

Elucidating the Problems of Service Delivery in the Nigerian Local Government System since the Fourth Republic

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Abstract

Local government as the third tier of government plays a crucial role in fostering a favorable and supportive atmosphere for residents at the community level through the proficient and productive provision of services. Its importance within a state is immeasurable as it represents an essential branch of governance. Consequently, the correlation between the caliber of services citizens receive is immensely significant. This research paper delves into the dynamics of local government and its capacity for efficient service delivery, particularly focusing on local administrations in Nigeria. It emphasizes that local government stands as the primary governmental entity closest to grassroots communities, hence it is entrusted with substantial responsibilities in delivering essential social services to enhance the quality of life. However, in Nigeria, the impact of local government remains notably constrained, particularly concerning the enhancement of service delivery. Adopting the methodology of secondary data analysis and the service delivery theoretical framework, this research paper highlights several variables responsible for the problems of service delivery in the Nigerian Local Government system since the Fourth Republic. The findings of this research paper are that, political interference, corruption and mismanagement, bureaucratic bottlenecks, insecurity, political instability, insufficient funding etc are some of the problem of service delivery in the Nigerian local government system since the fourth republic. The study recommends capacity building and training, transparent budgeting and financial management, decentralization of decision-making, performance monitoring and evaluation, policy reforms and legal frameworks and the most of others in addressing the problems of service delivery in the Nigeria local government system.

Keywords: Local Government, Service Delivery, Nigeria, System

Introduction

In the Global North and Global South, local government plays a central role in driving and maintaining development. It is widely recognized as a crucial tool for advancing development objectives and providing essential social services to communities. Positioned closest to rural populations, local government is strategically situated to effectively address the needs and preferences of the people. According to Fridayani (2021), local government stands as a vital intermediary for channeling the demands of the populace. Repette (2021) emphasizes that local government creation is imperative for promoting balanced development, enhancing citizen engagement, and ensuring responsive governance. Acting as both a political and administrative entity, local government facilitates decentralization, fosters national cohesion, improves

governance efficiency, and fosters grassroots participation. Across the globe, local government serves as a fundamental unit of administration.

The Local Government stands as the closest government body to the Nigerian people, yet those residing within its jurisdiction are deprived of its intended benefits. This is observable through the state of the environment, dilapidated public school infrastructure, inadequate market facilities, and the absence of sufficient healthcare centers. The failure of Local Governments to effectively deliver services has eroded citizens' trust in the government as an institution. In certain areas, officials of the councils are notorious for harassing citizens rather than fulfilling their duty of service provision (Ferdous, 2022). The primary concern revolves around the degree to which essential goods and services reach local residents promptly and adequately. The constitution allocates service delivery responsibilities to the three tiers of government, with states and local governments bearing the greatest responsibility for providing fundamental services such as education, healthcare, housing, water, and waste management. Given the Millennium Development Goals and the substantial resources available to various levels of government, it becomes crucial to assess the performance of service delivery since the country's transition to democratic governance in the fourth republic.

Methodology

This research paper adopts a qualitative approach that involves the use of secondary data sources such as academic journals, government reports, and media reports. The choice of secondary data is because it allows for an in-depth analysis of the problems of service delivery in the Nigerian local government system. Data collected is analysed via content analysis.

Literature Review

Conceptual Clarification of Local Government

Local government, a cornerstone of democratic governance, embodies the principles of subsidiarity, community representation, and decentralized decision-making. With roots tracing back to ancient civilizations and evolving through various forms over centuries, local government stands as a vital institution mediating between central authority and the populace at the grassroots level. In conceptualizing the term "local government," one delves into its functions, structures, and significance in fostering participatory democracy, responsive governance, and community development. Local government refers to the administrative authority established by law to govern specific geographical areas, such as municipalities, counties, districts, or townships (Abe & Omotosho, 2021). It operates within the framework of a larger national or regional government but possesses a degree of autonomy to address the unique needs and interests of its constituents. This autonomy enables local governments to make decisions on matters ranging from public services, infrastructure development, taxation, and land-use planning to social welfare programs and environmental management (Barak, 2022).

Fundamentally, local government serves as the primary interface between citizens and the state, embodying the principle of proximity in governance. By being geographically closer to the people, local authorities are better positioned to understand their communities' dynamics, preferences, and challenges. This closeness facilitates more responsive, tailored policy-making and service delivery that reflect local aspirations and priorities (Barak, 2022).

