



Decentralizing Power: Empowering Local Communities in Development Decision-Making in Nigeria

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Abstract. This study critically examines decentralization and local community empowerment within Nigeria's governance framework through theoretical and documentary analysis. Drawing on Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969) and Sen's Development as Freedom (1999), the research analyzes the gap between constitutional guarantees of local government autonomy and centralized power realities. Despite Section 7 of the 1999 Constitution guaranteeing local government existence, political, institutional, fiscal, and socio-cultural barriers impede genuine community empowerment. The 2024 Supreme Court judgment affirming local government financial autonomy represents a watershed moment, yet implementation challenges persist. This research contributes actionable recommendations for constitutional reform, institutional strengthening, and enhanced participatory mechanisms, arguing that meaningful decentralization is essential for sustainable development and democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Keywords: Decentralization, local government autonomy, community empowerment, participatory governance, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Nigeria confronts a profound development paradox where vast natural resources coexist with widespread poverty and inadequate infrastructure, particularly at the grassroots levels. At the heart of this paradox lies excessive concentration of power and resources at the federal and state levels, leaving local communities marginalized in decisions directly affecting their lives. Section 7 of the 1999 Constitution guarantees the existence of local government councils, yet their effectiveness is

significantly hindered by lack of genuine autonomy, with state governments exercising overwhelming control over local affairs, elections, and finances. This constitutional contradiction has created what scholars describe as "grassroots governance without grassroots power." The consequences of centralization are profound. Development initiatives designed at distant capitals often fail to address local realities. Community members remain excluded from meaningful decision-making despite possessing intimate knowledge of their challenges. Resources intended for grassroots development are diverted through opaque channels, fueling cynicism and undermining democratic legitimacy. Against this backdrop, decentralization and community empowerment become imperative for more responsive, accountable, and effective governance.

This study emerges at a particularly opportune moment. On July 11, 2024, the Supreme Court delivered a landmark judgment granting financial autonomy to Nigeria's 774 local government councils, ruling that allocations should be paid directly rather than through state governments, and declaring the practice of state governors dissolving democratically elected councils and installing caretaker committees as unconstitutional. This judicial intervention represents the most significant affirmation of local government rights since the return to democracy in 1999. This research pursues four primary objectives: to critically examine theoretical frameworks of decentralization and empowerment and assess their applicability to Nigeria; to analyze constitutional provisions regarding local government autonomy, identifying contradictions between legal frameworks and institutional realities; to comprehensively map barriers impeding effective decentralization; and to develop actionable policy recommendations for strengthening local government autonomy and

enhancing community empowerment. Employing theoretical and documentary analysis, this study synthesizes scholarly literature, constitutional provisions, and empirical case studies from Lagos and Oyo states, analyzed through thematic content analysis and philosophical inquiry.

2. Theoretical Framework

Understanding decentralization and community empowerment in Nigeria requires robust theoretical foundations illuminating both universal principles and context-specific dynamics. Decentralization encompasses multiple interconnected dimensions with distinct governance implications. Political decentralization involves transferring political authority to subnational elected bodies, representing the most extensive form, as it devolves genuine decision-making power. Administrative decentralization redistributes responsibilities from central to local administrative structures. Fiscal decentralization assigns expenditure responsibilities and revenue-raising powers to subnational governments, requiring not only revenue allocation but also local capacity to generate own-source revenues. In Nigeria, these dimensions are unevenly developed, creating what scholars describe as "decentralization without devolution."

Sherry Arnstein's seminal 1969 article presented a typology showing participation ranging across eight rungs in three categories: non-participation (manipulation and therapy), tokenism (informing, consultation, and placation), and degrees of citizen power (partnership, delegated power, and citizen control). Arnstein's central argument remains provocatively relevant: genuine citizen participation requires power redistribution. In Nigeria, manifestations of lower rungs are disturbingly common, where community consultations are staged to rubber-stamp predetermined decisions and development projects are announced as fait accompli. Most Nigerian local governance operates between manipulation and consultation, rarely reaching partnership or citizen control. While the 1999 Constitution promises elected local councils, state governors routinely dissolve democratically elected representatives and replace them with appointed caretaker committees, preventing true representative government.

