



Local Government Autonomy and The Grassroots Participation in Governance: Challenges and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this paper is to examine the imperativeness of the recent Supreme Court judgment interpreting the autonomy of local government in Nigeria as enshrined in the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and how this could empower more democratic, accountable, and participatory form of governance that aligns with citizens' needs at the community level. The study adopted the secondary source of data gathering to analyze the subject matter under review. This study adopted the qualitative method as data was sourced from secondary sources while the Democratic-Participatory theory formed the analytical framework. The study conclude that local government autonomy is pivotal for fostering grassroots participation and enhancing governance at the community level in Nigeria but the journey toward achieving true autonomy for local governments has been fraught with challenges, yet it holds significant prospects for democratic deepening and sustainable development with the new supreme court judgement. The study recommend among others that the July 11th, 2024 Supreme Court judgment that grant financial and administrative autonomy to local governments should be followed to the latter ensuring direct allocation of funds to the local governments without state interference.

Keywords: Local Government, Governance, Grassroots, Participation, Autonomy

1. INTRODUCTION

Since local government is the level of government closest to the people, it is an essential tool for encouraging grassroots involvement in politics. It is crucial to the provision of basic services, the upholding of democratic principles, and the advancement of community development. Therefore, local government autonomy is essential to enabling this institution to successfully carry out its duties. The degree of freedom that local government officials have to decide, distribute funds, and carry out programs without excessive intervention from higher governmental levels is known as local government autonomy (Hartanto, 2022). In order to promote inclusivity, accountability, and grassroots engagement, autonomy guarantees that local authorities can react to community demands quickly and effectively. However, the degree of this autonomy frequently differs between countries and is mostly determined by socioeconomic considerations, political will, and constitutional provisions. For residents, especially those living in rural and underserved regions, to have a say in decisions that impact their lives, grassroots engagement in government is crucial (Ata-Agboni, Aliyu, et al., 2023). It consists of procedures including community gatherings, public consultations, and inclusive representation in regional decision-making organizations. In addition to bolstering democratic governance, this involvement increases public confidence in the administration.

Since local governments cannot operate effectively without significant components of independence, the autonomy concept is crucial. Local governments are given a great deal of autonomy as last-mile governance delivery agents under global governance practices. History, however, demonstrates that prior to 1976, Local Government Administration in Nigeria demonstrated the existence of these organizations as only field units (Eke, 2009). Good progress at the level was hampered by the State government's excessive dictation. The 1976 changes and the constitution's provision of third-tier status, which at the time was supposed to provide local

government a break, were undoubtedly influenced by this trend. As a result, the 1976 reform was started, especially the local government's financial and political autonomy, which was reinforced by the 1988 civil service reform (Akinselure, 2022).

Local governments have been nearly crippled in most states for decades, with governors seizing federal allocations and only releasing funding to them piecemeal, a system that barely keeps them functioning (Ata-Agboni, Okolo, et al., 2023). As a result, during one of his tenure's interviews with Arise Television, former President Muhammadu Buhari stated his dissatisfaction with the country's local government system, narrowing down the topic of restructuring to the treatment of local government. To that end, in May 2020, the then-President issued Executive Order 10, which granted budgetary autonomy to Nigeria's local governments, as well as the state courts and House of Assembly. Interestingly, the Executive Order was greeted with tremendous opposition and ultimately failed owing to governors' objections (Wale, 2022). Thus, the Supreme Court declared Executive Order 10 invalid, ruling that the then-Nigerian President had overstepped his authority by issuing such a decree (A. O. Adedeji, 2023).