The structure of local government varies across countries and regions, reflecting historical, cultural, and political contexts. Common forms include municipal councils, county boards, town meetings, and decentralized administrative bodies. Regardless of structure, local governments typically comprise elected officials, administrative staff, and advisory bodies responsible for decision-making, policy implementation, and public engagement. Elections play a pivotal role in legitimizing local government authority and ensuring democratic representation. Through periodic elections, citizens exercise their right to choose representatives who will articulate their interests, allocate resources, and shape local policies. This democratic mandate fosters accountability and transparency, as elected officials are accountable to their constituents and subject to public scrutiny.

Central to the concept of local government is its multifaceted role in delivering essential services and promoting community well-being. From maintaining roads and sanitation systems to providing education, healthcare, and public safety, local governments play a vital role in enhancing quality of life and fostering social cohesion (Salim, 2020). By decentralizing service provision, local authorities can tailor solutions to address specific needs, promote inclusivity, and empower marginalized communities.

Furthermore, local government serves as a platform for civic engagement and participatory democracy, empowering citizens to actively participate in decision-making processes. Through public hearings, community forums, and advisory committees, residents can voice their concerns, propose initiatives, and collaborate with authorities to shape policies that reflect their aspirations. This participatory approach not only enhances the legitimacy of governance but also cultivates a sense of ownership and civic responsibility among citizens. Local government also serves as a catalyst for economic development and regional prosperity. By promoting entrepreneurship, investment, and job creation, local authorities stimulate economic growth and enhance the overall competitiveness of their jurisdictions (Claassen, 2023). Through strategic planning, zoning regulations, and incentives, they can attract businesses, foster innovation, and build sustainable economies that benefit residents and businesses alike. Moreover, local government plays a pivotal role in fostering social justice, equity, and inclusivity within communities. By addressing disparities in access to resources, services, and opportunities, local authorities can promote social cohesion, reduce inequality, and advance human rights. Through targeted interventions, such as affordable housing initiatives, social welfare programs, and cultural enrichment activities, they can create a more inclusive and vibrant community where all residents can thrive.

Historical Background of Local Government in the Nigerian State

The evolution of Nigeria's local government system is a complex narrative that reflects the country's historical, political, and socio-economic transformations. From pre-colonial structures to contemporary governance frameworks, Nigeria's local government system has undergone significant changes shaped by internal dynamics and external influences.

Pre-Colonial Era

Prior to colonial rule, Nigeria was characterized by diverse ethnic groups, each with its own systems of governance and socio-political organization. Local governance was largely decentralized, with communities governed by traditional rulers, councils of elders, and

customary laws (Anderson, 2021). These traditional institutions played crucial roles in maintaining order, resolving disputes, and managing local affairs. The pre-colonial era saw a rich tapestry of indigenous governance structures, reflecting the cultural diversity and complexity of Nigerian society.

Colonial Period

The arrival of European powers in the late 19th century marked a pivotal juncture in Nigeria's history. British colonial rule introduced centralized administrative systems, which gradually supplanted traditional governance structures. The colonial administration established indirect rule, whereby British officials collaborated with local chiefs and rulers to govern native territories (Anderson, 2021). This system aimed to exploit existing power structures while extending British authority across Nigeria. During the colonial period, local governance became increasingly intertwined with colonial interests, as traditional rulers served as intermediaries between local communities and the colonial administration. The imposition of British laws, tax systems, and administrative frameworks reshaped the dynamics of local governance, eroding the autonomy of traditional institutions and fostering dependency on colonial authorities.

Post-Independence Era

Nigeria gained independence from British rule in 1960, heralding a new era of nation-building and political transition. The years following independence witnessed efforts to consolidate democratic governance and empower local communities through decentralization initiatives. In 1976, the federal government under the General Olusegun Obasanjo's regime introduced the Local Government Reform Act (Udoji Report), which aimed to redefine the structure and functions of local government authorities (Mbalisi, 2023). The Local Government Reform Act sought to decentralize power and promote grassroots participation in governance. It established a three-tier system of government comprising federal, state, and local government authorities, with local governments granted greater autonomy in managing local affairs. Each local government area was administered by democratically elected councils, tasked with providing essential services, promoting development, and representing the interests of local communities.

In 1979, Nigeria adopted a new constitution that affirmed the role of local governments as the third tier of government and enshrined principles of democratic governance and decentralization. However, the transition to civilian rule was short-lived, as a series of military coups plunged the country into periods of political instability and uncertainty. The return to civilian rule in 1999 marked a pivotal moment in Nigeria's democratic journey, with the inauguration of the Fourth Republic and the restoration of civilian governance (Mbalisi, 2023). The new democratic dispensation heralded renewed efforts to revitalize the local government system and enhance its capacity to deliver services and promote development at the grassroots level.

