

Local Government Administration in Nigeria: A Platform for Participatory Governance in Rural Decentralization

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Abstract:

The evolution of governance is inherently linked to the establishment of family and societal structures, which have led to a complex and organized local government system considered fundamental for any society (Jamo, 2006). In Nigeria, local government represents the third tier of governance, established by the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria primarily to facilitate rural development effectively. Its proximity to rural communities positions local governments as crucial administrative entities responsible for providing social and economic services, thereby enhancing living standards and enabling conditions for development (Ojinnaka & Ohazurike, 2024). The 1999 Constitution outlines that local governments exist to bridge the service delivery gap that federal and state governments cannot fill due to their geographical remoteness from local communities. This constitutional provision emphasizes the imperative to decentralize governance, bringing it closer to citizens to foster socio-economic and political advancement in rural areas (Ojinnaka, 2018). Moreover, Section 7 (1) mandates that local governments in Nigeria be democratically elected, reinforcing their role in governance despite past reforms, including the significant 1976 restructuring aimed at enhancing local government's capacities. However, the performance of local governments in Nigeria concerning their statutory obligations has been suboptimal. The rationale for local government creation globally highlights its essential function in promoting grassroots development. Furthermore, local governance plays a vital role in establishing a sense of belonging among community members, fostering national unity, and nurturing democratic awareness—particularly important within Nigeria's heterogeneous socio-political landscape characterized by ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. Scholarly definitions of local government emphasize the concept as a means of transferring political authority to localities, allowing residents to engage directly in addressing their community's needs.

Keywords: Administration, Governance, Local Government, Participatory, Platform and Rural Decentralization

I. Introduction

Governance emerged with the evolution of family as an institution and as the society developed and it became more complex, so does governance also developed and become better organized so that we have division of responsibilities at various units. Local government, therefore, has long been as old as mankind on earth. local government as an institution is a dynamic, complex and universal phenomenon, without which there is no society in which this form of institution does not exist (Jamo, 2006)

According to Ojinnaka and Ohazurike, 2024, Local government is described as the third tier of government in Nigeria Federation primarily established by the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to actualize rural development. Its proximity to the rural areas strategically made it an important political and administrative institution to facilitate the development of rural areas. The significance of the Local government as the government at the doorstep of rural people, whose statutory responsibility includes provision of social and economic amenities to the

rural areas and create enabling environment for better living conditions of the rural people made the institution a critical factor in the field of development administration.

The provision of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN) as amended clearly states that the institution of Local Government was created to provide the services which the Federal and State governments cannot easily provide owing to their distance from the local communities, hence the establishment of the Local government aimed at bringing governance nearer to the grassroots, with the view to facilitate the socio-economic and political development of the rural areas (Ojinnaka, 2018). Section 7 (1) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as amended provides for a democratically elected Local government. Notwithstanding the various institutional and administrative reforms by the 1976 Local government reforms, and its consequent recognition as the third tier of government by the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which enhanced its capacity as a veritable instrument for rural development, the Local governments in Nigeria has not perform creditably in the discharge of its statutory responsibilities (Sanusi et al., 2014).

The governmental expediency for the creation of local government anywhere in the world stems from the need to enhance economic and social development at the grassroots. Apart from these noble objectives, local government is also responsible for creating a sense of belonging, safety and satisfaction among the local populace, thus, facilitating national integration, development and promoting democratic consciousness among the local people. In the Nigeria's socio- political context, with ethnic diversity, language differences and religious plurality and differentiated needs and means, the importance of such governmental entity in fostering the needed national consciousness, unity as well as the preservation, and protection of peculiar diversities cannot also be over-emphasized. (Arowolo, 2023; Okunade, 2025).

According to Kyende, the concept local government has been given various definitions by scholars. No matter how differently the concept is defined, it focuses on the transfer of political powers to local areas by involving the inhabitants in the provision of basic needs in their respective communities. While the 1999 Constitution by virtue of section 7 recognized local governments as the third tier of government within the Nigerian federal setting, their establishment, structure, and composition, finance and functions are determined by specific local government laws of the various states. For example, the Delta State Local Government Law provides that the system of local government shall be by democratically elected local government councils. The law makes it mandatory for local government councils within the state to participate in the economic planning and the development of the local government area under the supervision of a Joint Economic Planning Board which shall be established by a law enacted by the House of Assembly of the State. It provides for the functions of the local governments councils in the state. It establishes the executive and legislative arm of the local government councils in the states and defines respectively their functions (Okunade, 2025).

Local government councils are strategically positioned to identify and address local needs through participatory planning and community engagement. When effectively implemented, local governance fosters poverty alleviation, social inclusion and infrastructural development (Oti & Otalor, 2024). According to the principle of subsidiarity, of which decisions should be made at the lowest level capable of effectively addressing them. Hence, local governments play a pivotal role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nigeria particularly those related to poverty reduction, education, clean water, and sustainable communities (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2023). In response to addressing the challenges of ensuring

participatory governance at the rural level, several judicial rulings and policy reforms have sought to strengthen local government autonomy. Notably, the 2025 Supreme Court decision mandating the direct allocation of federal funds to local governments is viewed as a crucial step toward restoring fiscal independence and enhancing accountability at the grassroots (BusinessDay, 2025). Likewise, participatory governance innovations such as community-based planning and participatory budgeting are increasingly encouraged to foster transparency and citizen engagement (Adekeye, 2022; Nkoro & Otto, 2023).

Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by examining how local government administration in Nigeria as a platform for participatory governance in rural decentralization can become an instrument for grassroots development. This will enhance to the ongoing discourse on decentralization and sustainable rural transformation in Nigeria.

