



Policy Implementation Gaps in Nigerian Local Governments: Causes and Remedies for Improved Governance

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Abstract

Local governments in Nigeria are strategically placed in the constitution to spearhead development at the grassroots level, but the inability to bridge the gap between policy making and real implementation has remained the bane of good governance and service delivery to people. The paper analyses the nature, causes and impacts of policy execution deficits in the local government in Nigeria with specific reference to institutional capacity, fiscal and intergovernmental limitations, political interference, lack of accountability and low citizen involvement. Within the theoretical insights, the paper relies on the perspectives that are relevant, such as the theory of street-level bureaucracy and implementation theory, in order to examine how administrative practices and frontline discretion influence the results of the policy at the local level. Nigeria's local governments experience empirical data that is supported by comparative data of other African nations depicts implementation failures to be more structural rather than exceptional with roots in the weak governance systems, insufficient resources, and poor cross-governmental coordination. The research finds that the policy implementation gaps can be reduced by enhancing the institutional capacity, increasing its fiscal autonomy, enhancing transparency and accountability mechanisms, and by better engaging the community. These discoveries will help in unending discussions on local governance reform and provide policy-relevant information to enhance implementation effectiveness and service delivery in Nigeria.

Keywords: Accountability, Citizen Participation, Governance, Institutional capacity, Local government, Policy implementation, Street-level bureaucracy

How to Cite: Okotie, W., & Oladoyin, A. M. (2026). Policy Implementation Gaps in Nigerian Local Governments: Causes and Remedies for Improved Governance. *Jurnal Ilmu Pemerintahan, Administrasi Publik, Ilmu Komunikasi (JIPIKOM)*, 8(1) 2026: 65-87,



INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, local governments play a pivotal role as they are the level of government who are nearest to the citizens and who are constitutionally required to offer necessities to the citizens like healthcare, education, infrastructure, and social welfare (Olowu 2019). Local governments have never been able to use these policy directives to achieve anything significant, hence there has always been gaps in service delivery. To illustrate, infrastructural projects like the construction of rural roads or water supply projects are frequently left halfway, whereas health and education policies are often not reaching the people who need them because they are not fully funded, human resources are insufficient, and the institutions are weak (Adeniran, Olanrewaju, and Ikuomola 2020). Political influence and corruption also reduce the effectiveness of the policy, whereas a lack of citizen participation can cause the enactment of policies that fail to meet the local demands (Ogujiuba, Okojie, and Adeyemi 2015).

Such loopholes have immense implications on the development of the grassroots. Societies are faced with a slowed down or lack of important services, infrastructure has not yet been developed and the social confidence in the local government institutions is eroding. However, there are certain local governments that have proved to be effective where leadership, financial management, and involvement of the citizens are more effective. As an example, LGAs in Lagos State managed to execute the waste management and primary healthcare programs by involving the communities and using the digital tracking systems (Akinola and Oladipo 2021). The solution to the policy implementation gaps is thus to be found in the ability to determine the systemic obstacles as well as the pragmatic approach to the systemic changes. Interventions that could be important would be capacity-building programmes, which are focused, participatory governance methods, effective monitoring and evaluation systems and anti-corruption measures.

Although there are several research articles about local government administration and policy implementation in Nigeria, much of the prior research is based on an identification of the problems in implementing policies, such as poor management, lack of adequate funds, political interference, and a general weakness in institutions. While these studies provide valuable insights into the causes of implementation, little focus has been placed on how the identified problem areas interact to impact policy outputs at the community levels and what actions can be taken to increase implementation effectiveness. In addition to focusing on policy output and institutional/administrative issues associated with the implementation process, the prior research tends to give minimal consideration to the perspectives of those whose lives will be impacted by successful or unsuccessful policy implementations. Therefore, this study identifies the problem area and then evaluates the institutional, administrative, and participant-oriented strategies which may positively affect both service delivery and development outcomes at the local community levels.

This research aims to assist in a more accountable, responsive and effective local government system with respect to Nigeria, which can deliver its constitutional mandate and ensure sustainable development at the grassroots level.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Concept of Policy Implementation

The notion of policy implementation is defined as the process by which political policies are translated into concrete actions and outcomes through administrative and political actors (Hill and Hupe, 2019). It is the mobilisation of the institutional capacity, monetary resources, coordination processes and political support in order to accomplish the mentioned goals. Modern research

focuses more on implementation as a dynamic and interactive process, and not on a linear administrative role, especially in decentralised systems of governance (Cairney, 2020).

In Nigeria, state governments affect the execution of policies at the local government level due to constitutional provisions, intergovernmental relations, administrative capability and political control (Olowu, 2019; Fatile and Adejuwon, 2021). Whereas policies influencing primary healthcare, basic education, rural infrastructure and environmental management are usually initiated at the national or state level, it is the local governments that are left to execute the new policies. Thus, inadequate administrative systems at the local level are often the cause of failure in the implementation process, despite the clear articulation of policy objectives (Adeniran et al., 2020).

Concept of Policy Implementation Gaps

Policy implementation gaps define the difference between the policy objectives and the real results of the implementation process (Hudson, Hunter and Peckham, 2019). Such loopholes arise in cases where policies are not well funded, have poor coordination, are delayed, selectively applied, or have been abandoned. Recent literature highlights the importance of noting that policy design problems are a common source of implementation failures, although this is not an exclusive cause (Cairney and Geyer, 2017).

In the local governments of Nigeria, the gaps in implementation often occur in the form of unfinished projects, poor delivery of services, poor performance of social programmes, and an inability to reach the intended beneficiaries (Ogujiuba et al., 2015; Akinola and Oladipo, 2021). Such loopholes undermine the results of development and strengthen a mistrust towards local institutions. Continuous implementation deficiencies are structural rather than administrative failures.

Governance and Local Government Administration

The term governance can be defined as the arrangements, structures, and processes in which authority is exerted and the manner in which the resources of the people are used (UNDP, 2020). Good Local government practices are linked with transparency, accountability, participation, responsiveness, and decisions made by rules. The quality of governance refers to the local government level as the results of policy implementation directly depend on the quality of governance as the local authorities are the main point of contact between the state and citizens (OECD, 2019).

The local government system in Nigeria is formally decentralised and is still limited by the control of the state level, financial reliance, and political interference (Olowu & Wunsch, 2018; World Bank, 2021). These restrictions inhibit administrative discretion, and dilute accountability, thus increasing policy implementation gaps. Empirical research indicates that under a weak system of governance, making policies vulnerable to elite capture, corruption, and inefficiency (Transparency International, 2022).

Institutional Capacity and Policy Execution

Institutional capacity denotes the capability of the public organisations in order to plan, implement, monitor, and even evaluate the policies (Brinkerhoff and Morgan, 2019). It involves human resources, technical skills, organisational systems, financial management and monitoring systems. Effectiveness in implementation may be boosted by strong institutional capacity as it brings about consistency, coordination, and flexibility throughout implementation (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock, 2017).

