

ASSESSING THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUTONOMY IN GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT: EVIDENCE FROM GASHAKA LGA

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the relationship between local government autonomy and grassroots development in Gashaka Local Government Area (LGA), Taraba State. The objectives are: (i) to assess the impact of local government autonomy on the implementation of grassroots development programs; (ii) to examine the role of financial autonomy in facilitating effective service delivery and infrastructure development; (iii) to evaluate the level of citizen participation and transparency in local decision-making processes; and (iv) to explore the challenges hindering the effective execution of autonomy in Gashaka LGA. Guided by the General Systems Theory, which emphasizes the interdependence and interaction of subsystems within a broader political system, the study views local governments as essential subsystems that require adequate inputs (resources, autonomy, support) to function effectively and maintain systemic stability. When these inputs are insufficient, instability and citizen dissatisfaction may ensue. A survey research design was adopted, using structured questionnaires administered to 399 participants. Descriptive statistics and simple percentages were used to analyze the data. Findings revealed that the current state of local government autonomy has no significant impact on the successful implementation of grassroots development initiatives in Gashaka. However, the study underscores that local government autonomy remains a pivotal factor for sustainable grassroots development in Nigeria. Despite progress, systemic challenges continue to impede full realization. The study recommends that Gashaka LGA should prioritize strategies for local revenue generation, such as enhanced tax collection, investment in local resources, and support for local businesses, to foster sustainable development and stronger autonomy.

Keywords: Local Government Autonomy, Grassroots Development

INTRODUCTION

Globally, local government systems are instituted to decentralize power, ensure efficient governance, and enhance grassroots development. Across developed and developing democracies, local governments serve as the closest administrative units to the populace, tasked with providing essential services, promoting local economic development, and representing community interests. In Nigeria, the local government system constitutes the third tier of government as enshrined in the 1999 Constitution, following the federal and state governments. The country has 774 local government areas (LGAs), created to bring governance closer to the people. However, the autonomy of these LGAs remains highly contested, as state governments often treat them as subordinate appendages rather than independent entities (Abdulahi, 2018). Unlike global practices where local governments are allowed full control over administrative and financial decisions, Nigeria's local governments suffer from systemic interference. Although the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) oversees national and state elections, local government elections are

handled by state-established commissions, often leading to irregularities or appointments rather than democratic elections (Goddey, 2019). The principle of federalism implies devolution of powers to smaller units to enhance participation and development. Yet, despite constitutional backing, Nigerian local governments are frequently stripped of their financial and administrative independence by state governors who control the joint account meant for revenue disbursement (Maboguje, 2019).

Comparatively, countries like India and South Africa legally protect the autonomy of local government units, ensuring direct revenue transfers and constitutional safeguards. In contrast, Nigerian local governments receive a statutory 20.60% of national revenue, which is rarely remitted in full due to state-level control (Ola, 2014). Historically, reforms such as the 1976 and 1988 reviews and various constitutions since 1979 sought to strengthen local government autonomy in Nigeria. These efforts included the empowerment of councils to generate internal revenue, establish departments, and employ personnel (Akindele, 2017; Awofeso, 2014). Despite multiple reforms, the operational independence of local governments remains a challenge due to political manipulation, financial dependence, and weak institutional frameworks (Okoni, 2016; Wilson, 2015). This undue control by state governments cripples rural development, weakens service delivery, and distances government from the people it ought to serve (Akpan & Ekanem, 2014).