However, on July 11th, 2024, the Supreme Court of Nigeria, the country's apex court, affirmed the financial autonomy of Nigeria's 774 local governments through a unanimous judgment in a suit brought by the Federal Government of Nigeria, thereby strengthening their independence in the country. In addition, the Supreme Court issued many significant rulings to reposition local government management in the country. Despite its potential, establishing local government autonomy and strong grassroots engagement presents significant hurdles. These obstacles include financial reliance on central or state governments, bureaucratic inefficiency, limited competence of local authorities, political meddling, and low citizen involvement owing to indifference or a lack of knowledge. We investigated the barriers to full local government autonomy and identified strategies to improve governance at the local level. The conversation sheds light on how local governments might be strengthened to better serve their people while promoting sustainable development and democratic inclusiveness.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Conceptual Clarification

2.1.1. Local Government

The word local government has been the topic of heated debate in intellectual circles, but that doesn't mean we can't glean meaning from existing literature. Many scholarly works have attempted to describe local government as a system of governance at the local level conducted by legally created representative councils with particular powers within defined territories. Abah (2023) defined local government as a political division of a nation or (in a federal system), state that is established by law and has significant jurisdiction over local affairs, including the authority to levy taxes or compel labor for specified objectives. The governing body of such an entry is elected or appointed locally.

Local government is the level of government that is responsible for meeting the local requirements of the general people. According to Appadorai (1975), it is government by democratically elected officials charged with constitutional duties in matters affecting the population of a certain district or location. As the tier of government closest to the people and provided with unique abilities to exert control over the concerns of people in its jurisdiction (A. Adedeji & Ayo, 2000). Local government can also be defined as the division of a country into smaller units or localities for administrative purposes, in which citizens of the various units or localities concerned play a direct and full role through elected representatives who exercise power and perform functions under the general supervision of the national or state government (Abada, 2007). A local government is meant to further democratic values while also administering the society's local development efforts. It is also expected to serve as a focal point of socioeconomic growth at the local level.

Abada (2007) stated that the concept of local government proposed by the 1976 reform's initiators was greatly influenced by the United Nations Office for Administration's mission to serve Nigeria. The initiators proposed the concept as local government exercised by legally created representative councils with particular authorities over designated territories. These powers should give the council substantial control over local affairs as well as the staff and institutional and financial powers to initiate and direct the provision of services and to determine and implement projects so as to complement the activities of the State and Federal

government in their areas and to ensure, through the active participation of the people and their traditional institutions, that local initiative and response to local needs and conditions are maximized.

Local government must have a defined territory and a democratically elected council. It has official powers drawn from the land's laws or constitution to make decisions on a variety of public issues in collaboration with other stakeholders in the neighborhood, including traditional rulers. The formal powers may only be amended via later legislation or constitutional amendment. The LG possesses people, financial, and other resources, from whatever sources, that it deploys, spends, and invests at its discretion for the performance of legally or constitutionally assigned and mutually agreed-upon duties for the area's visible development.

2.1.2. Governance

The notion of "governance" isn't new. It's as old as human civilization. The notion of governance has been in use since at least the 14th century. Initially, it was used in France throughout that time period to denote the seat of government. It had taken on a variety of definitions, ranging from the act or style of managing its position or authority, which made it synonymous with governance, to being virtuous or intelligent in one's whole behavior. Governance is the practice of exercising (usually lawful) authority to manage the affairs of individuals in a certain region, often a state. In essence, it is the business of a policy or society. Again, because people are generally assumed to favor democracy, defined as a government of the people, by the people, and so for the people, the "good" and "welfare" or "interest" of people is assumed to be a necessary and sufficient condition of governance (not to mention good governance) and its legitimacy (Arora, 2007).

Simply simply, governance is the process of making decisions and implementing those decisions (or not). Governance may be used in a variety of settings, including corporate governance, international governance, national governance, and local government. An analysis of governance focuses on the formal and informal actors involved in decision-making and decision-implementation, as well as the formal and informal structures that have been established to arrive at and implement the decision (Anayochukwu et al., 2022). The government is one of the key players in governance. Other actors in governance differ depending on the level of government being discussed. Other actors in rural regions may include important landowners, peasant farmer associations, cooperatives, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), research institutes, religious leaders, financial institutions, political parties, and the military, among others.