The institutional capacity of most Nigerian local governments is poor because of low staffing, low training, poor data management, and inadequate planning units (Adeniran et al., 2020; World

Bank, 2021). Such deficits limit the capacity of local governments to adopt policies effectively, hence a major contributor to the absence of implementation gaps.

Political Interference and Accountability Deficits

Political interference is one of the key predictors of policy implementation in Nigeria local governments. Political control in the state is usually associated with budgetary allocations, choice of projects, procurement, and appointments (Fatile & Adejuwon, 2021). When patronage is used when making implementation decisions as opposed to developmental concerns, then the policy results will be within the area inclined to serve the interests of the elite instead of developing the community.

Lack of accountability is another factor that contributes to implementation failure. Poor citizen engagement and weak oversight institutions, coupled with low levels of transparency, diminish the motivation to perform well and stay compliant (Fox, 2015; World Bank, 2017). Non-performance is seldom condoned in this environment, and this means that implementation gaps are always left open.

Citizen Participation and Policy Responsiveness

Citizen participation refers to the participation of people and society in the process of policymaking, implementation, and monitoring (UNDP, 2020). Participatory governance improves policy responsiveness by aligning interventions with local needs and reinforcing social accountability mechanisms (OECD, 2019).

However, in the Nigerian local governments, citizens are not engaged in implementation processes and cannot be engaged in local processes on a large scale (Olowu & Wunsch, 2018; Akinola & Oladipo, 2021). Such exclusion undermines the ownership of policies and leads to a lack of compliance, resistance or disengagement, further increasing implementation gaps.

Conceptual Linkages

This research conceptualises the interaction between governance quality, institutional capacity, political interference, accountability, and citizen participation, which together determine how effectively policies will be implemented by local governments. Governance quality (transparency, accountability, responsiveness) creates an environment that supports effective implementation. However, good governance cannot compensate for weak institutional capacity or a lack of experienced staff, sufficient funding, and proper administrative systems. Inadequate institutional capacity can undermine successful implementation of otherwise well-conceived policies.

Political interference also has a negative impact on effective implementation because it influences decision-making regarding resource allocation and project approval. The extent to which political interference exists in the system directly affects the degree to which accountability mechanisms function. As political interference increases, implementation decisions are more likely to reflect political interests rather than developmental priorities, thereby reducing policy effectiveness.

Additionally, when there is limited citizen participation in local government processes, this limits the ability of citizens to provide oversight of their local government. Reduced participation weakens public accountability and decreases the responsiveness of policies to local needs. Therefore, according to the research's assumptions, policy implementation gaps are most likely to exist in places with poor governance quality, inadequate institutional capacity, political interference, and low levels of accountability and citizen participation.

Conceptual Model

Governance Quality + Institutional Capacity + Accountability + Citizen Participation → Effective Policy Implementation → Improved Service Delivery

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this work, the choice of the two complementary theoretical approaches was made with the help of Lipsky Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory and Policy Implementation Theory, specifically top-down and bottom-up approaches. Collectively, these frameworks enable the development of the analytical lens of how institutional structures, frontline actors and governance dynamics influence the policy implementation outcomes in the Nigerian local governments.

Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory.

The theory of Street-Level Bureaucracy was formulated by Lipsky in the first place; it assumes that frontline public officials, including administrators of local governments, health workers, teachers, and field officers, have great discretion in the implementation of the public policies (Lipsky, 2010; Brodtkin, 2015). The officials have to work with limited resources, heavy workloads, unclear policy directives and pressures by politicians hence they are forced to establish informal coping mechanisms that end up determining the results of the policies.

Street-level bureaucrats within the local government of Nigerians significantly shape the various ways in which policies are carried out in reality. Despite the form of good policies, their realization at the ground level largely depends on the actions, orientation and abilities of front officials who are charged with service delivery. Discretion at this level may result in selective enforcement, delays, informal prioritisation of beneficiaries or even outright distortion of policy-making it a factor in implementation gaps.

This theory is relevant to the study because it explains the reason why the outcomes of implementation usually differ with the intentions of the policies, especially where the institutions are weak, ineffective oversight, and politics. The lack of training, inconsistent payment and ineffective accountability systems further contribute to discretionary behaviour among frontline officials which is experienced in Nigerian local governments to influence service quality and equity. The Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory hence offers a micro level explanation on why implementation failures are witnessed in the grassroots level.

Policy Implementation Theory: Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches

Policy Implementation Theory has wider analytical interpretations of the translation of policies into action, and especially the top-down and bottom-up strategies (Hill and Hupe, 2019; Cairney, 2020).

Top-down approach considers policy implementation as a hierarchical process and decisions are made at higher levels of government and passed downwards to be implemented. According to this view, successful implementation requires clear policy goals, the presence of sufficient resources, good coordination and central control. This model in the Nigerian setting portrays the constitutional and administrative fact whereby federal and state governments are the primary policy formulators with local governments being the implementers. But too much centralisation, lack of mandate and poor intergovernmental co-ordination tends to derail proper implementation at the community level.

Conversely, bottom-up approach focuses on the issue of local actors, networks, and implementers to influence policy consequences. This view acknowledges that implementation is not a technical process but negotiated and flexible and depends on local circumstances, institutional ability and relationships between the stakeholders. The bottom-up theorists believe frontline officials and communities have vital contextual information that can be used to increase the responsiveness and effectiveness of the policy when they are utilized effectively.

In the case of the local governments in Nigeria, the conflict between the top-down control and the bottom-up realities is acute indeed. Policies that are made without proper consideration

of the local capacities, needs and participation often face resistance or lack of compliance which leaves gaps in the implementation. On the other hand, in the situation of the local discretion mixed with accountability and citizen involvement, the results of the implementation are expected to improve.

Relevance of the Theoretical Framework to the Study

Combining the Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory and the Policy Implementation Theory, this paper will take into consideration a multi-level approach to analysis that embraces the micro-level implementation behaviour and macro-level governance framework. The theories collectively describe the interactions among institutional capacity deficit, political interference, accountability weakness, and poor citizen participation to influence the outcomes of policy implementation in the local governments in Nigeria.

This theoretical basis as such underpins the main argument of the study that the gaps in policy implementation are not exclusive to the failures of good policy design but embedded in the governance structures, institutionalized and discretionary behaviours of frontline implementers. Such a combination offers a solid research base to the analysis of the problems in implementation and the subsequent offer of a context-sensitive solution to the enhancement of local governance in Nigeria.

Empirical Studies on Policy Implementation in Nigerian Local Governments

There is an empirical trend in the literature on policy implementation in the local governments in Nigeria which has always pointed to poor performance, disparities in performance, and high levels of fluctuation in performance by region and sector. The research on the effectiveness of local governments also shows that despite the constitutional authority that grants local governments the mandate to provide basic services, there are still limited resources to transform policy goals into actual output (Olowu, 2019; Adeniran et al., 2020). The results of implementing policies have been indicated by empirical studies to be influenced less by policy intent and more by institutional constraints, fiscal dependency and quality of governance.