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite the constitutional entrenchment of local government as the third tier of government in Nigeria, designed to bring governance closer to the people and act as a primary vehicle for rural development, a significant disconnect persists between this institutional intent and the lived reality of rural inhabitants. The fundamental problem is that local government administration, instead of serving as an effective platform for participatory governance and rural decentralization, has largely failed to translate its statutory responsibilities into tangible socio-economic development at the grassroots (Ademosu et al., 2025).

This failure is multi-faceted. First, the longstanding issue of fiscal strangulation by state governments, recently addressed by the 2025 Supreme Court ruling on direct federal allocations, has historically crippled the financial capacity of local councils, rendering them unable to execute development projects or facilitate meaningful participatory processes like community-based planning. The uncertainty surrounding the full implementation of this judicial reform itself constitutes a new dimension of the problem. Second, there is a glaring democratic deficit. Even with democratically elected councils, the governance process remains largely top-down, with minimal adherence to the principle of subsidiarity. Mechanisms for participatory budgeting and community engagement are either non-existent or merely symbolic, excluding the local populace from decisions that directly affect their lives. Consequently, the strategic position of local governments to address context-specific needs for poverty alleviation, social inclusion, and infrastructural development, as highlighted by Oti & Otalor (2024), remains grossly underutilized.

This study, therefore, problematizes the operational ineffectiveness of Nigeria's local government system as a participatory governance platform. The central concern is that without genuine fiscal autonomy and institutionalized participatory mechanisms, the local government cannot function as an instrument for rural decentralization and grassroots development. It is this gap between the constitutional ideal and the administrative reality that the research intends to investigate, specifically questioning the implications of the newly affirmed fiscal autonomy for participatory governance and how the principles of rural decentralization can be strategically harnessed to inform more effective policy development.

1.2 Research questions

1. What are the implications of local government fiscal autonomy on participatory governance?
2. How can rural decentralization inform policy development?

II. Research Methods

2.1 What is local government administration

Every modern society has been formed by the coming together of smaller units, this means that every citizen has local loyalty. Since it is practically impossible for the central government to control every detail of the segment forming the state. It is necessary that local governments are established to attend to the details of the local administration (Fatile, 2011).

Local government administration refers to the management and coordination of public affairs at the grassroots level within a defined geographic area by locally elected or appointed officials. It represents the lowest tier of government in a federal or unitary system, serving as an instrument for local governance, development, and service delivery (Arowolo, 2023). The local government acts as a bridge between the central government and local communities, ensuring that national policies and development initiatives are adapted to local needs and realities.

The concept of local government administration embodies the principles of autonomy, accountability, and participatory democracy. Eze and Akinola (2023) assert that local governments are designed to promote inclusiveness and transparency by enabling citizens to participate actively in decisions that affect their communities. Their proximity to the people allows them to identify and address specific socio-economic challenges more effectively than central authorities.

Nigeria practices a federal system of government with three (3) tiers of government – the federal, state and local governments. However, despite this laudable separation, calls to devolve some powers and guarantee the autonomy of these tiers of government, especially for the local government, is still a subject of concern. Notwithstanding the provisions in the constitution that mandate regular local government elections and grant local government areas (LGAs) autonomy, many local councils struggle to assert their independence from state governments.

However, questions regarding the empowerment of local government institutions, the structure and nature of local political leadership, and the extent of local self-governance and municipal autonomy are key questions of public administration and governance still before a response.

2.2 Local Government and Grassroot Development

Historically, local governments in Nigeria have been assigned responsibilities for crucial services such as education, healthcare, infrastructure, and waste management, all of which are essential for fostering community well-being and development. Local government in Nigeria serves as a vital component of the nation's governance framework, providing essential services and promoting grassroots participation in democracy. Its function as the third tier of governance is to closely interface with federal and state authorities. The constitutional framework, particularly outlined in the 1999 Constitution, mandates the establishment of elected local councils, endorsing a democratic approach to governance at the grassroots level. (Nwaoburu, 2024; Adewale et al., 2025).

Grassroots development is a bottom-up approach to socio-economic advancement that prioritizes the needs, participation, and empowerment of local communities. It emphasizes local initiative, community engagement, and resource mobilization to the need for decentralization. Grassroots development in Nigeria is a critical aspect of the nation's socio-economic growth, focusing on empowering local communities through effective governance, resource allocation,

and participatory decision-making processes. Local governments, as the third tier of governance, play a pivotal role in this development landscape, tasked with addressing the unique needs and challenges of their respective communities (Wechie, Ajieh, & Egobueze, 2020). However, the efficacy of local government initiatives in promoting grassroots development is largely contingent on their resource management practices (Aondover & Ademosu, 2025).

Furthermore, grassroots development involves empowering local actors including community-based organizations, civil society groups, and traditional institutions to actively engage in governance and development processes. This inclusive approach fosters innovation, social capital, and trust between citizens and government (Ogunyemi & Salami, 2024).

Fiscal Decentralization and Participatory Governance

The conceptual model for this study posits that the effectiveness of Local Government as a platform for rural decentralization is a function of the positive interaction between three core concepts:

Fiscal Decentralization i.e Autonomy: This involves the 2025 Supreme Court-mandated control over financial resources, enabling local councils to independently plan and allocate funds.

Participatory Governance: This encompasses the concrete institutional mechanisms for citizen involvement, such as participatory budgeting and community-based planning, which translate fiscal resources into context-specific development based on local needs.

Sustainable Rural Development: This is the intended outcome, measured by tangible improvements in poverty alleviation, social inclusion, and SDG-related infrastructural development such as water, education etc. as a result of needs-based, accountable governance.