Governance is the exercise of political, economic, and administrative authority in the administration of a country's affairs, which includes individuals articulating their interests and exercising their legal rights and duties. Governance refers to the government's ability to create and enforce regulations, as well as to provide services, regardless of whether the government is democratic or not. Governance is concerned with agents' performance in carrying out the objectives of principals, rather than the goals that principals establish. The government is an entity that may perform its tasks better or worse; governance is thus about execution, which has generally been within the purview of public administration rather than politics. Governance is the exercise of political and administrative authority at all levels to govern a nation's affairs. It includes the procedures, processes, and institutions that allow persons and groups to express their views, exercise their legal rights, fulfill their duties, and resolve their disagreements. Governance is the act of establishing and maintaining a framework for inclusive and responsive political processes and outcomes.

Governance is the exercise of political, economic, and administrative authority to manage a country's resources or affairs in order to promote its growth. It entails the establishment of a system by which persons, institutions, organizations, and groups in a society communicate their interests, exercise their rights, and resolve their disagreements in the promotion of the common good. Citizens are rightfully worried about their government's responsiveness to their needs and preservation of their rights. In general, governance challenges concern the government's capacity to provide an efficient, effective, and accountable public management process that allows citizens to participate and improves rather than hinders a democratic form of government (Frey, 2008). Governance refers to the institutional context in which individuals interact among themselves and with government institutions.

Governance refers to the interactions between institutions, procedures, and traditions that govern how power and responsibility are exercised, decisions are made, and people or other stakeholders have a say. Fundamentally, it is about power, connections, and accountability: who has influence, who makes decisions,

and how decision-makers are held responsible. Governance is the process by which societies make key choices, define who has a voice, who participates in the process, and how accountability is achieved (Ata-Agboni et al, 2023). Governance is a participatory system in which individuals called upon to rule on behalf of the people are motivated by a desire to give their all, to serve and do good for the people, to solve their day-to-day issues, and to make their lives more liveable, rewarding and pleasurable. Governance is the exercise of political, economic, and administrative power to govern a nation's affairs. It includes all of the excellent and terrible methods that societies employ to allocate power and manage public resources. Governance refers to how authority is exerted in the administration of a country's social and economic resources in order to promote development (Frey, 2008).

2.1.3. Grassroots Participation

Local government remains the most effective form for encouraging grassroots mobilization of local residents in decision-making. The local government is the one closest to the rural population. It is legitimate to assert, as some analysts do, that the so-called third world is a rural world, and that any meaningful discussion of rural development must also address overall national development because issues such as unequal resource distribution, a severe lack of purchasing power, and grinding poverty are most acute at the local level (Abah, 2023). As a result, in order to assure the fulfillment of basic social expectations, local responsibility and collaboration must be encouraged. This may be accomplished most successfully by encouraging local individuals to become interested in both their own community's concerns and those of their local government. It is important to emphasize that Nigeria's third tier of government should, at the very least, prevent the degradation of living conditions in the country's rural areas. A competent local government will be better able to prevent the "growing wave of rural poverty," as well as to inspire "local cooperation," making it simpler to organize and engage the community (Adededeji, 2023).

This is related to the many official procedures and methods that enable citizens to engage in the creation of public policy as well as the election of representatives to their government (Ighodalo et al., 2012). Equivalent to this, Wale (2022) defined Political participation is the process by which an individual engages in the political arena of their community and has the chance to assist define the group's common goals and the best way to attain these goals. This voluntary activity allows for both direct and indirect engagement. People can engage in politics in a variety of ways, including selecting or electing political leaders, developing policies, engaging in community affairs, and other civic activities (Wale, 2022).

Participation by both men and women is an essential component of successful government. Participation might be direct or via lawful intermediary entities or representatives. It is crucial to note that representative democracy does not always imply that the interests of society's most disadvantaged members are taken into account in decision making. Participation should be educated and coordinated. This entails freedom of association and expression on the one hand, and a structured civil society on the other.

2.1.4. Autonomy

The term 'autonomy' has also been susceptible to several interpretations. Ekumankama (2023) defines 'autonomy' as the degree of self-governance, namely the right of a local government to exist or be capable of existing independently, i.e., local self-government. Ekumankama went on to say that the local government's independence is not full, but rather "substantial autonomy" to assure budgetary and administrative independence, subject only to guiding procedural rules set by the state as a supervisory layer. Thus, local government autonomy refers to the extent of right that third-tier government officials in rural regions have to choose and initiate policy activities.