Concerning infrastructure delivery, there are a number of studies that record the incessant difficulties in the implementation of rural road development programs, water supply programs, and market infrastructure. Based on survey results in the chosen LGAs in South-West Nigeria, Akinola and Adesopo (2021) discovered that more than 60 percent of local infrastructural developments were delayed or not completed at all, in many cases because of disruption of funding and poor control of contractors. The same results are noted by Ogujiuba et al. (2015) who note that the rate of incomplete projects in the rural LGAs is high, especially in Northern Nigeria, where the administrative capacity is lower in relation.

The mixed results can also be observed in the implementation of health and education policies in the local area on the basis of empirical research. Research that has been conducted on the implementation of primary healthcare has shown that policies like the National Primary Health Care Development Programme are well-structured, but service provision is imperfect because there are a lack of frontline health workers, insufficient facilities, and inconsistent financing (Uzochukwu et al., 2021). Empirical studies in the education sector have revealed that the policies of Universal Basic Education are afflicted with a lack of monitoring, teacher allocation, and deterioration of infrastructures, particularly in the rural LGAs (Adewumi & Adenugba, 2020).

Empirical research information is that in the case of rural development programmes, the intended effects of interventions like community development projects, schemes to support farmers are frequently not realized because of low participation in the community and politicization of the project selection process (Lawal & Oluwatoyin, 2019). Nevertheless, there are some local governments, especially in Lagos and some areas in Ogun State, which show relatively

good results, with leadership interest, internally generated revenue, and stakeholder involvement stronger (Akinola & Oladipo, 2021). On the whole, the empirical literature demonstrates the Nigerian local governments as the localities with high implementation gaps interspersed with the cases of success due to favourable governance opportunities.

Sector-Specific Empirical Evidence of Implementation Gaps in Nigeria

In addition to general assessments, empirical studies are becoming more sectoral in seeking to investigate differences in policy implementation gaps between different areas of local government accountability. This literature shows that not all implementation challenges are homogenous but are influenced by institutional factors in the sector, funding systems, and the presence of political interest.

Empirical research in the primary healthcare sector has continuously found serious implementation gaps. A study by Abimbola et al. (2020) indicates that most primary healthcare centres which are under the administration of the local government perform below standard because of poor staffing, drug supply chain, and maintenance. Quantitative measures indicate that there are great differences in the service provision between urban and rural LGAs and that the rural regions had lower utilisation rates and worse health outcomes. Such loopholes are commonly pegged on lax oversight of frontline health workers and ineffective inter-governmental financing arrangements.

The same is also reflected in the empirical evidence of the basic education sector which also reports constant failures in implementation. The literature examining the implementation of Universal Basic Education in the local area reports the problem of teacher absenteeism, lack of learning resources, and the run-down school buildings (Akanbi and Alao, 2021). The studies conducted through surveys indicate that despite the expansion of the policies of enrolment, the quality indicators are still weak including learning outcomes and teacher performance, which presents a disconnect between the objectives and the outcomes of the policies.

Under the local infrastructure especially roads, water, and sanitation, empirical evidence shows that there are chronic inefficiencies. According to Ajayi and Aluko (2022), a considerable part of local road projects is either not completed to the design or not completed at all. Water supply projects also have a problem of poor maintenance that causes the systems to fail quickly. Such cases are often attributed to the lack of technical capacity in the local governments and poor contract management practices.

Environmental and waste management policy studies also provide an example of sector-specific implementation issues. Empirical studies in urban LGAs like Ibadan and Onitsha reveal that there are policies on waste management, but the policy lacks a proper implementation strategy as it is marked by lack of equipment, inefficiency in enforcement, and poor coordination with the operators (Ogwueleka, 2019). The indicators are that those areas that demand constant supervision of operations and technical ability are especially susceptible to the implementation gaps at the local level.

Taken together, the sector-specific empirical research highlights the complexity and depth of the implementation gaps in Nigeria, which in turn supports the concept of policy and institutional responses that should be differentiated instead of the use of one-size-fits-all responses.

Institutional and Administrative Determinants of Implementation Outcomes

One of the most frequent themes of the empirical studies is the primary influence of institutional and administrative capacity on the achievement of the policy implementation outcomes in the local governments in Nigeria. It has been proven empirically that local

governments that have better administrative structures, well trained staff and proper planning mechanisms record more implementation performance.

Examinations of the human resource capacity have shown that there are acute shortages of qualified human resource in vital departments like works, health, and planning. Adeniran et al. (2020) discovered that the number of LGAs who use understaffing of their technical units is high, which leads to use of external consultants and poor supervision of the project. The low motivation of the staff, lack of training opportunities and politicised recruitment also feature in the list of the factors that impair the effectiveness of the implementation as the results of the empirical evaluation.

Another determinant that has been found in the literature is technical expertise. The studies show that low engineering, financial, and monitoring capabilities limit the capacity of local governments to plan, implement, and assess projects successfully (Olowu, 2019). Infrastructure and environmental management are some of the sectors where this shortage is clearly evident, and technical complexity is great.

Studies with empirical evidence also highlight flaws in planning and monitoring systems. Some case studies indicate that local development plans are not usually well coordinated with the budgetary procedures, and as a result, they are implemented in a disjointed way (Lawal and Oluwatoyin, 2019). The monitoring and evaluation systems are either poor or not there at all, restricting feedback loop and learning.

These findings are theoretically close to the implementation theory and the street-level bureaucracy theory of Lipsky. Empirical research reveals that frontline officials have a lot of discretion in the situations when there is a lack of resources, and sometimes they take survival as their priority and policy as the second (Uzochukwu et al., 2021). In areas where institutional backing is low, street-level bureaucrats are informally policy makers and this influences their outcomes in a manner that might not reflect the intentions of the formal policy.

On the whole, the available empirical evidence proves the fact that the problems of implementation gaps in Nigerian local governments are deep-rooted in terms of institutional and administrative vulnerabilities. The need to enhance human capacity, technical competence, and planning systems stands out as a requisite to the enhancement of the policy outcomes at the grassroots level.

Fiscal and Intergovernmental Constraints on Policy Implementation.

A large amount of empirical evidence pinpoints fiscal and intergovernmental constraints as key factors that have led to policy failures during implementation in the local governments of Nigeria. However, the local governments are so reliant on the statutory allocation in the Federation Account, which restricts their autonomy to make decisions and implement them due to their constitutional obligations (Olowu, 2019; Eboh & Diejomaoh, 2020). Empirical research always indicates that such dependence undermines planning, slows down the execution of projects and diminishes service delivery.

This is a vital limitation in the fact that irregular and late release of statutory allocations is common being mediated by the state governments through the State-Local Government Joint Account. Empirical studies indicate that the state level delays and deductions are functional in the reduction of funds that local policy can implement (Arowalo, 2017; Ademolekun and Ayoade, 2021). The quantitative studies reveal that changes in monthly allocations are strongly related to projects being abandoned and under-delivering services especially the capital intensive facilities like infrastructure and health.