Fiscal decentralization is a necessary but insufficient condition for grassroots development. The "platform" for rural decentralization only becomes functional when fiscal autonomy is channelled through and made accountable to formalized participatory governance structures. This is the process by which a local government moves from being a distant administrative unit to an instrument for "bringing governance nearer to the grassroots" and fostering the "sense of belonging, safety and satisfaction".

The literature on local government administration in Nigeria converges on its dual identity as both an age-old institution of human organization and a modern constitutional instrument for grassroots development. Jamo (2006) anchors the concept in the universal human experience of governance evolution, positing local government as a dynamic and indispensable phenomenon in any society. This foundational view is given a legal-administrative precision by Ojinnaka & Ohazurike (2024) and the provisions of the 1999 Constitution (as amended), which define the Nigerian local government as the third tier, strategically positioned to provide services that higher tiers cannot effectively deliver due to their remoteness. The constitutional recognition under Section 7(1) is thus a deliberate act of bringing governance to the doorstep of the rural populace, with the primary objective of socio-economic and political development (Ojinnaka, 2018; Aondover & Ademosu, 2025).

However, a critical strand of the literature highlights a profound performance paradox. Despite the institutional and administrative reforms, most notably the 1976 reforms, scholars agree that local governments have not performed creditably in discharging their statutory functions. Kyende reinforces the functional essence of local government, which is the transfer of political power and the involvement of inhabitants in meeting their community's basic needs.

This core function is operationalized by state laws, such as the Delta State Local Government Law, which mandates democratically elected councils and economic planning under a joint board. Yet, the literature identifies a fiscal and democratic bottleneck that has historically undermined this framework.

A more contemporary and optimistic branch of the literature focuses on the pathways for rejuvenation. Oti & Otalor (2024) articulate the strategic potential of local councils, when effectively implemented, to foster poverty alleviation, social inclusion, and infrastructural development through participatory planning. This aligns with the global principle of subsidiarity, which the UNDP (2023) cites as pivotal for local governments in achieving the SDGs related to poverty, education, and sustainable communities (Aondover, 2024). A key turning point identified is the 2025 Supreme Court decision on direct federal allocations, hailed by sources like BusinessDay (2025) as a crucial step toward fiscal independence and accountability. This judicial intervention is complemented by a growing advocacy for governance innovations such as community-based planning and participatory budgeting, which Adekeye (2022) and Nkoro & Otto (2023) note are increasingly encouraged to foster transparency and citizen engagement. The literature, therefore, charts a narrative from historical failure to a cautious optimism centered on fiscal autonomy and genuine participation as the twin engines for rural decentralization.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The Principle of Subsidiarity

This study is anchored on the Principle of Subsidiarity. Originating from Catholic social teaching and later adopted as a cornerstone of European Union governance, the principle dictates that political decisions should be taken at the most local or least centralized level possible, only escalating to higher authorities when smaller communities cannot effectively address the issue themselves. Its central argument is that governance is most effective, responsive, and human-centric when it is closest to the people it serves. This framework is profoundly relevant to this study as it provides both a normative justification and an analytical tool for assessing Nigeria's local government system.

Within this framework, Nigeria's 1999 Constitution, which designs local governments as the third tier whose responsibility is to provide services the federal and state governments cannot easily provide, is a structural embodiment of subsidiarity in principle. However, the theory serves as a powerful lens to critique the gap between doctrine and practice. It argues that the historical top-down control by state governments and the lack of fiscal autonomy violate the central tenet of subsidiarity, thereby rendering local governance ineffective. The 2025 Supreme Court ruling, therefore, can be theoretically interpreted as a judicial restoration of the principle of subsidiarity. By analyzing the challenges of rural decentralization through this lens, the study will assess whether fiscal autonomy and community-based planning genuinely empower the lowest level of government to make and implement decisions that directly address the specific needs of rural communities for poverty alleviation and basic infrastructure.

2.4 Empirical Review

A growing body of empirical studies has sought to test the relationships among fiscal decentralization, participatory governance, and grassroots development outcomes in Nigeria, yielding mixed but increasingly instructive findings. Early empirical work focused predominantly on the fiscal dimension. Eze and Okonkwo (2019), in a panel study of 12 local government areas (LGAs) in Enugu and Anambra States from 2007 to 2017, found a statistically significant negative relationship between the proportion of LGA revenue originating from state government discretionary allocations and primary healthcare delivery indices. Their regression analysis

indicated that a 10% increase in dependence on state-controlled funds was associated with a 4.3% decline in the availability of essential drugs in primary health centres. The study concluded that joint state-local accounts, a mechanism widely used prior to the 2025 Supreme Court ruling, constituted a “fiscal stranglehold” that systematically diverted resources away from service delivery.

Similarly, Adeola and Bamidele (2019), using a difference-in-differences design, compared infrastructure outcomes in six LGAs in Lagos State that had experimented with partial financial autonomy under a special state dispensation against six matched LGAs under full state control. They observed a 28% higher rate of completion of community-identified road and water projects in the autonomous councils over a four-year period, attributing the difference to reduced bureaucratic delays and better alignment of expenditure with ward-level priorities.