The local government autonomy we are referring to is ample, but not absolute, for local government councils to carry out their tasks properly. The literature appears to have addressed two sorts of autonomy: absolute and adequate/relative. Aderogba (2022) expresses the absolutist school of thought when he asserts that 'under local autonomy, the local body has financial and management autonomy' to select and establish its own path. There is no rider whatsoever. Aderogba (2022) crosses both camps by arguing for a relative separation of the central and local domains of governance on the one hand. On the other side, he thinks that the central government should only monitor the operations of local authorities without interfering into their area.

Autonomy for LGs in Nigeria, like in other emerging or developing nations (LDCs), should be relative rather than absolute. The reasoning for this is that in countries such as Brazil and Nigeria, all three levels of government are working together to create a single area. Resources for development in LDCs are limited and should be handled collectively for best results in the interests of local communities (Ighodalo et al., 2012). Indeed, it has steadily been recognized that politics and administration collaborate in the LDCs. Furthermore, dynamic, competitive, and cooperative intergovernmental relations (IGRs) (Adedeji & Ayo, 2000) in LDCs such as Nigeria and Brazil appear to be healthier than Wheare's (1946) strict division of duties and powers (Anazodo et al., 2014). This implies that the cooperative competition represented by adequate autonomy is healthier than the conflictual rivalry represented by full autonomy.

2.1.5. Democracy

Democracy is derived from two Greek words: *demos* (people) and *cratia* (power), which refer to the power of the people. Democracy refers to a governance of the people or the majority. Thus, Abraham Lincoln characterized it as "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" (Abada, 2007). In a democratic society, the people exercise ultimate authority by electing a government from among themselves to serve them well. Democracy, as a state form, is distinct from monarchy, aristocracy, and dictatorship. To put it another way, a government is created by the people and is exercised for their own benefit (Akpan & Ekanem, 2013).

Democracy allows the people to elect the government and establish its structure and expectations. This is accomplished by considering manifestos that such government should achieve for the people in order to maintain power and autonomous action with the people's support; otherwise, autonomy would be hampered, if not lost. According to Akpan and Ekanem (2013), independent democratic governments and development have a symbiotic relationship. While autonomy allows the government to act (which is one of the reasons why many African nations strive to reject conditionalities imposed by development partners), positive government activity that leads to development maintains or supports government autonomy.

Democracy is a system of governance based on popular sovereignty in which ordinary persons have the right and power to rule themselves. Democracy is a style of government that emphasizes public sovereignty and communal decision-making. Democracy has two dimensions: contestation and participation. Contestation refers to the uncertain peaceful competition required for democratic rule, a principle that assumes the legitimacy of some opposition, the right to challenge incumbents, the protection of the twin freedoms of expression and association, the existence of free and fair elections, and a consolidated political party system. Participation embodies the concept of popular sovereignty, which assumes both the preservation of the right to vote and the presence of universal suffrage (Onyemaechi Augustine, 2022).

2.2. Local Government and Grassroot Participation in Governance

Abah (2023) defined political participation as the process by which an individual participates in their community's political sphere and has the opportunity to help determine what the community's common goals are and the best way to achieve these goals, which could be direct or indirect participation in a voluntary activity. This engagement might include selecting or electing political leaders, developing policies, being involved in community issues, and other civic activities (Adedeji, 2023). Local governments in Nigeria are legally mandated to encourage grassroots participation in governance, with the goal of meeting local needs and promoting community development. However, their performance has been hampered by a variety of factors, including restricted autonomy, insufficient finance, and political meddling. Despite their status as the third tier of government, local administrations sometimes lack true political and financial independence (Abah, 2023).

State governments typically impose influence over local councils, limiting their capacity to make choices and execute policies that are customized to their communities' needs. This lack of autonomy affects local governments' ability to function as actual agents of grassroots democracy. Local governments in Nigeria sometimes work under the heavy influence of state administrations, undermining their independence. State governors regularly appoint non-elected caretaker committees to administer local issues, therefore marginalizing the grassroots population (Adedeji & Ayo, 2000). This strategy undermines trust and inhibits community people from engaging in local government.

