102	36.9	510
Agree	4	92	33.3	368
Undecided	3	5	1.9	15
Disagree	2	57	20.7	114
Strongly disagree	1	20	7.2	20
Total	15	276	100	1027

$$\text{Mean } (\bar{X}) = 3.72$$

From the analysis made in Table 2 above, 102 respondents strongly agreed and 92 agreed that inadequate financial resources and a reasonable degree of discretion are a constraint to local government autonomy and governance. 5 respondents were undecided, 57 disagreed and 20 strongly disagreed with this view. The percentage of the respondents who supported this view was 70.2 % as opposed to 29.8 % of those who disagreed and those who were undecided on these points. The mean score is 3.72 so we accept that lack of financial resources and a reasonable degree of discretion is a constraint to local government autonomy and governance.

Question 3: Do you agree that there was no autonomy of local government in Nigeria?

Table 3. Existence of autonomy

Option	F	X	%	FX
Strongly agree	5	95	34.4	475
Agree	4	95	34.4	380
Undecided	3	7	2.5	21
Disagree	2	29	10.6	58
Strongly disagree	1	50	18.1	50
Total	15	276	100	984

$$\text{Mean } (\bar{X}) = 3.57$$

From the analysis made in Table 3 above, 95 respondents strongly agreed and 95 agreed that there was no autonomy of local government in Nigeria. 7 respondents were undecided, 29 disagreed and 50 strongly disagreed with this view. The percentage of the respondents who supported this view was 68.8% as opposed to 31.2% of those who disagreed and those who were undecided on this point. The mean score is 3.57. So, we accept that there was no autonomy of local government in Nigeria.

Question 4: Does the politicization of local government bureaucracy in Nigeria account for its lack of autonomy?

Table 4. Politicization of local government bureaucracy

Option	F	X	%	FX
Strongly agree	5	90	32.6	450
Agree	4	95	34.4	380
Undecided	3	12	4.3	36
Disagree	2	29	10.6	58
Strongly disagree	1	50	18.1	50
Total	15	276	100	974

$$\text{Mean } (\bar{X}) = 3.53$$

From the analysis made in table 4 above, 90 respondents strongly agreed and 95 agreed that politicization of local government bureaucracy in Nigeria accounts for its lack of autonomy 12 respondents were undecided, 29 disagreed and 50 respondents strongly disagreed with this view. The percentage of the respondents who supported this view was 67% as opposed to 33% of those who disagreed and those who were undecided on this point. The mean score is 3.53 so we accept that the politicization of local government bureaucracy in Nigeria accounts for its lack of autonomy.

Question 5: Does corruption at the grass-root level account for the lack of local government autonomy and governance in Nigeria?

Table 5. Corruption versus local government autonomy and governance

Option	F	X	%	FX
Strongly agree	5	89	32.2	445
Agree	4	93	33.7	372
Undecided	3	8	2.9	24
Disagree	2	43	15.6	86
Strongly disagree	1	43	15.6	43
Total	15	276	100	970

$$\text{Mean } (\bar{X}) = 3.51$$

Table 5 indicates that 89 respondents strongly agreed and 93 agreed that corruption at the grass-root level accounts for a lack of local government autonomy and governance. 8 respondents were undecided, 43 disagreed while 43 strongly disagreed with this view. The percentage of the respondents who supported this view was 65.9% as opposed to 34.1 % of those who disagreed and those who were undecided on this point. The mean score is 3.51. So, we accept that corruption at the grass-root level account for the lack of local government autonomy and governance.

Question 6: In your own opinion does state interference in local affairs contribute to a lack of local government autonomy and governance?

Table 6. State interference versus local government autonomy and governance

Option	F	X	%	FX
Strongly agree	5	104	37.6	520
Agree	4	76	27.5	304
Undecided	3	7	2.5	21
Disagree	2	37	13.5	74
Strongly disagree	1	52	18.9	52
Total	15	276	100	971

$$\text{Mean } (\bar{X}) = 3.52$$

Table 6 indicates that 104 respondents strongly agreed and 76 agreed that state interference in local affairs contributes to a lack of local government autonomy and governance. 7 respondents were undecided, 37 disagreed while 52 strongly disagreed with this view. The percentage of the respondents who supported this view was 65.1 % as opposed to 34.9 % of those who disagreed and those who were undecided on this point. The mean score is 3.52. So we accept that state interference in local affairs contributes to a lack of local government autonomy and governance.

Question 7: From your own opinion do you agree that the constitutional provisions portend intractable inter-governmental problems in which the local government is the “whipping child” contribute to its being less autonomous?