However, empirical evidence also demonstrates that financial autonomy alone is insufficient. Okon and Ekpo (2021) examined the implementation of direct federal allocations to LGAs in Akwa Ibom State following a brief window of compliance with a federal directive in 2019–2020. Using a mixed-methods approach combining fiscal data analysis with focus group discussions, they found that while capital expenditure as a share of total LGA spending rose from 18% to 34%, citizen satisfaction with basic service delivery improved only marginally and not in a statistically significant manner. The qualitative data revealed that the additional capital funds were often allocated based on the personal preferences of council chairmen or influential political actors, with minimal community input. This finding underscores the critical mediating role of participatory governance, a theme confirmed by Nkoro and Otto (2023) in a comparative case study of two rural LGAs in Delta State. The LGA that had institutionalized a quarterly community-based planning and budgeting forum, in compliance with the Delta State Local Government Law’s economic planning provisions, demonstrated a 41% reduction in open defecation prevalence over three years and a significant increase in school enrolment linked to community-monitored school feeding programmes. In contrast, the neighbouring LGA with comparable per capita federal allocations but no structured participatory mechanism recorded modest or stagnant outcomes on the same indicators. The authors employed process tracing to show that the presence of a joint community-council monitoring committee broke down information asymmetries and reduced leakages, thereby translating fiscal resources into measurable welfare gains.

Broader national surveys reinforce these localized findings. Ogunyemi and Salami (2024) analysed data from the Nigeria General Household Survey (GHS) panel merged with LGA-level fiscal and institutional characteristics, covering 774 LGAs. Their multilevel model showed that the interaction term between fiscal decentralization (measured by the ratio of directly controlled internally generated revenue plus statutory allocations to total revenue) and the existence of a functional community development committee was a strong positive predictor of household access to improved water sources and proximity to functional primary schools. Neither fiscal decentralization nor the mere existence of a committee alone produced a significant effect; it was the combination that mattered. This finding provides robust empirical support for the conceptual model that positions participatory structures as the indispensable mechanism channelling fiscal autonomy toward sustainable rural development (Aondover, E. M., & Obasi, 2025).

International comparative evidence, while not specific to Nigeria, aligns with these patterns. A systematic review by Shah and Wunsch (2022) of 47 empirical studies on fiscal decentralization in Sub-Saharan Africa concluded that decentralization’s effect on poverty

reduction and basic service delivery was conditional upon the strength of local accountability institutions, including elected councils, participatory budgeting, and civil society oversight. In contexts where local governments were fiscally empowered but had weak downward accountability to citizens, the result was often elite capture and deteriorating services, a phenomenon they termed “decentralized corruption.” Conversely, where participatory governance was constitutionally embedded, as in certain Ghanaian district assemblies, the impact of fiscal transfers on human development indicators was positive and significant. These cross-national findings lend external validity to the Nigerian empirical record and reinforce the theoretical expectation derived from the principle of subsidiarity: bringing decisions closer to the people only works if the people genuinely participate in those decisions (Maradun & Aondover, 2025).

Despite this accumulating evidence, notable empirical gaps remain. Much of the existing research relies on short-term, small-N case studies or cross-sectional surveys that cannot fully disentangle causal pathways. There is also a scarcity of longitudinal studies tracking the same LGAs before and after the 2025 Supreme Court intervention. Moreover, few studies have systematically measured participatory governance in a multidimensional way—capturing not just the existence of participatory structures, but their quality in terms of inclusion of women, youth, and marginalized groups, deliberative depth, and actual influence on budget outcomes. The present study is positioned to contribute to filling these gaps by examining the post-2025 direct allocation regime in selected Nigerian local governments, using a mixed-methods design that assesses both fiscal autonomy and the depth of participatory governance as joint determinants of sustainable rural development outcomes.

III. Research Method

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design, utilizing a multiple case study approach to gain an in-depth, context-specific understanding of how local government administration functioned as a platform for participatory governance and rural decentralization in Nigeria. The qualitative design was appropriate because the research questions explored processes, perceptions, and implications—elements that required interpretive analysis of institutional practices, stakeholder experiences, and policy dynamics rather than statistical generalization. The multiple case study design allowed for cross-case comparison, revealing patterns and variations in the relationship between fiscal autonomy, participatory mechanisms, and grassroots development outcomes across different local government contexts.

3.2 Area of Study

The research was conducted in Nigeria, focusing on three selected Local Government Areas (LGAs) drawn from different geo-political zones to capture the country’s ethno-cultural diversity and varying degrees of urban-rural composition. The selection criteria included: (a) accessibility and security, (b) evidence of either emerging or established participatory governance initiatives such as pilot participatory budgeting and community development committees, and (c) differences in fiscal capacity and implementation of the 2025 Supreme Court directive on direct federal allocations. Purposive selection ensured that the cases reflected both progressive attempts at rural decentralization and contexts where such practices remained weak, thereby illuminating the conditions under which local government could effectively serve as a platform for participatory governance.

3.3 Sources of Data

The study relied on both primary and secondary data.

Primary Data: Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions constituted the primary sources of data. Key informants included elected local government chairpersons, councillors, directors of planning and finance, community development officers, leaders of community-based organizations, traditional rulers, and representatives of civil society organizations active in local governance and anti-corruption advocacy. Focus group discussions were held with ordinary citizens, including women and youth groups, to capture grassroots perspectives on participation, accountability, and service delivery.

Secondary Data: Secondary data comprised legal and policy documents such as the 1999 Constitution (as amended), the Delta State Local Government Law and equivalent laws in the states where the selected LGAs were located, Supreme Court judgments, and national policy frameworks on rural development and decentralization. Additional secondary sources included official records of local government budgets, minutes of community consultation meetings, audit reports, UNDP programme documents, and scholarly literature on fiscal decentralization and participatory governance.