Theoretical Framework

Efficiency in service delivery theory is a conceptual framework that guides the operations and governance of local governments. This theory aims to optimize the allocation of resources, streamline processes, and enhance the quality and accessibility of public services within a community. Central to this framework is the idea of maximizing output while minimizing input, ensuring that local governments can effectively meet the needs and demands of their constituents

within resource constraints. Efficiency in service delivery theory emphasizes the importance of employing efficient mechanisms, such as technological advancements, data-driven decision-making, and performance metrics, to enhance the overall effectiveness of local government operations.

One key aspect of this theory is the focus on resource allocation. Local governments must allocate their financial, human, and technological resources in a manner that optimizes service delivery (Kgobe, 2021). This involves prioritizing investments in areas that yield the greatest benefits and leveraging resources to address critical needs within the community. Moreover, efficiency in service delivery theory underscores the importance of process optimization. Local governments are encouraged to streamline bureaucratic procedures, eliminate redundancies, and adopt best practices to enhance operational efficiency. By implementing efficient processes, local governments can minimize delays, reduce costs, and improve the overall responsiveness of public services. Another crucial component of this theoretical framework is the emphasis on accountability and transparency. Efficiency in service delivery theory advocates for mechanisms that hold government officials accountable for their actions and decisions (Kgobe, 2021). This includes promoting transparency in decision-making processes, fostering public participation, and establishing performance metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of government initiatives.

Findings of Discussion

Problems of Service Delivery in the Nigerian Local Government

Effective service delivery is a cornerstone of good governance, essential for meeting the needs of citizens and fostering socio-economic development. In Nigeria, local governments play a vital role in delivering services directly to the grassroots level. However, numerous challenges impede their ability to fulfill their mandate efficiently. They are as follows:

Political Interference: Political interference poses a significant challenge to service delivery in Nigeria's local government system. Despite the critical role local governments play in delivering essential services to citizens, political interference often hampers their ability to function effectively and meet the needs of the population. One major manifestation of political interference is the undue influence exerted by political leaders on the decision-making processes within local governments (Banko, 2020). Elected officials at the local level often succumb to pressure from higher-ranking political figures, leading to decisions that prioritize political interests over the welfare of the community. This interference results in the misallocation of resources, favoritism in project implementation, and the neglect of critical service areas.

Additionally, the appointment of unqualified or politically connected individuals to key positions within local government bureaucracies is a common consequence of political interference (Ifaka, 2021). This practice undermines meritocracy and compromises the competence of the workforce responsible for service delivery. Incompetent personnel are less likely to effectively execute policies and programs, further diminishing the quality and efficiency of services provided. Furthermore, the instability caused by frequent changes in local government leadership due to political considerations disrupts continuity in service delivery. Projects initiated by one administration may be abandoned or altered when new leaders assume office, leading to delays and inefficiencies (Ifaka, 2021). This lack of consistency can hinder long-term development initiatives and negatively impact the overall well-being of the community.

Corruption and Mismanagement: Corruption and mismanagement pose formidable challenges to service delivery within Nigeria's local government systems, undermining the effective provision of essential services and impeding socio-economic development. Corruption denotes the abuse of entrusted power for private gain, while mismanagement pertains to the inefficient or negligent handling of resources and responsibilities. Firstly, corruption pervades various facets of local government operations, from procurement processes to budget allocations (Tinuoye, 2023). Officials may siphon funds meant for public projects into personal accounts or demand bribes in exchange for basic services, thereby diverting resources away from their intended purposes. This breeds a culture of impunity where accountability mechanisms are weak, allowing corrupt practices to flourish unchecked.

Moreover, nepotism and favoritism often dictate hiring and promotion decisions, rather than merit-based criteria. This compromises the competency and integrity of the workforce, leading to inefficiencies and substandard service delivery (Tinuoye, 2023). Qualified individuals may be overlooked in favor of less competent but politically connected individuals, exacerbating the problem of mismanagement. Furthermore, inadequate infrastructure and technology exacerbate opportunities for corruption and mismanagement. Outdated record-keeping systems and lack of transparency in financial transactions create loopholes for embezzlement and fraud. Without proper monitoring mechanisms and oversight, it becomes challenging to detect and prevent corrupt practices. The consequences of corruption and mismanagement are profound, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities that rely heavily on local government services. Vital sectors such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure suffer as funds intended for their improvement are siphoned off or misappropriated (Tinuoye, 2023). This perpetuates a cycle of poverty and underdevelopment, eroding public trust in governmental institutions and hindering progress towards sustainable development goals.