Table 7. Constitutional provision versus intergovernmental problems

Option	F	X	%	FX
Strongly agree	5	102	36.9	510
Agree	4	90	32.7	360
Undecided	3	5	1.9	15
Disagree	2	59	21.3	118
Strongly disagree	1	20	7.2	20
Total	15	276	100	1023

Mean (\bar{X}) = 3.71

From the analysis on table 7 above, 102 respondents strongly agreed and 90 agreed that the constitutional provision portends intractable inter-government problems which makes the local government the “whipping child” and becomes less autonomous 5 respondents were undecided, 59 disagreed and 20 strongly disagreed with this view. The percentage of the respondents who supported this view was 69.6 % as opposed to 30.4 % of those who disagreed and those who were undecided on this point. The mean score is 3.71. So we agree or accept that the constitutional provisions portend intractable inter-government problems which makes the local government a whipping child and less autonomous.

Discussions

Constitutional autonomy

[The 1999 constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria \(section 7\)](#) empowers the states to exert sufficient control over the local governments under their jurisdiction. This arrangement neither promotes the autonomy of local governments nor protects staff from the whims of state government. State governments have, therefore, by that power exerted tremendous control over staff in the local governments: ranging from recruitment, through promotion, to postings. There is no doubt that one of the cardinal objectives of the 1976 local government reform was to devolve governmental powers to the grassroots by making local government areas the third tier of government. This tier status was strengthened first by the 1979 constitution which made elaborate provisions to this effect by making it explicit that the Nigeria federal structure is “three-tier” viz. federal, state, and local. However, the same constitution almost explicitly gives state governments certain fundamental regulatory supervisory and statutory fiscal powers over the local government, which encumbers the exercise of genuine autonomy by the latter.

Furthermore, although all the communities in Nigeria are constituent parts of one local government area or another, (be it rural or urban), the power of appointment, deposition, and control of Traditional council members does not in any significant way reside in the Local Government Authority, notwithstanding the subordination of the functions of the traditional rulers to local Government Authorities as contained in section (1) of the Fourth Schedule. This concurrent power over traditional rulers leaves the local government without authentic control over the socio-cultural matters of their constituent communities. Since the traditional officers tend to owe allegiance to the state government which has more effective powers to determine the fate of their tenure. Along with the above, the Draft constitution of 1999 further provides the consent of the state council of chiefs shall be sought in matters of creating new chieftaincy or up-grading of any chief or making of any law which may improve the security of tenure or dignity of the traditional institution (section 8, subsections). Thus, nowhere is mention made of the input of the local government chairman, even though traditional rulers are deemed to perform their cultural and statutory functions under the supervision of the relevant local Government Authority. In this study, most of the respondents were of the view that Nigeria's local government had no autonomy. Considering items 13 in which we were to know if the constitutional provision portends intractable intergovernmental problems in which the local government is the “whipping child”. Our study strongly supports the fact the constitution provision weakens the powers of the local governments as the majority of the LGA workers claimed.

The constitutional implication of the results and findings

The insincerity of the three constitutions (1979, 1989, and 1999) claiming to provide a full tier local government is borne by our experiences since the local government reforms of 1976. Some of the areas where the local government's functions have been encroached upon by the state governments are:

Refuse disposal and other sanitary projects are areas that local governments have traditionally exercised exclusive authority. But over the years, the state governments in many parts of the federation have been interfering under the specially established environmental sanitation authorities. The local governments on their part can do no more than accuse state officials of wanting to usurp their lucrative sources of revenue, but they can hardly do more than this. Matters are by no means helped by the endemic incidence of military administration in Nigeria which over several years guaranteed the prevalence of the unitarist phenomenon in Nigeria's federalism. However, in 1987, the Federal Government established the Directorate of Food, Roads, and Rural infrastructure (DFFRI). The objective of this body was to bring about rural development in an area that any fair-minded observer would see as the exclusive preserve of the local government. An examination of its functions will reveal that it is encroaching on the functions of the local government. Yet the local government will perform them very efficiently with a strong financial base. Experience during the well-days of DFFRI the state Directorate was that of the incessant clash between DFFRI Officials and local Government officials, as the former tended to duplicate local government function in the area of rural development. It is interesting to note that the area of jurisdictional rivalry between the state and local governments are mainly the lucrative ones, like rate collection, distribution of fertilizers, and other farm inputs like pesticides. This is, perhaps, one of the most veritable of the inhibitory factors, which confronts the local government system in its bid to fulfill its responsibilities to the local peoples.