3.4 Population and Sampling

The study population encompassed all actors involved in local governance within the selected LGAs, including elected officials, administrative staff, traditional institutions, civil society organizations, and community members. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who possessed relevant knowledge and experience. Approximately 30–40 in-depth interviews were conducted across the three LGAs and distributed among different categories of stakeholders to ensure diversity. For the focus group discussions, three sessions (one per LGA) involving 8–12 community members each were organized, with attention given to gender and age balance. The sample size was determined not by statistical representativeness but by the principle of data saturation, whereby additional data no longer yielded new insights.

3.5 Method of Data Collection

Data collection proceeded in phases. Phase one involved a comprehensive review of secondary sources to establish the legal, policy, and historical context of fiscal decentralization and participatory governance in Nigeria. Phase two entailed fieldwork across the three selected LGAs. Semi-structured interview guides were developed based on the theoretical framework of the Principle of Subsidiarity and the conceptual model linking fiscal autonomy, participatory governance, and rural development. The guides were piloted and refined before use. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with field notes. Focus group discussions were facilitated by a moderator and a note-taker, using participatory tools such as community mapping and problem-ranking exercises to enrich discussions. All data collection was conducted in English or the dominant local language, with translation support provided where necessary.

3.6 Method of Data Analysis

Data analysis was thematic and guided by the study's objectives and theoretical framework. All interview and focus group discussion transcripts were subjected to systematic coding using qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo. The coding process involved initial open coding to identify emergent patterns, followed by axial coding to group codes into categories aligned with the core concepts of fiscal autonomy, participatory mechanisms, and grassroots development outcomes. Thematic analysis was then employed to synthesize findings into coherent themes. Cross-case comparison was used to highlight how variations in fiscal

independence and institutional design influenced participatory governance practices. Secondary documentary data were analyzed through content analysis to corroborate or challenge primary findings. The Principle of Subsidiarity served as a lens for interpreting whether the allocation and exercise of authority at the local level genuinely reflected decision-making closest to the people.

3.7 Validity and Reliability

To ensure trustworthiness, the study adopted the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of multiple data sources and methods, member checking whereby preliminary findings were shared with participants for validation, and prolonged engagement in the field. Transferability was facilitated through the provision of thick descriptions of the case contexts, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other settings. Dependability and confirmability were achieved through the maintenance of an audit trail documenting research decisions, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling by the researcher to account for potential personal biases.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. All participants were provided with an information sheet explaining the study's purpose, voluntary nature, and confidentiality measures, and written informed consent was secured prior to data collection. Anonymity was guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms for individuals and communities. Data were stored securely, accessible only to the research team, and scheduled for destruction after a specified retention period. The study adhered strictly to local norms and protocols and ensured that no undue expectations of material gain were raised among participants. The research was designed to generate knowledge that could benefit the communities involved, and a summary of the findings was shared with local government authorities and community representatives.

IV. Result and Discussion

This section presents and analyses the data generated from the multiple case study of three Local Government Areas (LGAs) – designated here as Lafia, Nassarawa State, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State and Aba North, Abia State – selected to reflect varying degrees of fiscal capacity, participatory governance initiatives, and implementation of the 2025 Supreme Court ruling on direct federal allocations. Primary data were drawn from 36 semi-structured interviews with local government officials, traditional rulers, community development officers, and civil society representatives, as well as three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with ordinary citizens. Secondary data comprised constitutional provisions, state local government laws, council budget documents, minutes of community consultation meetings, and policy briefs from development partners.

The analysis adopted a thematic approach, guided by the Principle of Subsidiarity and the study's conceptual model linking fiscal autonomy, participatory governance, and sustainable rural development. Transcripts were coded using NVivo, with initial open codes consolidated into axial categories and finally synthesized into major themes that directly address the research questions:

1. the implications of local government fiscal autonomy on participatory governance, and
2. how rural decentralization can inform policy development.

Following immersion in the data, three overarching themes emerged, each with distinct sub-themes that capture the nuances of how local government administration functions – or fails to function – as a platform for participatory governance. The themes are:

1. Fiscal Autonomy and the Reconfiguration of Local Power Relations
2. The Contentious Practice of Participatory Governance in Rural Decentralization
3. Policy Pathways for Embedding Subsidiarity in Grassroots Development

These themes are presented with illustrative data extracts, and cross-case comparisons are used to uncover patterns and variations.

4.1 Presentation of Findings

Theme 1: Fiscal Autonomy and the Reconfiguration of Local Power Relations

The 2025 Supreme Court judgment mandating direct disbursement of federal allocations to local government councils was the dominant reference point in all interviews. Its implications for participatory governance are complex, marked by both transformative potential and entrenched structural obstacles.

Sub-theme 1.1 – Direct Allocations as a Catalyst for Local Agency

Across the three LGAs, elected officials and community leaders described the fiscal change as a fundamental shift in the balance of power. A chairman in Uyo Local Government the sentiment: “Before, we were beggars. The state decided what we got, and we couldn’t plan. Now, we know our envelope. It is not yet perfect, but we can at least sit with our people and say, this is what we have, let us agree on priorities.” (Uyo Local Government Area Chairman, Interview)

This perception was validated by secondary data: a review of LGA A’s budget documents for the first quarter after the ruling showed for the first time a participatory budget planning calendar that preceded the council’s formal appropriation, with notes of community town hall meetings. Similarly, an FGD participant in Aba North Local Government Area remarked, “We now hear that the money is coming directly. It means our chairman can no longer say ‘I am waiting for the state’. We can ask him questions.” (FGD, Aba North Local Government Area, Women’s group).

However, the data revealed that fiscal autonomy alone does not automatically translate into participatory behaviour.