Therefore, this study stands on the assertion that local government autonomy is crucial for sustainable grassroots development. Drawing from both global and national perspectives, the research investigates how autonomy—or the lack thereof—affects the effectiveness of local governance, with a specific focus on Gashaka Local Government Area, Taraba State.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Nigeria, local governments are constitutionally established as the third tier of government with the fundamental aim of ensuring grassroots development and promoting democratic governance. Despite this constitutional provision, the practical effectiveness of local governments—especially in rural areas like Gashaka Local Government Area of Taraba State—remains severely constrained by limited autonomy. Empirical studies (Akindele, 2017; Okoni, 2016; Akpan & Ekanem, 2014) have shown that financial dependence, administrative interference, and poor political will are common challenges undermining local governance. These studies, however, often adopt broad scopes and fail to conduct context-specific investigations, especially in less-explored regions such as Gashaka. Moreover, they tend to generalize findings without assessing localized developmental outcomes or institutional capacity.

Gashaka, despite its abundant natural and human resources, continues to struggle with underdevelopment, poor infrastructure, inadequate healthcare and education services, and rising poverty. These challenges are exacerbated by state-level control of local finances, delays or diversions in statutory allocations, and the replacement of elected officials with caretaker administrators. Consequently, there is a glaring gap between constitutional promises and actual performance. This study seeks to critically examine how the lack of autonomy affects development in Gashaka Local Government Area. By addressing this specific gap, the study aims to offer localized solutions for promoting sustainable and accountable grassroots governance.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following serves as the research question of this study

- i. What is the impact of current state of local government autonomy on the implementation of grassroots development programs in Gashaka Local Government Area?
- ii. What are the role of financial autonomy in facilitating effective service delivery and infrastructure development in Gashaka Local Government Area?
- iii. What is the level of citizen participation and transparency in decision-making processes at the local government level in Gashaka Local Government Area?
- iv. What are the challenges faced by the current state of autonomy towards executing the mandate in Gashaka Local Government Area?

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The broad objective of this study is to investigate local government autonomy and grassroots development in Gashaka Local Government Area. The specific objectives are:

- i. To assess the impact of local government autonomy on the implementation of grassroots development programs in Gashaka Local Government Area.
- ii. To examine the role of financial autonomy in facilitating effective service delivery and infrastructure development in Gashaka Local Government Area.
- iii. To evaluate the level of citizen participation and transparency in decision-making processes at the local government level in Gashaka Local Government Area.
- iv. To examine the challenges faced by the current state of autonomy towards executing the mandate in Gashaka Local Government Area.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

- i. There are no significant impact of current state of local government autonomy on the successful implementation of grassroots development programs in Gashaka Local Government Area
- ii. The role of financial autonomy does not facilitates effective service delivery and infrastructure development in Gashaka Local Government Area
- iii. There are no significant level of citizen participation and transparency in decisionmaking processes at the local government level in Gashaka Local Government Area
- iv. There is no significant challenges faced by the current state of autonomy towards executing the mandate in Gashaka Local Government Area

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Akindele (2017) examined "Local Government Autonomy and Rural Development in Nigeria", aiming to assess autonomy's role in rural transformation. Using decentralization theory and a qualitative design, findings showed that limited autonomy hindered service delivery. The study concluded that true autonomy boosts grassroots development and recommended constitutional amendments. However, the study lacked a specific local focus.

Okoni (2016) explored "State Interference and Local Government Administration in Nigeria", targeting the effects of state control on LG operations. Guided by institutional theory and mixed methods, results

revealed systemic financial manipulation by states. The study called for fiscal independence but failed to analyze rural-specific impacts.

Akpan and Ekanem (2014) studied "Challenges of Local Government Autonomy in Nigeria's Federal Structure", using political economy theory and a case study approach. Findings indicated political interference as a major constraint. Though insightful, the study generalized without examining a particular LGA. Therefore, these studies highlight autonomy challenges but lack localized empirical data. This study fills the gap by focusing specifically on Gashaka LGA in Taraba State.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopted general systems theory as its theoretical framework. It is a theory that has been contributed to by a number of writers, such as Almond (1960); Easton (1965); Adamolekun (1983) and Offiong (1996). A synthesis of the definitions of a system given by various writers, some of whom are listed above, can be stated as follows. It is a phenomenon of whatever type, including physical, biological, social, political, etc., which is an organized whole with identifiable, interrelated structures delineating it from the environment (supra system) in which it is located and with which it interacts, processing the inputs from it into outputs for it.