However, Arnstein's framework requires contextual adaptation for Nigeria. The framework presupposes relatively stable institutional environments and clear distinctions between powerholders and have-nots, while Nigerian reality is more complex with traditional authorities wielding significant informal power, ethnic and religious identities crosscutting class divisions, and federal, state, and local governments engaging in intricate power struggles.

Moving toward authentic participation requires institutional safeguards including legal rights to information and participation, independent facilitation of participatory processes, community control over some participation mechanisms, and genuine consequences when officials ignore citizen input.

Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom* (1999) fundamentally reconceptualizes development not as rising GDP but as expanding people's substantive freedoms to lead lives they have reason to value. Sen identifies five interconnected instrumental freedoms essential for development: political freedoms enabling participation and expression; economic facilities providing opportunities for education and healthcare access; transparency guarantees enabling trust and informed citizenship; and protective security providing safety nets against severe deprivation. These freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing, with Sen famously observing that no famine has ever occurred in a functioning democracy.

For Nigerian local governance, genuine local government autonomy enhances all five instrumental freedoms. Proximity enables more effective citizen participation in decisions affecting their lives. Autonomous local governments can tailor economic policies to local conditions and create employment through local procurement. Local governments constitutionally responsible for primary education and healthcare can respond more rapidly to local needs than distant bureaucracies. Smaller scale facilitates transparency as citizens can more readily monitor local expenditures. Local governments are best positioned to identify vulnerable populations and target social protection effectively.

Sen's most profound insight is reconceptualizing development itself through the capability approach, which assesses what people can actually do and be rather than income alone. For Nigerian local communities, this means evaluating development not by oil revenue allocated but by expansion of substantive freedoms: Can children attend functioning schools? Can families access clean water and healthcare? Can farmers obtain credit and market their produce? Can women participate equally in community decisions? Decentralization matters because it potentially expands capabilities when communities control resources and decisions, prioritizing investments that expand local capabilities rather than serve distant political interests.

Beyond Arnstein and Sen, African philosophy emphasizes ubuntu—communal solidarity and

interdependence captured in "I am because we are." These values can both support and complicate participatory governance, supporting it by providing cultural foundations for collective action while complicating it when invoked to justify hierarchical decision-making potentially excluding women, youth, or minority voices. Nigerian decentralization must navigate tensions between communalist traditions and democratic principles, creatively synthesizing both by drawing on communalist values of solidarity while ensuring inclusive, rights-respecting participation.

3. Constitutional Framework and Historical Context

Nigeria's 1999 Constitution provides legal foundations for local government, yet constitutional provisions have been systematically undermined. Section 7 guarantees that the system of local government by democratically elected councils is guaranteed, requiring state governments to ensure their existence under law providing for their establishment, structure, composition, finance, and functions. However, this formulation simultaneously recognizes local government while placing it under state legislative authority, creating critical ambiguity about whether state responsibility grants authority to control or suffocate local autonomy. The Constitution's Fourth Schedule enumerates local government functions including economic planning recommendations, revenue collection, establishment of cemeteries and markets, construction and maintenance of roads and drains, refuse collection and disposal, registration of births and deaths, and assessment of properties for rating purposes. These functions position local government as primary provider of essential grassroots services, yet constitutional allocation of functions without corresponding resource allocation and genuine autonomy creates responsibilities without capacity.

More controversially, Section 162(6) requires each state to maintain a State Joint Local Government Account into which all allocations to local government councils from the Federation Account and state government must be paid. While introduced to address problems of local governments failing to pay teachers and workers in the 1990s, the Joint Account mechanism has become the primary instrument of state control over local finances. State governments routinely retain substantial portions of local government allocations, releasing funds piecemeal and often with conditions, enabling governors to starve local councils financially and render them entirely dependent on state largesse.

Pre-colonial Nigeria comprised diverse political systems with indigenous governance structures suited to local conditions. The Sokoto Caliphate featured hierarchical emirate systems, Yoruba kingdoms combined monarchical authority with councils of chiefs, and Igbo communities operated through decentralized republican systems. Despite diversity, common features included close leader-community connections enabling responsiveness, integration of political and religious authority, accessible dispute resolution mechanisms, and resource mobilization through self-help traditions. British colonial administration's indirect rule policy fundamentally disrupted indigenous governance, transforming traditional rulers from accountable community leaders into colonial agents and creating Native Authorities serving extraction and control rather than community development.

Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999 promised renewed local government autonomy, yet constitutional promises have been systematically undermined by state interference. The landmark 2024 Supreme Court judgment sought to curtail state interference by ordering direct federal payments to local governments and declaring caretaker committees illegal. However, exactly one year after the ruling, state governors have retained control of council allocations totaling ₦4.5 trillion through various bureaucratic maneuvers, with the federal government channeling allocations through state governments and governors securing moratoriums that have become indefinite delays. This demonstrates that constitutional text alone, without political will and enforcement mechanisms, cannot guarantee autonomy.

4. Barriers to Effective Decentralization

Despite constitutional guarantees, Nigerian local governments face formidable barriers to autonomy across multiple interconnected dimensions. Politically, elite capture and godfatherism undermine democratic accountability, wherein wealthy, politically influential individuals sponsor candidates for office expecting reciprocal benefits once elected. At local government level, godfathers often control council chairs, dictating policies, appointments, and resource allocation. This system fundamentally undermines democratic accountability as elected officials answer primarily to godfathers rather than constituents, with development priorities reflecting godfather interests rather than community needs.

Perhaps the most significant political barrier is entrenched state government opposition to genuine local autonomy. Governors possess powerful incentives to maintain control: economically, the State Joint Local Government Account enables

access to substantial resources financing state-level projects, political patronage, and sometimes personal enrichment. Politically, control over local governments provides extensive patronage networks, with appointing local government chairs strengthening political machines and extending gubernatorial influence to grassroots levels. Governors routinely dissolve democratically elected councils and install caretaker committees, with the practice becoming normalized despite constitutional illegality. State governments also control State Independent Electoral Commissions responsible for conducting local government elections, manipulating elections through delayed elections, predetermined results, electoral violence, and regulatory manipulation that disqualifies opposition candidates.

Institutionally, capacity constraints severely limit effectiveness even with full autonomy. Local governments often lack qualified personnel for planning, budgeting, financial management, and project implementation, as skilled professionals gravitate toward federal and state governments offering better remuneration. Continuing professional development opportunities are limited, and when training occurs, it's often generic rather than tailored to local government needs. Many local governments operate with outdated administrative procedures, poor record-keeping, inadequate information technology systems, and inefficient workflows. Nigerian bureaucracy exhibits strong centralist tendencies accumulated over decades of military rule, with civil servants accustomed to hierarchical, top-down decision-making resisting participatory approaches viewed as time-consuming or threatening to bureaucratic authority.

Fiscally, Nigerian local governments derive overwhelming majorities of revenues from monthly Federation Account Allocation Committee distributions, creating dependence on external funding that makes them vulnerable to manipulation. Revenue volatility from fluctuating oil prices creates unpredictability undermining planning. Despite the 2024 Supreme Court judgment, the State Joint Local Government Account remains the primary mechanism of fiscal control through arbitrary deductions, delayed releases, conditional releases dictating spending, and opacity where local governments often don't know allocations or deductions. Local governments possess constitutional authority to generate revenues through property taxes and various fees, yet internally generated revenue remains disappointingly low due to limited tax bases in economically marginal areas, collection inefficiencies from weak capacity and corruption, political resistance to aggressive taxation, and

economic informality making most activity difficult to tax.

Socio-culturally, Nigerian local governance must navigate complex relationships between modern democratic institutions and traditional authorities who carry significant legitimacy, particularly in rural areas, performing valuable conflict resolution, cultural preservation, and community mobilization functions. However, tensions arise when traditional and democratic authority conflict over competing legitimacy claims, gender and age hierarchies in traditional systems contradicting democratic principles, elite domination by traditional leadership disconnected from ordinary members, and resistance to reforms threatening traditional status. Many Nigerian citizens lack detailed understanding of governance structures, constitutional rights, or participation mechanisms due to limited formal education, information gaps about government plans and budgets, and genuine governance complexity. Years of governance failure have generated widespread cynicism, with many Nigerians viewing politics as irredeemably corrupt and participation as futile. Nigerian governance systematically excludes women facing cultural norms restricting public roles, youth dismissed as immature despite Nigeria's median age of approximately 18, persons with disabilities facing physical and social barriers, and ethnic and religious minorities marginalized in heterogeneous local governments.