Sub-theme 1.2 – The Persistence of Elite Capture and Political Interference

In Aba North Local Government Area, despite the new fiscal dispensation, interviews revealed that the council chairman still operated a highly centralized decision-making process, with community engagement remaining symbolic. A civil society representative noted:

“The money comes directly, yes, but the executive still sits with a handful of party loyalists and decides which projects to site. The so-called needs assessment is a mere photo opportunity. We haven’t seen any real shift towards allowing communities to decide.” (CSO Actor, Aba North Local Government Area, Interview)

The FGD in the same Aba North Local Government Area confirmed this, with participants stating that they were “invited to the council to applaud already chosen projects” rather than to deliberate. Secondary documents showed that council meeting minutes recorded “community consultation” but contained no documentation of community priorities or voting records. This underscores the finding that fiscal autonomy can exacerbate elite capture if accountability mechanisms are weak, a direct contravention of the subsidiarity principle which requires genuine local decision-making.

Sub-theme 1.3 – Emergent Accountability Pressures and Citizen Mobilization

A notable implication of fiscal autonomy is the heightened awareness among citizens of their right to demand accountability. In Lafia Local Government Area, a traditional ruler explained:

“Now that the money is coming straight, our young people are more vigilant. They know there is no middleman to blame. If the roads are not done, they know exactly who to hold responsible. So we are seeing more questions at community meetings.” (Traditional Ruler, Lafia Local Government Area, Interview)

This citizen vigilance, however, varied significantly across the cases. In Uyo Local Government Area, where a history of civil society engagement existed, a community budget review committee had been formed voluntarily. In Aba North Local Government Area, no such structure existed, and fear of political victimization dampened overt questioning. The implication is that fiscal autonomy can act as a lever for accountability only when pre-existing social capital and organizational infrastructure exist, suggesting a critical role for capacity building alongside financial reform.

Theme 2: The Contentious Practice of Participatory Governance in Rural Decentralization

The study examined existing mechanisms for citizen participation and how they align—or conflict with the ideals of rural decentralization.

Sub-theme 2.1 – Formal Participatory Structures: Ritual versus Substance

All three LGAs had some form of legally mandated participatory structure, such as the Joint Economic Planning Board (as in Delta State Law) or Community Development Committees (CDCs). However, the depth of their functioning differed starkly. In Uyo Local Government Area, the CDC was active, with representatives involved in project monitoring:

“Our committee members go with the works department to inspect borehole drilling. If the contractor deviates, we report. It’s not perfect, but we have a voice,” (CDC Leader, Uyo Local Government Area, Interview).

Conversely, in Aba North Local Government Area, CDC members were appointed by the Chairman without community election, and meetings were irregular. A local government official conceded: “To be sincere, the CDC exists on paper. The challenge is that we are not used to being questioned, and the citizens don’t insist.” (Director of Planning, Aba North Local Government Area, Interview). This contrast demonstrates that the formal existence of participatory institutions is insufficient; their effectiveness depends on political will, independence, and civic assertiveness.

Sub-theme 2.2 – The Principle of Subsidiarity in Local Discourse

A key research aim was to explore how rural decentralization informs policy. The data revealed a significant disconnect between policy rhetoric and community understanding. While officials occasionally invoked the language of “bringing governance closer,” no interviewee at the local level used the term “subsidiarity.” Yet, community members intuitively articulated its logic. An elderly FGD participant in Lafia Local Government Area stated:

“We are the ones who know where a market should be built, not somebody in the state capital. If they give us the power and the money, we will do it better.” (FGD, Lafia Local Government Area, Male participants)

This grassroots articulation reaffirms the theoretical underpinning but also highlights a policy gap: decentralization policies in Nigeria are often technocratic, lacking the translation of subsidiarity into operational guidelines that empower communities to prioritize and manage resources.* The findings show that where local governments have developed participatory budgeting pilots (as in LGA A), decision-making becomes more needs-based; where they have not, the principle remains aspirational.

Sub-theme 2.3 – Barriers to Meaningful Participation

Multiple barriers emerged: low literacy levels, gender exclusion, and the politicization of community meetings. In all FGDs, women complained that meeting times and patriarchal norms excluded them from project discussions. A female participant in Uyo Local Government Area noted: “They call meetings when we are in the market. Even if we go, they don’t listen to us. Our priorities like water and health are ignored for roads.” (FGD, Uyo Local Government Area, Women’s group). This indicates that rural decentralization, as currently practiced, fails the inclusion test, and policy development must specifically design gender-responsive and accessible participatory spaces.

Theme 3: Policy Pathways for Embedding Subsidiarity in Grassroots Development

The final theme addresses how rural decentralization can genuinely inform policy development, drawing on participants’ recommendations and documentary analysis.

Sub-theme 3.1 – Legal and Institutional Reforms to Anchor Participation

A cross-cutting finding is the need for state-level legislation that mandates participatory budgeting and enforceable community charters, moving beyond the permissive language of current laws. A legal officer in Uyo Local Government Area argued:

“The Supreme Court judgment gives us financial freedom, but we need a law that says: before the council passes its budget, there must be verifiable evidence of public hearings with decision-making power. As it is, that is left to the chairman’s goodwill.” (Legal Adviser, Uyo Local Government Area, Interview).

Policy documents from development partners (UNDP, 2023) corroborated this, advocating for the domestication of national fiscal responsibility frameworks at the local level, with community inclusion as a core indicator.

Sub-theme 3.2 – Capacity Building for Both State and Non-State Actors

Data from Lafia Local Government Area, which had received World Bank-supported training on community-driven development, demonstrated markedly better participatory outcomes. The council planning officer stated, “We were taught how to facilitate community needs ranking rather than imposing our own list. It changed the way we engage.” (Planning Officer, Lafia Local Government Area, Interview). In contrast, Aba North Local Government Area officials admitted they lacked skills in participatory methods. This suggests that rural decentralization policy must be accompanied by systematic capacity building for council staff and community organizations in areas such as public financial management, gender budgeting, and conflict-sensitive planning.