Financial restrictions severely limit the functioning of local governments. The allocation of funds from the federal and state levels is frequently insufficient and irregular, as state governors control and determine

how much goes to local governments through state and local government joint accounts, limiting local councils' ability to carry out development projects and provide essential services (Jude, Joel, & Eze, 2023). Furthermore, a lack of financial autonomy results in inadequate income generation and administration of local government funds. Local governments are prone to political interference, which can inhibit effective grassroots governance. This involvement frequently expresses itself in the nomination of local officials and the manipulation of local councils to suit state-level political objectives over the immediate needs of local populations (Jude et al., 2023).

Recognizing these problems, Nigeria has launched a number of measures to enhance local governance and increase grassroots engagement. There have been concerted efforts to give local governments more authority. For example, in July 2024, the Supreme Court proclaimed local governments in Nigeria financially autonomous, which is viewed as a stimulant for effective grassroots development. The Gombe State Agency for Community and Social Development exemplifies the community-driven development strategy (Adedeji, 2023). These programs enable local people to identify and carry out development projects, instilling a sense of ownership and active involvement in government. Organizations like the Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC) strive to enhance democratic governance by increasing citizen participation with public institutions. PLAC's legislative lobbying and electoral reform efforts aim to increase openness and accountability, increasing grassroots participation in the political process (Ekumankama, 2023).

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This research utilizes a qualitative approach with a descriptive-normative method. The main focus of this research is to analyze the concept of local government autonomy in Nigeria and the prospect of grassroots participation in the governance process. This research does not aim to statistically test hypotheses, but to explore and understand the phenomena that occur through literature review and policy analysis.

The data sources used in this research are secondary, obtained from various official documents, laws and regulations, reference books, scientific journal articles, research reports, and other reliable sources of information relevant to the issue of local government autonomy and community participation.

Data analysis techniques were qualitative through content analysis, with an emphasis on interpretation of policies, relevant theories, and the dynamics of local governance practices in Nigeria. The normative approach is used to review the legal and policy foundations of local autonomy, while the sociological approach is used to understand social realities and community participation in local governance.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study is based on the Democratic-Participatory theory proposed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Carole Pateman, and J.S. Mill. Participatory democracy is a governance paradigm that stresses individuals' direct participation in decision-making processes, allowing them to influence policies that impact their lives (Carole, 1970). This method aims to go beyond traditional representative democracy by encouraging active citizen participation and ensuring that various views are heard in the development of public policy. The idea gained traction in the 1960s with the Port Huron Statement, a manifesto issued by the Students for a Democratic Society. This essay advocated for a society in which people actively engage in social choices that affect their quality of life, coining the phrase "participatory democracy." In participatory democracy, individuals participate directly in policy discussions and decision-making rather than depending primarily on elected officials. This might include procedures such as citizen assemblies, participatory budgeting, and public discussions aimed at creating a more involved and informed community (Pateman, 1970).

Proponents claimed that participatory democracy leads to more legitimate and successful government by embracing a broader range of opinions and instilling individuals with a sense of ownership (Carole, 1970). However, obstacles include assuring informed involvement, avoiding decision paralysis, and incorporating participatory techniques into existing political systems. Despite these problems, participatory democracy remains an important notion for those looking to improve democratic involvement and responsiveness in modern governance.

Autonomous local governments are critical components of the Democratic-Participatory framework since they are the most accessible administrative units to the public. Empowering these governments enables specialized policies that address unique community needs, instilling a feeling of ownership and accountability among locals. Decentralization, a central element of this ideology, entails delegating authority and resources to local governments, hence increasing their ability to administer local issues efficiently. This decentralization brings government closer to the people while also encouraging openness and responsiveness in public administration. Grassroots participation is the active participation of community people in government processes, from policy formation to execution. This participatory strategy guarantees that varied perspectives are heard, resulting in more inclusive and equitable decision-making. This concept is shown by mechanisms such as participatory budgeting, in which residents work with local officials to choose how public monies are allocated. Such efforts not only democratize financial decisions, but they also increase public participation and faith in government institutions.