Financial autonomy

Another finding from our study is that finance is a major problem confronting local governments especially in developing countries like Nigeria. There is a doubt that the ability of the local governments to perform their constitutionally assigned functions depends on the funds available to them. [Okoli \(1998\)](#) is of the view that section (1) sub-section (8, 9, and 10) of the Decree subordinated the financial fortunes of the local government to the full glare and, sometimes scrutiny of the state government. Even though the statutory allocations due to the local government councils were paid to them directly, the mere fact that both the National and State Assemblies should by the provisions of section 1 (8A and B), make provisions for statutory allocations of public revenue to the local government councils within the state, was limiting factor.

Section 1 (a) of the Decree, as well as section 34A, as amended provided for an Auditor-General for the local government of a state, who should be appointed by the Governor of the state, to audit annually the accounts of the local government, and the report thereof should be laid before the House of Assembly of the state. Section 1 (a) stated that "subject to the provisions of part I to IV of this Decree, the House of Assembly of state, shall enact a law providing for the structure, composition, revenue, expenditure and other financial matters, staff meeting and other relevant matters for the local governments in the state. From the stipulations of this constitution oral provision, local government councils cannot claim to be autonomous, especially in the area of finance. However, going back to item No 12 in respect to state interference in the local government autonomy and governance.

Personnel autonomy

An institution claims to be autonomous where it can hire and fire its personnel. In the case of the local government, it is the state government that sets up the local government service commission and appoints its members.

Sections 29 to 33 provided for the existence and functions of a local government service commission. The main functions of the commission included the following:

- (i) To set up general and uniform guidelines for appointments, promotions, and discipline,
- (ii) To monitor the activities of each local government to ensure that the guidelines are strictly and uniformly adhered to, and
- (iii) To serve as a review body for all petitions from local governments in respect of appointments, promotions, and discipline.

In addition to the personnel functions of the local government service commission, there were also the provisions of sections 34 and 34A, as amended by Decree No 25 of 1990, on the removal of the chairman or vice-chairman of a local government council.

It would, however, appear that devolution has not worked smoothly and successfully in Nigeria's local government. Freedom has thus been greatly circumvented by state government actors. Political and financial institutional arrangements for such performance have played into the hands of the state governments and local government political leadership and bureaucracy. While the state government is empowered by the constitution to control the purse, and play the superior governmental role in the relationship, leadership at the local level has not been able to translate political devolution into tangible benefits, thus becoming a liability to the system. For local government autonomy and governance to be appreciated, state encroachment should be reduced or completely erased so that the grass root development which forms the principal objectives for the creation of local government can be achieved.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, literature and experience have made it clear that statutory and constitutional provisions, no matter how full-proof they may be, cannot guarantee true autonomy for the local government as a tier, unless the political will exists on the part of a statesman to rationalize and stabilize this very critical level of government. Both the state and the federal levels have over time tended to see the local government tier as a child that needs at times to be treated with a sense of paternalism and to some extent (and this is often) as an instrument for political and material aggrandizement.

Also based on the findings, local governments lack autonomy because of inadequate finance. The increases in local revenues as a result of the allocation from the federal account and the value-added tax (VAT) look significant. However, if we consider the demand on the financial resources of the local governments, they still do not have adequate revenue. Their financial stability has been weakened by frequent increases in number through fragmentation.

Recommendations

In the light of the challenges examined above, the following recommendations are proposed:

To enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the local government system, there is an urgent need to review the constitution and delineate areas of inter-governmental frictions especially in electoral matters, creation of local governments, tenure of councils, and finance. The council elections should be conducted as and when due, to avoid a democratic vacuum that is dangerous to the local government system. The political party leaders should insist on the performance of local councils rather than demanding patronage of the council leadership.

Given the weak revenue base of the local government as a third-tier government, state government unconstitutional responsibilities not backed up financially, the state governors should not encroach on the lucrative responsibilities of local governments or misappropriate local government funds in any form similarly, local governments should creatively establish avenues for revenue generation to avoid depending heavily on the statutory allocations.

The state joint local government account should be scrapped. This will reduce the problems of illegal deductions, extra-budgetary impositions, under-allocation, etc. it will then be easy to lay the blame for non-performance and financial mismanagements squarely at somebody's table.

Because of the above and to understand and appreciate the issue of local government autonomy and governance, we believe that if the above recommendations are strictly adhered to, then Nkanu west local government which is the study area of this work will benefit and perform its functions more efficiently and so justify its status as the third tier of government in a federal system.

Limitation and future studies

Based on the findings of the study, the use of only the Nkanu-west local government area for the study may have limited the generalization of the findings. This is because other local governments could have

provided more valid information on the opportunities and problems, which confront the Nigerian local government system.

Based on the limitations of the present study, we suggest that further research studies in this area should be undertaken with more local governments included in the study and hence, larger sample size to enable greater confidence in the generalization of results.

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