Also, poor internally generated revenue (IGR) serves as an additional limitation to the implementation abilities of local governments. In the sample of fiscal data of various LGAs, it has

been found that IGR adds less than 10-15 percent of total local government revenue in most states, indicating limited tax base, bad revenue management, and the opposition of local government taxation (Oluwatosin and Fatile, 2020). This fiscal vulnerability limits the capacity of the local governments to co-finance projects, keep up the infrastructure or even recurrent services.

Implementation outcomes are also determined by intergovernmental relations. There is empirical evidence that political control by the state on the local governments is often converted into project interference, funds reallocation, and twisted local priorities (Suberu, 2021). This has led to the local governments being more administrative branches of the state governments rather than policy-implementing bodies. All these fiscal and intergovernmental limitations create a structural space where policy implementation gaps are created with local administrative effort notwithstanding.

Political Interference, Corruption, and Accountability in Policy Implementation

One of the significant explanatory variables in empirical studies on the outcome of policy implementation in the local governments of Nigeria is political dynamics. In a variety of studies, political interference, patronage system, and corruption are found to negatively impact the successful implementation of policies at the grassroots level (Ogujiuba et al., 2015; Transparency International Nigeria, 2022).

Empirical studies provide evidence of the dominance of elite capture and patronage-based project selection in which infrastructure projects are selected according to political loyalties, as opposed to the need to advance development. Evidence of this in the case studies of various states reveals that the location of projects tends to be a politically advantageous community and leads to uneven distribution of public goods and strengthening local disparities (Akinola & Oladipo, 2021). This kind of politicisation interferes with the logical planning and undermines the developmental effectiveness of local policies.

Corruption also creates bigger gaps in implementation. Empirical surveys have shown that high contracts, quality of implementation, and funds diversion are typical characteristics of local government projects (ICPC, 2021). Quantitative analyses indicate that the level of perceived corruption is negatively correlated with the quality of infrastructure, and thus the outcomes of policies are directly taken away through corruption. The fact that the sanctions are not enforced strongly and that there is minimal prosecution of the wrongdoers helps to create low risk environment to malpractice.

The lack of accountability adds to these challenges. Research indicates that the oversight institutions including local legislative councils, audit departments and community watchdog organizations are often independent and unable (Eboh and Diejomaoh, 2020). There is also a lack of transparency in the procurement processes and budget implementation, which leads to a lack of scrutiny of the population. It has been empirically indicated that in areas with a poor accountability system, the outcomes of policy implementation decline considerably, which supports the lack of trust in local governance establishments among people.

Fiscal and Intergovernmental Constraints on Policy Implementation.

Empirical literature has found fiscal and intergovernmental constraints to be significant factors that determined policy implementation failures within the local governments in Nigeria. The local governments are still very reliant on statutory distributions by the Federation Account, which constrained their fiscal independence and execution capacity even despite their constitutional duties (Olowu, 2019; Eboh & Diejomaoh, 2020). Empirical evidence has always indicated that such a dependency debilitates the planning process, slows down the implementation of projects and destroys service provision.

One of such constraints is the inconsistent and tardy publication of allocations made out of statutes, which are usually mediated by state governments through the State-Local Government Joint Account. According to empirical studies, the amount of money allocated to local policy implementation is greatly decreased in response to delays and deductions at the state level (Arowolo, 2017; Ademolekun and Ayoade, 2021). The quantitative studies show that the monthly variances in allocations are strongly related to project abandonment and inadequate service delivery, especially in capital ionized sectors like infrastructure and health.

Secondly, low internally-generated revenue (IGR) also limits the implementation ability of local governments. Documented fiscal data of several LGAs indicates that IGR brings less than 10-15 percent of local government revenue in most states, indicating small tax basis, inadequate revenue collection, and political disapproval against local taxation (Oluwatosin and Fatile, 2020). This financial deficiency limits the capacity of local governments to co-fund initiatives, upkeep structures, or operate on routine services.

Implementation results are also influenced by intergovernmental relations. The empirical evidence indicates that the state-level political domination of the local government is frequently associated with the interference of the project, re-distribution of the funds, and the misrepresentation of the local priorities (Suberu, 2021). This causes local governments to become more administrative projections of the state governments than policy-implementing agencies on their own. It is all these fiscal and intergovernmental constraints which create a structural environment where policy implementation gaps remain irrespective of the local administrative effort.

Political Interference, Corruption, and Accountability in Policy Implementation

The political dynamics emerge as a significant factor of explanation in the empirical studies of the results of the policy implementations in local governments of Nigeria. As a number of studies indicate, political interference, patronage, and corruption are the main factors that are impeding the effective policy implementation at the ground level (Ogujiuba et al., 2015; Transparency International Nigeria, 2022).

Empirical studies have emphasized high levels of elite capture and patronage based project selection, whereby the infrastructure projects are selected on political loyalty basis as opposed to need to develop. Evidence of various states demonstrates that the location of projects is mostly politically advantageous communities, which leads to uneven distribution of social benefits and supports local discrepancies (Akinola & Oladipo, 2021). This kind of politicisation undermines the planning process and deteriorates the developmental effectiveness of the local policies.

Implementation gaps are also created by corruption. According to the empirical surveys, inflated contracts, low quality of execution, and misplaced funds are typical characteristics of local government projects (ICPC, 2021). Quantitative tests demonstrate that there is negative correlation between the perceived levels of corruption and the quality of infrastructure implying that corruption is a direct factor which diminishes policy effects. The environment of low-risk to malpractice can be attributed to weak enforcement of sanctions and few persecutions to the offenders.

Lack of accountability adds to these difficulties. Research reveals that monitoring bodies like local legislative councils, audit services, and local watchdog committees do not have independence or ability (Eboh & Diejomaoh, 2020). Weak transparency in the area of procurement and budgetary implementation also minimizes the number of scrutinized people. It has been empirically indicated that when accountability mechanisms are ineffective, the outcome of policy implementation is much worse and this strengthens the mistrust of the people in local governance institutions.

Role of Street-Level Bureaucrats in Policy Implementation Outcomes

It is also becoming widely acknowledged by empirical research that street-level bureaucrats frontline public servants, including health workers, teachers, engineers and environmental inspectors, play a central role in determining the outcomes of policy implementation at the local level. Applying the Theory of Street-Level Bureaucracy, which is presented by Lipsky, research findings indicate that these actors have a lot of discretion especially in resource-strained settings (Lipsky, 2010; Uzochukwu et al., 2021).

As demonstrated by the empirical studies conducted on the local governments in Nigeria, frontline officials tend to devise mechanisms of coping with the high workloads, lack of resources, and unclear instructions. They may be rationing services, prioritisation of some clients, or informal rule-making, which may change the policy outcomes considerably (Abimbola et al., 2020). Although this kind of discretion can be effective in the short-term operation, it can equally result in the inequalities in service delivery and policy goals.