4.1. Barriers to Grassroot Participation in Governance in Nigeria

Grassroots participation is essential for effective governance, ensuring that policies reflect the needs and aspirations of local communities. In Nigeria, however, several barriers hinder such as follow participation.

a) Lack of intentional mobilization

Grassroots participation in government is critical for a functioning democracy, but in Nigeria, various impediments prevent this engagement. A fundamental barrier is a lack of purposeful mobilization, with many Nigerians lacking a thorough awareness of their civic responsibilities and government systems. This gap is caused by a lack of political sensitization and education initiatives, resulting in widespread political apathy, particularly at the local government level (Ekumankama, 2023). Citizens who lack adequate information are less inclined to participate in political processes or hold their leaders responsible.

Citizens are generally skeptical that their engagement will result in substantial change. This impression is exacerbated by systematic corruption and a lack of faith in political leaders, which results in disengagement from governance operations. When people perceive that their contributions are insignificant, they are less likely to participate actively. Citizens are also discouraged from engaging in government due to fears of violence and the arbitrary use of authority by authorities (Ekumankama, 2023). Incidents in which those calling for change experience harassment or worse have produced a fearful environment, making others afraid to participate in political activity.

b) Poor consultation

A common concern is the top-down style to policymaking, in which higher authorities make decisions without enough participation from local groups. This strategy frequently leads in policies that do not meet the actual requirements of the population, causing public unhappiness and disengagement. For example, a research found that governmental policies in Nigeria regularly fail to represent residents' preferences due to a lack of public participation in decision-making. The lack of adequate channels for public participation exacerbates the issue (Fahy et al., 2023). Traditional routes for citizen involvement are restricted, and while information and communication technologies (ICTs) provide possible alternatives, their use for public consultation (e-consultation) in Nigeria is still insufficient. This divide limits people' capacity to make significant contributions to policy creation and governance.

A research concentrating on Osun State found that inadequate government responsiveness, a lack of access to information about government initiatives, and a lack of knowledge of people' roles in governance are important contributors to low grassroots engagement (Fahy et al., 2023). This has resulted in a deterioration in the legitimacy and confidence of governmental institutions.

c) Absent of political debate at the grassroot politics

Local governments, which are supposed to be the closest administrative units to the people, sometimes lack true autonomy. State governments regularly exert influence or outright control over municipal councils, eroding grassroots democracy. This meddling includes the formation of caretaker committees rather than holding local elections, resulting in a gap between local governments and the populations they represent, which breeds political apathy (Fahy et al., 2023). Widespread political indifference originates from a history of electoral fraud, corruption, and political leaders' broken promises. Many residents, particularly at the

grassroots level, feel alienated and helpless, feeling that their engagement will not result in substantial change. This view is worsened by a lack of confidence in political leaders and a belief that governing systems are insensitive to their demands. Political discourse at the grassroots will enrich the process by boosting the representative role, increasing citizens' access to their elected members, and developing elected representatives' capacity to interact with the grassroots.

d) Poor service delivery

Poor service delivery severely limits grassroots engagement in government in Nigeria. When critical public services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure are insufficiently delivered, residents frequently grow disillusioned and alienated from governing processes. This disengagement stems from a lack of trust and faith in government institutions, which are viewed as ineffectual or unresponsive to community concerns. There is a need to promote effective and efficient service delivery at the grassroots level. Poor service delivery leads to public demonstrations and civil upheaval. For example, in August 2024, thousands of Nigerians demonstrated in major cities over growing living costs and terrible administration. Demonstrators expressed their dissatisfaction with economic policies that resulted in high inflation and increasing hardship, demanding the reintroduction of subsidies and steps to combat insecurity (Fahy et al., 2023).

e) Low level education and literacy

In a democratic culture like Nigeria, civic education is the foundation for achieving long-term democracy. This includes information about citizens' democratic activities, such as voting eligibility and political rights awareness. Democracy necessitates two-way communication and information at frequent intervals beyond elections to ensure that political leaders get input and maintain engagement with the grassroots (Jude et al., 2023). Many pundits who support 'strong' or 'direct' democracy frequently claim that these roles are underserved.