The general systems theory seeks to argue that every system, including political system, has subsystems which make up the entire system. They are assigned functions and provided with enabling empowerment, including resources, appropriate authority, etc. to enable them discharge their responsibilities optimally. Where this is the case, there is said to be *homeostasis* (stability) in the political system. On the other hand, instability reigns in the political system where the contrary is the case and the subsystems and entire system are also unable to function optimally. Input and output analysis of a political system is very important. A political system is said to obtain its inputs (demands, supports, liberty or autonomy, cooperation, criticisms, resources, information, direct labour, etc.) from the environment. It may be pointed out that some of these inputs, such as liberty or autonomy, cooperation, and direct labour, were not specified in the original or earlier analysis of the general systems theory, but they are considered important for this paper. These inputs are what the subsystems employ to discharge their responsibilities, so that the political system can send out its outputs into the environment and obtain further inputs for its operations. Applying this brief exposition of the political systems analysis to the Nigerian local government system particularly Gashaka local government area of Taraba State, the local governments in the country constitute the subsystems. They must be well handled in terms of being fed with adequate inputs, so that they can contribute appropriately to the optimality of the Nigerian political system, as well as its *homeostasis*. If the reverse is the case, that is, if the local government do not have the required inputs to operate, two important things may happen.

First is that there might be instability and the second is that there might be discontent amongst the citizenry. The two are intertwined. It is therefore very useful to realize the importance of the systems theory in the handling of local government autonomy in Nigeria particularly Gashaka local government area of Taraba State. This means the realization of the sub-systemic nature of local governments which are an

integral part of the overall Nigerian political system. They have their assigned responsibilities to perform to the benefit of the people, not as appendages of either the Federal or State Governments. Failure to treat the local government as such could send frustration through their veins, disenchantment and inability to perform and hence dissatisfaction amongst the populace.

The Basic Assumptions of General System Theory (GST)

The basic assumptions of General System Theory (GST) can be effectively applied to the concepts of local government autonomy and grassroots development. Here are some key assumptions that underpin the relationship:

- 1. Systems are Composed of Interrelated Parts:** Local governments, communities, and grassroots organizations are interdependent components of a larger socio-political system. Changes in one part of the system (e.g., local policies) can significantly affect other parts (e.g., community initiatives).
- 2. Holistic Perspective.** The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Understanding local governance and grassroots development requires a holistic view that considers interactions and relationships rather than isolated entities.

Dynamic Interactions: Systems are dynamic and continuously evolving through interactions. Local government practices and grassroots efforts are not static; they adapt over time in response to feedback, challenges, and opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

Research design is the overall plan for connecting the conceptual research problems to the pertinent (and achievable) empirical research (Creswell, 2014). A research design is a logical plan for getting from here to there, where „here“ may be defined as the initial set of questions to be answered, and „there“ is some set of conclusions (answers) about these questions (Yin, 2009). The research design used for this study encompasses the methods for the data collection, measurement and analysis of data related to the research objectives. The research design used for this study is descriptive survey research method. The descriptive survey research method is most appropriate because the researcher has no control of the variables as well as the outcome.

Area of the Study

Gashaka is a Local Government Area in Taraba State, Nigeria. Its headquarters are in the town of Serti. It has an area of 8,393 km² and a population of 87,781 at the 2006 census. The postal code of the area is 672. The Lamdo (Emir) of Gashaka is Alhaji Zubairu Hammangabdo Muhammadu Sambo. He was installed on 28 January 2017 after the demise of his father Alhaji Hammangabdo Muhammadu Sambo who had ruled the Gashaka kingdom for 51 years and died on 23 October 2016 at the age of 81. The estimated population of Gashaka local government area is (187,500). Fulani is the major spoken language in Gashaka and Serti town.