Research conducted in health and education industries indicates that street-level bureaucrats attitudes, incentives, and motivation are very critical in the determination of the quality of service delivery. In a place where pay is low and supervision is poor the absence of commitment and absenteeism will be high and it will work against the effectiveness of the policies (Adewumi and Adenugba, 2020). On the other hand, empirical instances indicate better results in those cases when front line workers are trained, given incentives and supervised.

By showing that results of implementation are not merely dependent on policy design or institutional formations but are actively developed by daily interactions between frontline officials and citizens, such findings operationalise the theory that Lipsky has developed. Street-level bureaucrats are thus informal policy makers whose behaviours may reduce or increase the gaps in implementation.

Citizen Participation and Community Engagement in Local Policy Implementation

The empirical literature is troubling the need of citizen participation and community engagement as demand side measures of enhancing the outcomes of policy implementation in local governments. Research indicates that community engagement promotes relevance, accountability, and sustainability of the policies by aligning policies with the local needs (Mansuri and Rao, 2019; Akinola and Adesopo, 2021).

According to the empirical evidence in Nigeria, community monitoring and participatory planning are linked to superior project results. Community-driven development research demonstrates the increased completion rates and better maintenance in cases when the beneficiaries become part of decision-making and supervision processes (World Bank, 2020). The mechanisms of social accountability like, town hall meetings, community scorecards and civil society monitoring have been seen to minimize project abandonments and enhance the quality of services.

Nevertheless, there are still consistent limitations in the literature. A large number of local governments have poor levels of citizen engagement because of poor institutional structures, political marginalization, and low awareness. Empirical evidence indicates that in cases of participation that is symbolic as opposed to substantive, the results of implementation are still poor.

All in all, the empirical research indicates that the participation of the citizens is a remedial mechanism to the failures of the implementation due to the elite and bureaucratic practices. The introduction of participatory governance at the local policy processes is thus an important avenue through which the gaps of implementation can be reduced and governance outcomes enhanced.

Comparative Empirical Evidence from Other African Countries

Empirical evidence on policy implementation in other African nations proposes important insights on the dynamics of policy implementation in Nigeria and shows that the implementation problems in the country are not unique but structural. The examples of different countries with different models of decentralisation indicate that institutional design, fiscal institution, and accountability systems influence the local policy outcomes throughout the continent.

Empirical research on the topic of decentralisation and local budgeting in Ghana suggests that a comparatively more transparent fiscal transfers and district-level planning systems have led to better implementation results in such areas as basic education and sanitation (Ayee, 2017; Crawford, 2019). Nevertheless, the literature also records that there are still lingering problems such as capacity issues and political influence suggesting that decentralization does not necessarily make implementation effective. The case of Ghana indicates that fiscal autonomy should be coupled with a good administrative framework and checks and balances to ensure that the policy intent is translated into a policy result.

The devolution reforms began in Kenya in 2010 with the introduction of the new Constitution, and have received considerable empirical research. Research indicates that devolution has enhanced access to health and local infrastructure in a number of counties especially due to increment in budgetary allocations and the ability to make local decisions (World Bank, 2021). However, there are also gaps in the implementation data which are associated with elite capture, the uneven capacity among the counties, and ineffective monitoring (Cheeseman, Lynch, and Willis, 2016). These results are very close to the Nigerian experiences and the role of institutional capacity and political incentives is important.

The municipal governance studies in South Africa show a controversial track record of policy implementation. Although the performance of the service delivery in metropolitan municipalities is rather better than in rural and peri-urban ones, the challenges associated with these areas are chronic and associate with the lack of financial discipline, administrative instability, and accountability (Pycroft, 2018). Empirical studies indicate that strong legal systems are not enough to have without efficient enforcement and professionalised local governments.

The centrality of local accountability is further enforced by evidence on Tanzania and Uganda. Research records that the participatory planning and community surveillance have enhanced the implementation on health and water projects especially where the local councils involve the citizens in a meaningful manner (Francis and James, 2019). Where there is a weak or politicised participation, however, there is still a gap in implementation.

Taken together these comparative studies clearly indicate that the problems of policy implementation in Nigeria are not specific to the country, but are more indicative of wider governance constraints affecting decentralised systems across Africa. Meanwhile, they also present the best practices, like participatory budgeting, more visible fiscal transfers, and performance monitoring, providing a topical example to the Nigerian local governments.

Methodological Approaches in Existing Empirical Studies

An analysis of the available sources of empirical literature shows that there are significant trends and shortcomings in the empirical investigations of the policy implementation within the local governments. The literature is more methodologically dominated with qualitative case studies, which in most cases resort to interview, document analysis and observation. These methods are very informative in contexts, but are often unsustainable by generalisation and statistics.

Where quantitative studies are available, they are more likely to be based on descriptive statistics based on surveys or administrative data. Statistical methods used in an inferential

manner (regression analysis or multivariate modelling) are quite uncommon, mostly because of the data limitations on the local government level. Subsequently, causality relationships among the variables of governance and implementation outcomes are usually implied without being tested empirically.

A high level of bias is present in case studies with a large number of studies targeting individual local governments, sectors or projects. Despite offering insight on context-specific dynamics, such studies restrict comparative analysis not only between regions nor only between policy domains. Moreover, the use of self-reported information provided by officials and community respondents is also too dependent, therefore, leading to the problem of bias in responses and social desirability.

One of the issues that has been recurring is data limitations. Most local governments do not have credible, disaggregated information on budgetary activities, project implementation and service performance. This limits longitudinal analysis and empirical assertions. Therefore, current studies have a tendency to fail to align theory with specific indicators of implementation performance.

These methodological trends indicate that the literature is abundant in description but is discontinuous analytically and methodologically disproportional, and more integrated and systematic methods of empirical research are required.

Identified Empirical Gaps and Justification for the Present Study

Even with the scope of the current empirical research, there are still a number of gap issues. To begin with, most of the literature has focused on governance, institutional capacity or political interference, or citizen participation, but has made little attempt to incorporate these variables into a single analytical model. This disaggregation limits the comprehensive knowledge of the interaction between various factors to create gaps in the implementation of policies.

Second, a dearth of empirical information about the grassroots level that integrates the community perspectives with an institutional and a political analysis exists. Most studies adopt elite or official opinions, which does not reflect the lives of policy beneficiaries.

Third, most of the literature has a weak connection between theoretical constructs and empirical evidence. Although theories like Street-Level Bureaucracy and implementation theory are most often mentioned, they are hardly ever operationalised with the help of clear variables and indicators.

Fourth, the literature on this subject area has a tendency of focusing on individual sectors, e.g., health or education, which inhibits the cross-sectoral understanding of the dynamics of implementation at the local government level.

This paper fills these voids by implementing a combined method of analysis, which concurrently analyses the structure of governance, institutional capacity, politics, street-level bureaucratic behaviour and citizen participation. The qualitative and quantitative evidence in the grassroots level and direct association of theory with empirical signs enable the study to provide a more complete and policy relevant picture of the gaps in implementation in the local governments of Nigeria.