Bureaucratic Bottlenecks: Bureaucratic bottlenecks pose a significant challenge to service delivery within Nigeria's local government system. These bottlenecks represent the various hurdles, inefficiencies, and delays inherent in the bureaucratic processes that hinder the effective provision of services to the populace. At the heart of bureaucratic bottlenecks in Nigerian local governments are issues such as red tape, corruption, inadequate infrastructure, and limited capacity (Asaju & Ayeni, 2020). These factors often result in cumbersome bureaucratic machinery that slows down decision-making, implementation, and responsiveness to the needs of the citizens. One major aspect contributing to bureaucratic bottlenecks is the complex and outdated administrative procedures prevalent in many local government offices. These procedures are often characterized by excessive paperwork, multiple layers of approval, and a lack of streamlined processes (Asaju & Ayeni, 2020). As a result, essential services such as healthcare, education, sanitation, and infrastructure development are delayed or compromised.

Corruption further exacerbates bureaucratic bottlenecks within Nigerian local governments. The prevalence of bribery, extortion, and favoritism undermines the merit-based delivery of services and perpetuates inefficiency. Officials may demand bribes or engage in embezzlement, diverting resources meant for service delivery to personal gain. Additionally, the limited capacity of local government personnel in terms of skills, training, and resources contributes to bureaucratic bottlenecks. Many employees lack the necessary training and expertise to effectively carry out their duties, leading to errors, delays, and substandard service delivery.

Insecurity: In Nigeria, insecurity presents a formidable challenge to service delivery within local governments, undermining their ability to effectively govern and provide essential services to citizens. Insecurity manifests in various forms, including insurgency, communal clashes, banditry, kidnapping, and pervasive criminal activities, all of which disrupt the social, economic, and political fabric of local communities (Nweke, 2023). One critical aspect affected by insecurity is infrastructure development. In many regions, the fear of attacks hampers the construction and maintenance of roads, bridges, schools, and healthcare facilities. The lack of adequate infrastructure not only impedes access to basic services but also isolates communities, hindering economic activities and development initiatives.

Moreover, insecurity deters investment and economic growth. Businesses are reluctant to operate in areas marked by violence and instability, leading to a dearth of job opportunities and reduced revenue generation for local governments. This exacerbates poverty and inequality, perpetuating a cycle of underdevelopment and dependency on external aid. Furthermore, the delivery of essential services such as healthcare and education is severely compromised. Insecurity disrupts the functioning of schools and healthcare facilities, discouraging attendance and impeding the delivery of vital services (Nweke, 2023). Additionally, healthcare workers and teachers often flee conflict-affected areas, exacerbating staff shortages and diminishing the quality of services provided. Political instability and corruption also thrive in environments plagued by insecurity. Local government officials prioritize personal safety over public service, diverting resources meant for development projects to bolster security measures or lining their pockets through corrupt practices. This erodes trust in government institutions and undermines accountability, exacerbating social unrest and perpetuating the cycle of insecurity.

Political Instability: Political instability poses a significant challenge to service delivery in Nigerian local governments, undermining efforts to meet the needs of citizens effectively. Characterized by frequent changes in leadership, power struggles, and governance inconsistencies, political instability hampers the continuity, efficiency, and effectiveness of service provision. One key aspect of political instability in Nigerian local governments is the incessant turnover of elected officials due to factors like elections, impeachments, or power struggles (Tinuoye, 2023). These changes disrupt continuity in policymaking and project implementation, as incoming officials often prioritize new agendas over completing existing initiatives. This discontinuity leads to delays, mismanagement of resources, and the abandonment of crucial projects, exacerbating the already limited service delivery capacity.

Moreover, political instability fosters a climate of uncertainty and distrust among government officials, inhibiting collaboration and consensus-building necessary for coherent development strategies. Politically motivated decisions often take precedence over the rational allocation of resources, diverting funds away from essential service delivery projects to politically expedient ones. This misallocation perpetuates a cycle of inefficiency and inequality, as certain regions or demographics receive preferential treatment based on political affiliations rather than genuine need. Furthermore, political instability breeds corruption and patronage networks, as officials exploit their positions for personal gain rather than serving the public interest. Bureaucratic processes become mired in red tape and bribery, hindering the timely delivery of services such as healthcare, education, infrastructure, and sanitation. The lack of stable political leadership also undermines accountability mechanisms, making it difficult to hold officials responsible for their

actions or inactions (Tinuoye, 2023). This impunity erodes public trust in government institutions and fuels social discontent, potentially leading to unrest and further destabilization.