Gashaka's climate is categorized as savanna (Aw), or tropical wet and dry. The district's annual temperature is 30.42 °C (86.76 °F), which is 0.96% greater than Nigeria's average. There are

147.74 rainy days (40.48% of the time) and about 100.97 millimeters (3.98 inches) of precipitation in Gashaka each year. Gashaka LGA is located in the tropical savannah zone and has a total area of 8,393 square kilometers. The well-known Gashaka Gumti National Park is located in the LGA, which is next to the Mambilla Plateau. There are many mountains in the area, including the Gangirwal Mountains, which are part of the Gashaka Gumti Park. Gashaka Local Government Area (LGA) experiences an average temperature of 29 degrees Celsius and an average humidity of 38%.

Population of the Study

The population for this study consists of the entire people of Gashaka local government area of Taraba State which is two hundred and twenty four thousand, three hundred and fifty seven (187,500, estimated population 2023).

Sampling Size

The sample size of three hundred and ninety nine (399) respondents was used to represent the entire population for the study and the formula that guided the researcher in selecting the sample size is Taro Yamane statistical technique (1967).

Sampling and Sampling Techniques

In this study, systematic random sampling was used to select 399 respondents out of a total population of 187,500 respondents in the study area. This is based on the researcher's application of the Taro Yamane (1967) method in determining the sample of the study. It is mathematically expressed as; $n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$. Where; n = signifies the population size.

K = constant value

N = signifies the population under study e = signifies the margin of error Therefore, $n = 187,500$

$$(1 + 187,500(0.05)^2) \quad n = 187,500$$

$$(1 + 187,500(0.0025)) \quad n = 187,500$$

$$469.75$$

$$n = 399.14$$

An approximately (399) respondent served as the sample of this study

Method of Data Collection

Data for the study was collected using both quantitative and qualitative method of data collection. Questionnaires were administered to staffs in Gashaka Local Government Area. The research rely on both primary and secondary source of data collection.

The Primary Data

The questionnaire and interview guide was used to generate primary data for the study. The questionnaires were well thought to avoid confusing respondents as to the nature of the information required.

The Secondary Data

The Secondary sources of data are those that were derived from what others have done related to the subject matter. These secondary data was collected through Textbooks, Journals, Magazines, and official publications of government, materials from the Organizations especially the ones that were collected from the organizations under study, internet, and unpublished works. These secondary sources of data will be review in relation to the impacts of local government autonomy and grassroots development in Gashaka local government area of Taraba. It gives more understanding and geared towards answering research questions, achieving the research objectives and test relevant hypotheses.

Method of Data Analysis

Method of data analysis deals with process of data classification, data coding, data entry and analysis in order to make interpretation possible (Nyan"au, 2014). After collecting all information on the topic of research using the quantitative methods and qualitative method. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies tables and percentages were used to summarize and present the demographic characteristics of respondents and their perceptions regarding local government autonomy and its impact on grassroots development.

FINDINGS

The issue of local government autonomy is critical in determining the success of grassroots development programs in many regions of Nigeria, including Gashaka Local Government Area (LGA) in Taraba State.

This study indicated that one of the key advantages of local government autonomy is the ability to better allocate resources and make decisions that directly address local needs. In Gashaka, the local government"s ability to independently control its finances, make budget decisions, and implement development programs can help prioritize urgent community needs such as road construction, healthcare, and education, which are often overlooked in centralized governance systems.

The study found that Local government autonomy also fosters greater accountability and transparency in the management of public funds. In Gashaka, L.G.A when the local government has full control over its financial management, it is more likely to be held accountable by its citizens for the proper use of allocated resources. This leads to better monitoring of development projects and reduces opportunities for corruption and misuse of public funds. According to Adewumi and Olatunji (2021), autonomy allows for improved citizen participation in decisionmaking, as local governments are more directly answerable to the communities they serve. This fosters greater trust between the local government and citizens, encouraging the public to participate actively in the governance process and contributing to the success of development programs (Adewumi, A. D., & Olatunji, A. A., 2021).