By doing this, it remains a kind of rectifying action to the empirical shortcomings that are currently present and enhances the knowledge of how the implementation of the policy can be reinforced in order to enhance the results of the governance at the local level.

Table 1: Cross-Country Empirical Insights into Local Government Policy Implementation and Governance Challenges in Africa

Country	Focus of Empirical Studies	Key Implementation Challenges Identified	Areas of Relative Strength	Lessons Relevant to Nigeria
Nigeria	Local government policy implementation across infrastructure, health, education, and rural development	Weak institutional capacity, fiscal dependence on states, political interference, corruption, limited citizen participation, weak monitoring systems	Presence of formal decentralisation framework; increasing policy awareness at grassroots level	Implementation failure is driven more by governance and capacity deficits than policy absence
Ghana	Decentralisation, district-level budgeting, service delivery	Capacity gaps, elite influence, delays in fund disbursement	Clearer fiscal transfer mechanisms; participatory planning in some districts	Fiscal clarity and community engagement improve implementation outcomes
Kenya	Devolution and county-level service delivery	Elite capture, uneven county capacity, weak accountability in some regions	Increased local budget autonomy; improved health service delivery in several counties	Devolution improves outcomes only when matched with accountability and administrative capacity
South Africa	Municipal governance and service delivery	Financial mismanagement, administrative instability, weak enforcement	Strong legal and regulatory frameworks; better performance in metropolitan municipalities	Legal frameworks must be supported by enforcement and professional local administration
Tanzania	Local accountability and community-driven development	Central oversight constraints, resource limitations	Community monitoring and participatory implementation in health and water sectors	Citizen participation enhances responsiveness and sustainability
Uganda	Decentralisation and social service delivery	Political interference, funding shortfalls	Use of community scorecards and social accountability tools	Demand-side governance mechanisms strengthen implementation outcomes

Source: Author's Compilation, 2025

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research design uses the qualitative institutional research design to analyze the gaps in policy implementation in the local governments in Nigeria. This methodology is suitable given that policy implementation is a phenomenon of governance and process that is influenced by institutional set ups, political relations, administrative actions and discretionary activities of the players of the local government system. The study is aimed at explaining the causes and reasons of the gap between policy intentions and outcomes at grassroots level instead of numerical measurement. The design would concur with the Street Level Bureaucracy Theory and the policy implementation theory, which focus on discretion, institutional constraints, and interaction between actors in implementation.

Study Area

The research is carried out in the chosen Local Government Areas in Oyo and Ogun States in South West Nigeria i.e. Ibadan North, Ido and Abeokuta South Local Government Areas. These councils are chosen strategically to bring a sense of diversification in administrative capacity,

urbanisation, and performance of governance in a common legal and regional structure. Ibadan North is an urban local government with complicated administrative needs, Ido indicates semi urban and rural area with fewer institutional supplies, and Abeokuta South offers an urban environment with comparatively bigger internally produced revenues and extended experience of administrative reforms. This choice makes meaningful institutional comparison and preserves contextual consistency.

Population of the Study

The population includes institutional actors and stakeholders who are directly engaged in the process of policy implementation on the local government level. Such are elected officials, top administrative officials, frontline service providers, and community stakeholders. In particular, the local government chairpersons or their representatives, the heads of department, planning officers, health and education officers, the officials of the works department, the community development officers, the ward leaders, the representatives of the civil society, and those residents who have direct experience on the service delivery by the local governments are covered.

Table 2: Estimated Accessible Population of Policy Implementation Stakeholders in the Selected Local Government Areas

Category	Ibadan North	Ido	Abeokuta South	Total
Chairpersons/Vice Chairpersons	2	2	2	6
Heads of Departments	10	10	10	30
Planning Officers	1	1	1	3
Health Officers	1	1	1	3
Education Officers	1	1	1	3
Works Department Officials	2	2	2	6
Community Development Officers	2	2	2	6
Ward Leaders/Civil Society Representatives	10	10	10	30
Estimated Population				87

Source: Compiled from Local Government Administrative Structures and Field Reconnaissance, 2025.

The accessible population of the study consisted of approximately 87 institutional actors and community stakeholders directly involved in or affected by policy implementation across the three selected Local Government Areas.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling is used to pick both the places where the study was to be conducted and the individuals who were to be sampled according to the administrative relevancy, and policy participation and accessibility to the institutional information. The key informants are selected based on their roles, duties, and experience in the implementation of the policies. The sampling will go on until there is saturation of data, and no new insights are gained by carrying out an interview.

Sample Size and Participant Selection

A total of 18 key informants were purposively selected from the estimated accessible population of 87 stakeholders across the three selected Local Government Areas. Participants were selected based on their direct involvement in policy implementation, administrative responsibilities, professional experience, and knowledge of local governance processes.

The sample included local government officials, departmental heads, frontline service providers, community development officers, ward leaders, civil society representatives, and community stakeholders. The selection sought to capture both administrative and community perspectives on policy implementation. Interviews continued until thematic saturation was

achieved, that is, when additional interviews generated no substantially new information or themes.

Sources and Methods of Data Collection

The analysis is also based solely on the qualitative data to be collected using primary and secondary sources. The primary data will be obtained by conducting in depth semi structured interviews on the selected local government officials and community stakeholders. The secondary data will be available as a result of document analysis of policy documents, development plans, budget reports, audit reports, council minutes and implementation guidelines. Using these methods, it is possible to triangulate and trace the policy processes institutionally.

Interview Procedure

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews guided by a flexible interview schedule developed from the study objectives and theoretical framework. The interviews focused on institutional capacity, political interference, accountability mechanisms, administrative discretion, citizen participation, and policy implementation outcomes.

Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was conducted in a location convenient to the participant. With participants' consent, interviews were recorded and supplemented with field notes to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data collected.

Method of Data Analysis

Coding and Thematic Analysis

The interview transcripts and documentary materials were analysed using thematic analysis. The first stage of the analysis involved repeated readings of the interviews to familiarise with the data. Codes based upon frequently occurring ideas and statements, after which related codes were grouped into categories.

Categories were repeatedly refined and compared until they developed into themes that relate to institutional capacity, political interference, administrative discretion, accountability mechanisms, and citizen participation. Themes were interpreted as to how they relate to both Street Level Bureaucracy Theory and Policy Implementation Theory.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Trustworthiness of this research project was enhanced by employing Methodological Triangulation. Interview Data was compared to Policy Documents, Budget Reports, Audit Reports, and Implementation Guidelines. An audit trail was maintained throughout the coding and analysis process to improve transparency and consistency.

Credibility of the results was further supported by comparing participant responses within categories of participants and among the three study locations. This also helped identify repetitive patterns within the findings and reduced the potential for researcher bias.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS.