Insufficient Funding: Insufficient funding poses a critical challenge to service delivery in Nigerian local governments, hampering their ability to meet the needs and expectations of their constituents effectively. At the heart of this issue are several interrelated factors that contribute to the chronic underfunding of local government services. Firstly, the over-reliance on federal allocations exacerbates the problem. Local governments in Nigeria depend heavily on transfers from the central government, which often arrive irregularly and in inadequate amounts. These funds are insufficient to cover the diverse needs of local communities, ranging from infrastructure development to social services.

Moreover, the revenue generation capacity of local governments remains limited. Many local authorities struggle to collect taxes and levies effectively due to a variety of reasons, including weak administrative structures, widespread informality in economic activities, and resistance from taxpayers. As a result, they fail to generate the necessary resources to supplement federal allocations and fund essential services adequately. Furthermore, mismanagement and corruption further compound the issue. Inefficient allocation of funds, embezzlement, and diversion of resources meant for public projects deprive communities of much-needed development initiatives. The lack of transparency and accountability in financial management erodes public trust and undermines the effectiveness of service delivery mechanisms. Consequently, the inadequacy of funding severely impacts the provision of basic amenities such as healthcare, education, sanitation, and infrastructure within local government areas. Residents often bear the brunt of these deficiencies, experiencing poor-quality services or complete absence thereof, despite their fundamental right to access them.

Conclusion

To ensure efficient administration at the local government level in Nigeria, it's crucial for local authorities to streamline their spending patterns to achieve optimal outcomes, at the very least. It's widely acknowledged that local government, despite its various evolutionary stages, has firmly entrenched itself as the third tier of governance in Nigeria. Throughout its inception to the present day, the significance of local government entities in Nigeria's governance framework has remained unquestionable. They serve as vital conduits for swiftly delivering federal-level governance and development initiatives to grassroots communities. Local governments ought to leverage the enthusiasm of local communities and methodically strategize and fund impactful, sustainable projects that benefit everyone. The recent trend among local governments to enhance their capacity for service delivery should thus be maintained and reinforced.

Recommendation(s)

Improving service delivery in Nigerian Local Governments requires a multifaceted approach that addresses various aspects of governance, infrastructure, human resources, and community engagement. The research paper thereby makes the following recommendations in the attainment of Service Delivery in the Nigerian Local Government;

- i. **Capacity Building and Training:** Local government staff need regular training and capacity-building programs to enhance their skills in service delivery. This includes

- training in customer service, project management, and the use of technology to streamline processes.
- ii. **Transparent Budgeting and Financial Management:** Implement transparent budgeting processes and financial management systems to ensure that funds allocated for service delivery are utilized efficiently and effectively. This includes public disclosure of budgets, expenditures, and audits.
 - iii. **Decentralization of Decision-Making:** Decentralize decision-making processes to empower local government officials and communities to address their unique service delivery challenges. This can involve delegating authority and resources to lower levels of government and promoting community participation in decision-making.
 - iv. **Infrastructure Development:** Invest in critical infrastructure such as roads, water supply systems, healthcare facilities, and schools to improve the quality of life for citizens. Infrastructure development is essential for enhancing access to basic services in local communities.
 - v. **Use of Technology:** Embrace technology to improve service delivery processes and enhance efficiency. This includes the use of digital platforms for citizen engagement, e-governance solutions for administrative tasks, and the implementation of information systems for better data management.
 - vi. **Stakeholder Engagement and Collaboration:** Foster collaboration between local government authorities, community leaders, civil society organizations, and the private sector to identify priorities, mobilize resources, and implement initiatives that address local service delivery needs.
 - vii. **Performance Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establish robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track the performance of service delivery initiatives and assess their impact on communities. Regular evaluations help identify areas for improvement and ensure accountability in the use of public resources.
 - viii. **Promotion of Accountability and Anti-Corruption Measures:** Strengthen mechanisms for accountability and transparency within local government institutions to prevent corruption and misuse of public funds. This includes enforcing ethical standards, conducting audits, and prosecuting offenders.
 - ix. **Community Participation and Empowerment:** Promote active participation of citizens in local governance processes by creating platforms for dialogue, consultation, and feedback. Empowering communities to participate in decision-making fosters ownership of development initiatives and ensures that services meet local needs.
 - x. **Policy Reforms and Legal Frameworks:** Advocate for policy reforms and legislative changes that support improved service delivery in Nigerian Local Governments. This may involve reviewing existing laws, regulations, and administrative procedures to remove bottlenecks and enhance efficiency.

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