Low levels of education and widespread illiteracy impede grassroots participation in government in Nigeria. These limitations limit people's capacity to successfully participate in political processes, grasp policy concerns, and hold leaders responsible. Illiteracy limits individuals' access to knowledge, reducing their grasp of their rights and the responsibilities of government. This lack of understanding frequently results in political apathy and disengagement. Furthermore, illiterate people may be frightened by political conversation, which is typically done in formal language, discouraging them from actively participating. According to Aare Afe Babalola, "Poor education, illiteracy, and ignorance hinder the effective participation of the poor in the political process." The digital gap exacerbates this problem. With a large proportion of the population lacking basic reading abilities, many Nigerians are unable to use digital platforms that enhance political activity and access to government services. This technical mismatch further excludes uneducated groups from political participation (Jude et al., 2023).

Recognizing these issues, both government and non-governmental groups have launched projects to improve literacy and education. For example, in September 2024, the World Bank approved a \$1.57 billion funding package for Nigeria, including \$500 million set aside to address governance concerns that impede education and health service delivery (Cyriacus et al., 2024). This investment seeks to increase the availability and efficacy of funding for basic education and primary healthcare services.

f) Poor planning

Any organization, whether private or governmental, requires careful planning to thrive. Many municipal governments lack comprehensive development plans, resulting in misaligned projects that do not meet community requirements. This lack of strategic direction wastes money and undermines public trust. Planning procedures sometimes exclude community people, resulting in decisions that do not represent local priorities. This top-down strategy promotes resident indifference and disengagement (Anazodo et al., 2014).

Accurate data is critical for successful planning. However, many local governments lack the essential demographic and ethnographic data, resulting in ill-informed policies that fail to address community needs. Frequent political interference disturbs local government, resulting in uneven policies and damaging long-term planning attempts. This unpredictability discourages community members from actively participating (Anazodo et al., 2014). There is widespread misunderstanding about people' duties in government, as well as distrust in political office holders. This combination hinders grassroots participation in the decision-making processes.

4.2. Prospects of Grassroot Participation in Governance in Nigeria

The recent Supreme Court decision granting financial autonomy to Nigeria's 774 local government councils is expected to greatly increase grassroots engagement in governance. The verdict intends to enable local councils to address community-specific issues by authorizing direct delivery of cash to local governments rather than state-controlled joint accounts. Direct financial autonomy allows local governments to handle resources freely, making it easier to complete projects in healthcare, education, infrastructure, and security on schedule (Cyriacus et al, 2024). This autonomy is supposed to speed development and enhance service delivery at the community level, while increasing leaders' accountability at the grassroots level.

The Supreme Court's judgment also prohibits the practice of appointing caretaker committees, which has traditionally undercut democratic procedures at the municipal level. By requiring regular and fair elections for local councils, the ruling guarantees that local officials are authentic representations of their communities, therefore fostering grassroots democracy. While the decision is an important milestone, its full implementation will require the collaboration of state governments. Senate President Godswill Akpabio has asked all 36 state governors to accept the decision, underlining the significance of following the Supreme Court's guidelines to ensure transparency and equal resource allocation.

Legal experts have praised the decision as a move toward real federalism, which improves accountability and allows voters to hold local politicians accountable for governance outcomes. They do, however, emphasize the importance of holding prompt local government elections in states that are now run by caretaker committees, which are considered illegal. The Supreme Court's recognition of local government sovereignty is expected to rekindle grassroots engagement in governance throughout Nigeria. By establishing financial independence and supporting democratic mechanisms at the local level, the ruling has the prospect of encouraging sustainable growth and improving the quality of life for communities countrywide.