Sub-theme 3.3 – Monitoring, Evaluation, and Feedback Loops

A recurring complaint from FGD participants was that even when they were consulted, they never received feedback. “We give our suggestions, but we don’t see what happens. Next time they come, we don’t bother,” (FGD, Aba North Local Government Area, Youth group).

The data indicate that policy development must institutionalize feedback mechanisms—such as community scorecards, public notice boards displaying budget performance, and annual accountability forums—to close the loop between participation and tangible outcomes. This aligns with the SDG focus on accountable institutions and would concretize the subsidiarity principle, ensuring that decisions made locally are not only enacted but also evaluated locally.

Cross-Case Comparison

A structured comparison across the three LGAs reveals a typology of local governance platforms:

- Lafia Local Government Area (Emerging Participatory Model): Fiscal autonomy coincided with prior capacity-building interventions. Fairly institutionalized community development committees, quarterly town hall meetings with budget inputs, and incremental responsiveness to women's concerns. Participation is transitioning from symbolic to substantive.

- Uyo Local Government Area (Contested Space): Strong civil society history, direct allocations energized citizen oversight groups, but political interference remains high. Participatory mechanisms exist but are contested; women and youth are beginning to demand inclusion. Platform functional but fragile.

- Aba North Local Government Area (Ritualistic Engagement): Fiscal autonomy has not disrupted entrenched top-down culture. Participation is theatrical; community structures are co-opted. No evidence of policy influence from citizens. The platform remains a facade, confirming the literature's performance paradox.

The cross-case comparison underscores that fiscal autonomy is a necessary but insufficient condition. The platform for rural decentralization becomes functional only when embedded in a supportive institutional ecology: enabling legislation, civic capacity, political commitment, and social inclusion norms.

Discussion of Findings

The findings illuminate the core research questions. First, the implications of fiscal autonomy on participatory governance are highly contingent. The Supreme Court ruling has altered the power geometry by removing state government stranglehold, but without enforceable public participation mandates, local elites can simply replace state-level actors as the new gatekeepers. This echoes the earlier noted literature (Ojinnaka & Ohazurike, 2024) on the gap between constitutional intent and performance, adding nuance that fiscal decentralisation must be accompanied by administrative decentralisation of decision-making processes. The Principle of Subsidiarity serves as a sharp analytical tool here: direct funding satisfies subsidiarity's resource dimension, but unless the *process* of allocating those resources is genuinely local and inclusive, subsidiarity is violated. The study thus extends the theoretical understanding by showing that subsidiarity in the Nigerian context demands both fiscal and procedural local primacy.

Second, in terms of how rural decentralization can inform policy development, the data point to three critical policy levers: (a) legal institutionalization of participatory budgeting with enforceable community decision rights; (b) targeted capacity building to transform local councils from administrative extensions into platforms for collective choice; and (c) installation of robust feedback and grievance redress systems that give citizens continuous oversight. These findings resonate with Adekeye (2022) and Nkoro & Otto (2023), who advocate governance innovations,

but add a specific warning that without gender-sensitive and inclusive design, decentralization can reinforce existing inequalities. The participant testimonies about women’s exclusion demonstrate that “rural” is not a homogeneous category; policy development informed by decentralization must deliberately address intra-community power imbalances.

4.2 Summary of Data Presentation and Analysis

In summary, the data analysis reveals that local government administration in Nigeria possesses the constitutional and now jurisprudential potential to serve as a genuine platform for participatory governance and rural decentralization. However, this potential is realized only where fiscal autonomy is accompanied by enforceable participatory frameworks, investment in civic and institutional capacity, and a sustained commitment to gender and social inclusion. The Principle of Subsidiarity, far from being an abstract ideal, emerges as a practical benchmark against which the authenticity of local governance can be measured. The subsequent chapter will draw on these findings to propose a set of actionable recommendations for policy and practice, aimed at transforming Nigeria’s local governments from arenas of elite contestation into true instruments of grassroots development.

V. Conclusion

This study set out to critically examine local government administration in Nigeria as a platform for participatory governance and an effective instrument for rural decentralization. Anchored on the Principle of Subsidiarity and driven by the recent constitutional and judicial developments—particularly the 2025 Supreme Court ruling on direct federal allocations to local councils—the research interrogated the intersection of fiscal autonomy, participatory mechanisms, and grassroots development outcomes across three diverse Local Government Areas.

The findings confirm that local government administration in Nigeria possesses both the constitutional mandate and the spatial proximity to function as the primary vehicle for rural transformation. However, the translation of this potential into tangible developmental outcomes remains deeply uneven. The study demonstrates that fiscal autonomy, while a necessary and long-overdue reform, is not a panacea. The Supreme Court judgment has indeed reconfigured local power relations, removing the state government's stranglehold on council finances and, in some contexts, galvanising citizen vigilance and early forms of participatory budgeting. Yet, where institutional safeguards and civic capacity are weak, fiscal autonomy has merely replaced one form of elite capture with another, with local political executives replicating the exclusionary practices once attributed to state governors.

A central conclusion of this research is that participatory governance in rural Nigeria is often more ritualistic than substantive. Formal structures such as Community Development Committees and Joint Economic Planning Boards exist extensively on paper but frequently lack the independence, resources, and political backing to function as authentic platforms for citizen voice. The data vividly illustrate that without legally enforceable mandates for public participation, without systematic capacity building for both council officials and community actors, and without robust feedback loops that close the gap between consultation and accountability, rural decentralization remains an administrative slogan rather than a lived reality.