The results contained in the chapter are arrived at using a systematic thematic analysis of qualitative data collected through in depth interview and review of documentary reports carried out within the Ibadan North, Ido, and Abeokuta South Local Government Areas. After data collection, the interview responses have been transcribed and then analysed in connection with policy documents, budget records and audit reports. The data were inductively coded and common patterns and explanations regarding policy implementation were identified and further categorized into wider analytical themes representing the institutional capacity, political interference, administrative discretion, accountability mechanisms, and citizen participation. The themes that were kept were those that showed consistency of evidence among various respondents and were backed by documentary evidence. The analysis will be structured

thematically according to the theoretical framework of the study and direct information gathered through the respondents will be combined with institutional documents to expound how policy implementation gaps are created and sustained in the local governments of Nigeria.

Institutional Capacity and Policy Implementation

This theme came up as a result of repetitive codes that concerned the shortages of staff, flawed planning systems, lack of technical skills and knowledge, and ineffective monitoring abilities throughout interview transcripts and official documents.

The results of the three local governments show that institutional capacity is still one of the main factors of the results of the implementation of the policies. Lack of skilled personnel, poor planning units and poor technical capabilities were recurrent among the issues that respondents cited as a major hindrance to successful policy implementation. In Ido Local Government Area, authorities reported that key departments which are works and health have a very small number of professional staff and this has led to delays, lack of supervision and use of external contractors. One of the senior officers revealed that with limited staffing, there is usually a need to make departments to focus on survival rather than adhering to formal implementation procedures.

Ibadan North and Abeokuta South Local Government Areas: Staffing was relatively better, but the respondents identified that issues of capacity as poor inter departmental coordination and poor monitoring systems have continued to be experienced. Analysis of documents on development plans and budget reports showed that there was a discrepancy between policy targets and actual implementation timetables implying that flaws in planning lead to gaps in implementation even in comparatively well-resourced councils.

The cross-case data show that the variations in performance are not totally determined by the availability of money for the implementation of programmes. Although it is true that Abeokuta South has better administrative procedures and a greater tax base than Ibadan North, however the latter's poor ability to coordinate and monitor its activities cannot be said to be due to inadequate staff as compared to Ido. This indicates that institutional effectiveness depends not only on resource availability but also on quality of the administrative systems, planning processes and internal coordination systems they have in place. The results therefore indicate that local government authorities which have strong organisational frameworks, are better equipped to deal with problems of programme implementation even when they face similar levels of funding constraint.

Political Interference and State Level Control.

This theme was made based on recurring motifs in interview information and documentary writings on the state level influence on the budget release, project choice and administrative decision making.

Political interference became one of the leading themes that influenced the implementation of the policy in all the places of study. Respondents explained the impact of state level influence on budget releases, project choice and administrative freedom. In the Ibadan North Local Government Area, the officials cited that they received regular commands or order by the state authorities to change the project priorities during the implementation. These projects usually lead to a drop off or unfinished projects, especially the infrastructure and environmental services.

Political interference in Ido Local Government Area was said to be more direct and restrictive. According to the respondents, the local decision making is hampered by limited fiscal autonomy, as well as, state influence on statutory allocations. Reported instances of delayed payouts were associated with the stagnating health and road projects. The respondents of Abeokuta South likewise recognized political impact but mentioned that greater internally generated revenue gives a little buffering of the outside control.

The findings further suggest that political interference and institutional weakness reinforce one another. Frequent changes in project priorities and delays in resource allocation place additional pressure on already constrained administrative systems. In situations where institutional capacity is weak, local governments have limited ability to resist external influence or maintain implementation continuity. As a result, political interference not only affects policy decisions directly but also exacerbates existing implementation challenges.

The Administrative Discretion and Street Level Practices.

This theme was developed based on an inductive coding of the responses of frontline officials, whereby they talked about coping mechanisms, informal practice, and discretionary changes they have to make in the implementation of the policy.

In line with the Street Level Bureaucracy Theory, there are reports that frontline officials make major discretions when implementing policies. The three local governments employed in the fields of health, education and field workers presented strategies of coping they adopted to know how to cope with resource shortages, heavy workloads, and vague instructions. These strategies comprise informal prioritisation of beneficiaries, selective application of regulations and adjustment of policy guidelines to local facts.

In Ido Local Government Area, discretionary practices were stronger in that there were acute resource constraints. The respondents acknowledged that in most cases, the decisions pertaining to service delivery are determined by practicality instead of the formal policy specifications. The bureaucratic pressure and political demands have contributed more than the sheer lack of resources in Ibadan North and Abeokuta South in discretion. These observations indicate how discretionary behaviour despite its ability at times to allow the creation of minimal functionality, has led to an uneven and inconsistent policy behaviour.

The findings indicate that administrative discretion produces both positive and negative outcomes depending on the implementation context. Discretion appears beneficial where officials use their judgement to adapt policies to local conditions and maintain service delivery despite resource constraints. However, discretion becomes problematic when it results in inconsistent application of rules, unequal treatment of beneficiaries, or deviation from policy objectives. The effectiveness of discretion therefore depends largely on the presence of adequate oversight, clear guidelines, and professional accountability mechanisms.

Accountability Mechanisms and Oversight

This theme was created after repeat codes of poor oversight, weak audit enforcement and low transparency were experienced in both interviews response and audit reports reviewed.

The study has established that the accountability systems in the local governments are mostly poor and sporadic. Limited oversight by legislative councils, poor internal audit departments and low procurement and project monitoring process transparency were cited by the respondents in all three councils. In the Ido Local Government Area, the oversight institutions were reported to be very dormant and thus implementation failures were never reprehended.

Formal accountability structures exist in Ibadan North and Abeokuta South Local Government Areas, but have been compromised by politics and the inertia of the administrative process. Analysis of documents of audit reports indicated that there had been recurring observation on financial anomalies and project non completion with scant evidence on corrective action taken. These weaknesses in accountability allow a culture of unfulfilled implementation without a hand on the institution.

Citizen Participation and Community Engagement

The theme came up due to the data and records of the interviews, where there was minimal consultation, feedback systems, and community participation in the implementation and monitoring process.

Results show that the involvement of citizens in implementation of policies is still minimal and symbolic. The representatives of the community stated that consultation usually takes place when major decisions are already made, and there is no possibility of substantial interaction. Low awareness and lack of information in Ido Local Government Area further limit the community participation in monitoring projects.

At Ibadan North and Abeokuta South, respondents confirmed that they have town hall meetings and stakeholder forums, however, they said that in most cases, the two platforms do not affect the decisions on implementation. It has been documented that the community feedback mechanisms have low institutionalisation which means that it is not very effective as a means of accountability and responsiveness. Lack of sustained citizen participation is also a factor that leads to low policy ownership and poor social accountability.

Although citizen participation was generally limited, respondents in Ibadan North and Abeokuta South noted that town hall meetings and stakeholder consultations occasionally helped identify community priorities and improve communication between local authorities and residents. While these mechanisms were not fully institutionalised, they demonstrate the potential of meaningful participation to improve policy responsiveness, strengthen community ownership, and enhance accountability in the implementation process.