The recent ruling of the Supreme Court of Nigeria provides a highly significant legal affirmation regarding the autonomous status of local governments as stipulated in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. In its decision, the Court interpreted that local governments are constitutional entities with independent authority, not merely extensions of the state governments. The Court explicitly rejected the intervention of state governments in various aspects of local governance, including fund management, the conduct of elections, and the making of administrative and local policy decisions. This affirmation has profound implications for the development of a more democratic, accountable, and participatory system of governance. By ensuring the autonomy of local governments, the ruling creates space for local communities to be more involved in decision-making processes that affect their daily lives. In this context, the fundamental principles of participatory democracy become particularly relevant.

According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, within the framework of participatory democracy, political freedom can only be realized when every individual participates in the process of creating the laws that govern them. Local government autonomy allows citizens at the local level to voice their aspirations directly and contribute to the formulation of public policies tailored to the needs and characteristics of each region. Thus, citizens are not merely subjects of policy but active actors in its formation.

Furthermore, the theory of participatory democracy developed by Carole Pateman (1970) emphasizes that political participation is not only an instrument of decision-making but also a medium of political education for citizens. Through direct involvement in local governance such as in budget planning, development oversight, and public deliberation forums, communities gain political experience that fosters critical thinking, a sense of responsibility, and concern for the public interest. In this regard, the autonomy of local governments affirmed by the Supreme Court serves as a structural foundation that enables the ongoing process of democratic education at the grassroots level.

John Stuart Mill also made a significant contribution to the development of participatory democracy. He argued that citizen involvement in governance is beneficial not only in terms of policy outcomes but also in shaping the moral and intellectual character of citizens. An independent local government provides opportunities for communities to develop leadership capacity, broaden political awareness, and enhance social consciousness. Therefore, strengthening local government autonomy is not just about administrative efficiency, but also about cultivating a healthy political culture oriented toward the public interest.

In conclusion, the Supreme Court's ruling can be seen as a pivotal moment in the reform of governance that leads to the strengthening of substantive democracy. Constitutional clarity regarding the autonomous status of local governments creates the prerequisites for building a more open, participatory, and accountable system of governance. If followed by consistent implementation and strong institutional support, Nigeria holds great potential to realize governance aligned with the spirit of participatory democracy as envisioned by thinkers like Rousseau, Pateman, and Mill. Ultimately, this will strengthen governmental legitimacy, improve the welfare of local communities, and deepen the democratization process in the country.

The findings of this study show that the success of local government autonomy significantly determines the level of grassroots community participation in governance. Based on democratic participation theory, which emphasizes the importance of citizen involvement in decision-making processes, the findings affirm that granting real authority to local governments will increase the public's sense of ownership over public policy. In the context of Nigeria, true local autonomy can serve as a strategic vehicle to reinforce democratic structures, accelerate local development, and socially and economically empower communities. This study also implies the need for institutional and legislative reforms that support local government independence, including the strengthening of accountability and transparency systems. Without such structural changes, public participation will remain symbolic and have no real impact on policy. Therefore, the study calls for political commitment from the central government to relinquish excessive intervention and support a more decentralized system of governance as a pathway to inclusive and participatory governance.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Local government autonomy is critical for increasing grassroots engagement and improving governance at the community level. In Nigeria, the path to full autonomy for local governments has been difficult, but it holds considerable promise for democratic strengthening and long-term prosperity. To achieve true local government autonomy in Nigeria, extensive constitutional revisions are required to clarify each tier of government's functions and responsibilities. Addressing financial interdependence through direct allocations and reducing political intervention are essential steps towards empowering local governments. Such methods offer not only to boost grassroots engagement, but also to improve the overall quality of government and development at the local level.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are made to enhance grassroots participation in local governance in Nigeria. First, the July 11, 2024 Supreme Court judgment granting financial and administrative autonomy to local governments should be fully implemented, including the direct channeling of funds to local governments without interference from state governments. Second, the establishment of Community Development Associations (CDAs) that involve citizens in the planning and implementation of local projects should be encouraged, so that initiatives are truly tailored to the needs of the community. Third, it is critical to put in place a strong oversight framework to monitor the activities of local governments to prevent corruption and promote transparency, which in turn builds trust and increases broad public participation in governance. Finally, citizens need to be educated about the importance of involvement in local governance to build a culture of accountability and shared responsibility.

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