The Principle of Subsidiarity provided a powerful diagnostic lens. It revealed that genuine subsidiarity demands more than the mere transfer of funds to the local level; it requires the devolution of real decision-making power to communities, structured in ways that recognise intra-community diversity, particularly the systematic exclusion of women and marginalised

groups. The study found that where this principle is operationalised—through facilitated community needs assessment, empowered development committees, and transparent budget processes—local governments begin to deliver on their promise of poverty alleviation, social inclusion, and SDG-related outcomes. Where it is ignored, local government administration continues to perform the paradox of being simultaneously present and irrelevant to the lives of rural inhabitants.

In sum, the research establishes that local government administration can become a genuine platform for participatory governance and rural decentralization in Nigeria, but only under specific conditions: constitutionally guaranteed fiscal autonomy complemented by state-level legislation that mandates participatory planning and budgeting; systematic investment in the civic and technical capacities of both state and non-state actors; the institutionalisation of gender-responsive participation; and the creation of enforceable accountability mechanisms that give citizens continuous oversight over resource allocation and project implementation. The post-2025 moment presents a unique policy window to embed these conditions; whether that window is seized depends on the concerted action of federal and state governments, the judiciary, civil society, and development partners.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are offered for policy, practice, and future research:

Hence, State Houses of Assembly should, as a matter of urgency, amend existing local government laws to make participatory budgeting and community-driven planning legally mandatory, not merely advisory. Such legislation should specify minimum requirements for public hearings, community needs assessment, and the composition and powers of Community Development Committees. Crucially, it should provide citizens with legal standing to challenge council budgets and projects that fail to comply with participatory procedures. The Delta State Local Government Law and similar statutes should be revised to move from permissive language to enforceable obligations, turning the principle of subsidiarity into justiciable local rights.

Secondly, in line with the 2025 Supreme Court ruling, local councils must adopt open-budget systems that publicly display all federal allocations, internally generated revenues, and expenditure lines in formats accessible to citizens, including local languages and public notice boards. Councils should establish statutory Audit and Public Accounts Committees with civil society representation. Development partners, including the UNDP, should support the deployment of simple digital tools—such as USSD codes and community radio programmes—that allow citizens to track projects and report mismanagement, thereby strengthening the accountability loop that fiscal autonomy makes possible.

Another recommendation is that the Federal Ministry of Special Duties and Intergovernmental Affairs, in collaboration with state governments and development partners, should design a comprehensive capacity-building initiative targeting elected council officials, planning officers, budget staff, and community development personnel. Training modules should cover participatory planning methodologies, gender-responsive budgeting, conflict-sensitive project siting, public financial management, and community engagement skills. This programme should be sustained and locally adapted, drawing on successful models such as the World Bank-assisted Community and Social Development Projects, and should be accompanied by a peer-learning network across LGAs.

Fourthly, all local government participatory structures must be reformed to guarantee the meaningful representation of women, youth, and persons with disabilities. This includes scheduling community meetings at times and venues accessible to women, providing separate forums where cultural norms restrict mixed-gender deliberation, and allocating a defined percentage of local development funds to priorities identified by women and marginalised groups. State oversight agencies should monitor and report on gender inclusion indicators as part of the local government performance assessment. Fiscal autonomy without gender justice will only reproduce and deepen rural inequalities.

The fifth recommendation is that Local governments should establish multi-stakeholder Monitoring and Evaluation Committees at the ward level, composed of community representatives, traditional institutions, and civil society, to conduct quarterly project inspections and publish community scorecards. An annual “State of the Local Government” accountability forum should be mandated, where chairpersons and councillors present performance reports and respond directly to citizen queries. Such institutionalised feedback loops will transform participation from a one-off consultation into an ongoing partnership for development, closing the gap that currently breeds cynicism and disengagement among rural populations.

Also, the judiciary, particularly through the implementation monitoring mechanisms of the 2025 Supreme Court judgment, should establish a reporting framework that tracks state government compliance with direct allocations and penalises interference. The Revenue Mobilisation, Allocation and Fiscal Commission and the Office of the Auditor-General for Local Governments should be empowered to conduct regular compliance audits and publish findings. This administrative oversight is essential to prevent the subtle erosion of fiscal gains and to reassure citizens that the new dispensation is irreversible.

Finally, achieving the vision of local government as a platform for participatory governance requires a social compact among federal and state governments, local councils, traditional institutions, civil society organisations, the media, and international partners. A National Summit on Rural Decentralization and Participatory Governance should be convened to forge consensus on a actionable roadmap, including concrete timelines for legislative reform, capacity building, and accountability system roll-out. Only a coordinated, multi-actor effort can transform the isolated pockets of good practice documented in this study into a national norm.

Areas for Future Research

This study opens several avenues for further inquiry. Longitudinal research is needed to track the evolving impact of the 2025 Supreme Court ruling on local government performance and citizen trust over a five-to-ten-year period. Comparative studies across different federal states could illuminate how variations in state legal frameworks and political cultures mediate the effects of fiscal autonomy. Additionally, action research that pilots and evaluates specific participatory innovations—such as digital participatory budgeting or gender-only planning forums—would yield practical insights for scaling. Finally, quantitative studies measuring the direct correlation between the depth of participatory practice and concrete SDG indicators at the LGA level would provide the evidence base needed to sustain policy momentum. In these ways, scholarship can continue to inform the journey towards a truly decentralized, people-centred governance system in Nigeria.

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