Cross Case Analysis of the Study Areas

Cross case analysis shows that, there are common implementation dynamics and that there are also differences in the implementation dynamics amongst the three local governments. Such obstacles as low institutional capacity, political interference, poor accountability, and low citizen participation are common. There is however some variation in the intensity and expression of these factors.

Ido Local Government Area has the worst implementation lapses, which is fuelled by acute shortages of resources, poor institutional set ups and lack of autonomy in the administration. The challenges related to bureaucratic complexity and political interference of the situation in an urban context is shown by Ibadan North. Abeokuta south has a relatively better performance which is buttressed by better revenue capacity and administrative routines even though it is limited by accountability and governance flaws.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that policy implementation gaps in Nigerian local governments are not merely administrative shortcomings but reflect broader governance and institutional challenges. Across the three study areas, implementation outcomes were shaped by the interaction of institutional capacity, political influence, accountability structures, administrative discretion, and citizen participation. This suggests that effective policy implementation depends not only on policy design but also on the quality of governance systems through which policies are executed.

The findings strongly support the assumptions of Policy Implementation Theory, which emphasises that implementation outcomes are influenced by organisational capacity, resource availability, intergovernmental relationships, and the behaviour of implementing actors. Consistent with previous studies (Adeniran et al., 2020; Fatile & Adejuwon, 2021), the study found that weak institutional capacity, inadequate staffing, and poor coordination significantly undermine implementation effectiveness. The findings further reinforce the argument that

implementation failures often arise from systemic institutional weaknesses rather than from deficiencies in policy formulation alone.

The findings also provide empirical support for Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory. Frontline officials were found to exercise considerable discretion in response to resource shortages, administrative pressures, and ambiguous policy directives. Similar to the observations of Lipsky (1980), discretion served both adaptive and problematic functions. While it enabled officials to maintain service delivery under difficult conditions, it also contributed to inconsistencies in implementation and unequal policy outcomes. This demonstrates the important role played by frontline actors in shaping policy outcomes at the local level.

The study further contributes to broader debates on decentralisation and local governance in Nigeria. Although decentralisation is intended to improve responsiveness and bring government closer to citizens, the findings suggest that local governments continue to face significant constraints arising from state-level control, limited fiscal autonomy, and political interference. These findings support previous studies (Olowu & Wunsch, 2018; World Bank, 2021) which argue that the benefits of decentralisation are unlikely to be realised where local institutions lack sufficient autonomy and administrative capacity.

The findings also reinforce governance literature that identifies accountability, transparency, and citizen participation as critical determinants of implementation success. The evidence suggests that weak oversight mechanisms and limited public participation reduce accountability and allow implementation failures to persist. Conversely, stronger citizen engagement and more effective monitoring systems have the potential to improve policy responsiveness and strengthen public trust in local government institutions.

Overall, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on governance and public sector reform by demonstrating that policy implementation gaps are multidimensional and interconnected. Addressing these gaps requires more than increased funding or administrative reforms alone. Sustainable improvements in implementation outcomes will depend on strengthening institutional capacity, reducing political interference, enhancing accountability mechanisms, and promoting meaningful citizen participation within local government governance structures.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

Summary of the Study

This study examined policy implementation gaps implementation in the Nigerian local governments based on the cause of such gaps and the solutions that can be offered to address the gaps to achieve better governance and service delivery. The research was driven by the fact that local governments have been ineffective throughout history in liaising policy goals at the grassroots level to actual developmental deliverables, even though they are mandated to do so in their constitution.

Mixed methods research design was used, which consisted of quantitative data collection using structured questionnaires and qualitative data collection using key informant interviews. The study followed the implementation theory and Lipsky theories of Street-Level Bureaucracy that gave understanding on how institutional capacity, political relationship, administrative practice and frontline discretion affect the policy outcome at the local governmental level.

Summary of Findings

According to the findings of the study, the level of awareness of government policies and programmes among members of the community are relatively high, but this awareness does not always lead to effective implementation and better service delivery. Some of the key contributors

of implementation gaps were found to be institutional capacity constraints such as poor staffing, poor technical expertise, ineffective monitoring and evaluation systems, etc.

Fiscal constraint also turned out to be a paramount issue. High reliance on statutory allocations by higher government levels and low internally generated revenues poses a significant constraint to the working levels of local governments. The lack of political interference and accountability further weakens implementation process such that the project is usually abandoned, the quality of the infrastructure is poor, and the services are not delivered efficiently.

It was also found that the discretionary nature of the street-level bureaucrats is crucial in determining the policy outcomes, especially in situations where there is scarcity of resources and poor supervision. Moreover, low citizen involvement in the process of policy making, implementation and surveillance minimizes policy responsibility and sustainability.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that the policy implementation gaps within the Nigerian local governments are more of structural, institutional and governance related weaknesses and not the lack of well conceived policies. Although the local governments are strategically placed in the constitution to provide necessary services to the people, they lack the capacity to provide the required services, they are financially dependent, political interventions, and lack effective accountability mechanisms.

Policy implementation should be holistic therefore in ways that reinforce the institutions of governance, promote administrative capacity, and active citizen engagement. In the absence of the attempts at solving these preliminary problems, the local government policy programs can hardly deliver any significant developmental outcomes.

The findings further suggest that addressing implementation gaps requires targeted reforms at both the institutional and governance levels. Priority should be given to strengthening administrative capacity through continuous staff training, improved planning systems, and enhanced monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Greater fiscal autonomy would enable local governments to implement development programmes more effectively and reduce excessive dependence on higher levels of government. In addition, stronger accountability systems, including regular audits and transparent reporting procedures, are necessary to improve oversight and reduce implementation failures. Finally, participatory governance mechanisms that promote meaningful citizen involvement in planning, implementation, and monitoring processes should be institutionalised to enhance policy responsiveness and strengthen public trust in local government institutions.

Recommendations

To close the identified policy implementation gaps, the study suggests the issue of enhancing the institutional capacity by enhancing the staff training, staff recruitment, planning, monitoring, and evaluation systems. The increased fiscal autonomy must be achieved by issuing statutory allocations in time and enhancing the methods of revenue mobilisation.

The interference of political processes into the administrative processes must be reduced by the better separation of the roles and the implementation of the regulatory system. The lack of accountability and transparency should be improved by engaging in the strengthening of the mechanism of control and openness of budgets to society and increased communication with stakeholders.

Street-level bureaucrats are supposed to be equipped with proper resources, working policies, and performance rewards that would enhance the performance in terms of service delivery. Also, the local governments are supposed to institutionalise participation governance

systems that allow citizens to participate in policy-making and oversee the implementation processes.

Recommendations on Future research.

The use of inferential statistical methods in the future should be to study the cause and effect relationship between the variables of governance and the outcome of policy implementation. Additional research can also extend the coverage to other local governments in Nigeria and also carry out respective analysis in terms of sector to gain further empirical insight on policy implementation processes.

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