Autonomy can enable better resource management, it is important to note that many local governments in Nigeria, including Gashaka, face significant capacity constraints. The effective implementation of development programs requires technical skills, financial expertise, and human resources that local governments may not always possess. Even with autonomy, the lack of skilled personnel and inadequate training for local government officials can hinder the success of grassroots development projects. Olaniyan

and Makinde (2019) highlight the importance of capacity-building programs for local government officials to enable them to manage resources efficiently and effectively execute development initiatives. Without this foundational capacity, local governments may struggle to implement their mandates, even with financial and administrative autonomy.

A major challenge to local government autonomy in Gashaka is the issue of financial dependence. Despite having administrative independence, many local governments still rely heavily on allocations from the state or federal government, which limits their ability to execute development programs independently. Financial autonomy is critical for local governments to meet the demands of grassroots development. However, Gashaka, like many rural LGAs, faces challenges in internally generating revenue. This financial constraint affects the council's ability to fund and sustain development projects. As Adesina and Longe (2015) point out, the financial autonomy of local governments is essential for their development effectiveness. Without control over local revenue generation and the ability to retain and manage funds independently,

Gashaka's local government is limited in its capacity to provide infrastructure, basic services, and social welfare programs without external support (Adesina, A. A., & Longe, T. A., 2015). Despite the theoretical benefits of local government autonomy, political interference remains a significant challenge in Gashaka and other Nigerian LGAs. At times, state governments or national political actors exert influence over local government affairs, either through funding, policy directives, or appointments, which can undermine local autonomy and the implementation of grassroots development programs. Studies by Olufunmilayo O. Ibironke et al. (2017) show that political interference can affect the execution of local development projects by introducing conflicting priorities and diverting attention away from community needs. Effective policy frameworks that protect the autonomy of local governments are crucial to ensuring that development programs are both citizen-driven and sustainable.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the issue of local government autonomy and its role in fostering grassroots development in Gashaka Local Government Area (LGA) remains a critical concern for effective governance and sustainable development. From the analysis of the challenges and opportunities surrounding local government autonomy in Gashaka, it is evident that while there are notable strides toward improving local governance, several significant obstacles continue to hinder the full realization of autonomy and the successful implementation of grassroots development initiatives. Financial dependence on state and federal allocations, political interference, and weak administrative capacity are some of the most pressing challenges limiting the ability of Gashaka LGA to exercise its autonomy fully. Local governments in Gashaka, like many rural areas in Nigeria, continue to face significant financial constraints that restrict their capacity to plan, execute, and monitor development projects effectively. Additionally, the lack of institutional autonomy due to interference from higher levels of government undermines the council's ability to make decisions that are aligned with the unique needs of the community. However, local government autonomy is essential for empowering local authorities to respond to the needs of their communities with tailored

development strategies. The research highlights the potential for decentralized governance to bring about more efficient public service delivery, infrastructure development, and greater citizen participation in governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The suggestions of this research work are based purely on experience and direct observation and therefore practical and problem solving. The following recommendations/suggestion is put toward:

- i. Gashaka LGA should be empowered to make decisions independently, manage its resources and execute development projects without interference from the state or federal Government.
- ii. The local government needs to explore and implement strategies for generating local revenues such as improving tax collections, investing in local resources to facilitate effective service delivery and infrastructural development.
- iii. Local government authority should always encourage citizen participation in decision making process at the local government level as this would boost citizen participation in governance.
- iv. There should be concerted effort to enhance the political and administrative independence of local government councils. This can be achieved by empowering local government officials and reducing the ability of state and national governments to control the actions of local authorities. A clear legal framework should be developed to delineate the functions and powers of local governments, making it harder for political interference to disrupt their operations.

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