Technically, increasingly digital governance and participation face severe digital divides from infrastructure gaps with many areas lacking internet connectivity or electricity, device access remaining unaffordable, digital literacy deficits, and language barriers with platforms operating in English excluding non-English speakers. Effective participation requires information about government plans, budgets, and performance that is systematically unavailable through non-disclosure citing confidentiality, incomprehensible technical formats, language barriers, and delayed release too late for citizen influence. Even when citizens attempt engagement, feedback and accountability mechanisms are weak with no response channels, toothless monitoring bodies, and impunity where officials face no consequences for non-performance. These barriers interact and reinforce each other, with political manipulation depending on fiscal control, fiscal control depending on institutional weaknesses, institutional weaknesses exploited by cultural barriers, and all sustained by information asymmetries.

5. Case Studies from Nigerian States

While barriers are formidable, Nigerian experience offers examples of innovation and partial success.

Lagos State, though smallest in land area, is Nigeria's economic nerve center and most populous state, with governance innovations offering insights into possibilities and limitations. Community Development Associations represent formalized structures for community organization and participation, with the Lagos State Community Development Associations Law of 2008 providing legislative backing. As of 2023, Lagos boasts over 4,000 registered CDAs organizing at neighborhood level, electing executive committees, conducting regular meetings, and mobilizing for self-help projects. CDAs perform multiple functions including initiating infrastructure projects, organizing environmental cleanup campaigns, establishing neighborhood security, advocating for government services, and mediating resident conflicts.

Lagos State government actively cultivates CDA partnerships, with over 3,900 vibrant CDAs providing platforms through which government tests viability of plans and policies while obtaining public feedback. However, CDAs face significant challenges including elite domination where leadership skews toward wealthier, more educated residents underrepresenting renters and economically marginal members. Sustainability depends on volunteer effort that waxes and wanes, with leadership turnover devastating institutional continuity. Not all residents participate or recognize CDA authority, raising questions about whose interests CDAs represent. Close government-CDA ties raise concerns about co-optation, with CDAs potentially becoming government cheerleaders rather than critical voices, evidenced by over 4,000 CDAs endorsing Governor Sanwo-Olu for second term.

Oyo State, nicknamed the Pace Setter, offers contrasting context as one of Nigeria's most urbanized states with Ibadan metropolis while maintaining extensive rural areas combining urban dynamism with traditional governance structures. The Community and Social Development Agency, established in 2008 to comply with World Bank requirements, adopts Community-Driven Development approaches emphasizing participatory planning and implementation. A 2013 impact assessment showed significant progress with 930,529 people gaining increased social services access. CSDA innovations include establishing desk offices in relevant ministries for coordination and serving as secretary to synergy bodies eliminating duplication. The agency received recognition as best reform among Oyo State reforms and represented the state at governance innovation conferences.

Remarkably, Adamawa State Governor Ahmadu Fintiri granted local governments autonomy before

the 2024 Supreme Court judgment, demonstrating that political will can overcome legal ambiguities. The Adamawa State Chairman of Association of Local Governments confirmed councils receive federal allocations directly, with the Commissioner of Finance noting Adamawa was first to implement local autonomy because Governor Fintiri believes in rule of law and separation of powers. Adamawa's example demonstrates local government autonomy is achievable when governors prioritize it, raising questions about why other governors resist.

Internationally, India's Panchayati Raj system following 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments devolved substantial powers to village councils with constitutional protection, reserved seats for women and marginalized groups, constitutionally mandated elections, and State Finance Commissions determining revenue-sharing. Brazil pioneered participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre enabling citizens to directly decide municipal budget priorities through neighborhood assemblies. Kenya's 2010 Constitution established 47 counties with substantial devolved powers and resources, though experience has been mixed with devolution bringing government closer while also generating new corruption and capacity challenges. These international experiences demonstrate that constitutional entrenchment matters, fiscal transfer mechanisms are critical, inclusion mechanisms like quotas can substantially increase participation, capacity-building is essential, and context adaptation is necessary as what works elsewhere must be adapted to Nigerian realities.

6. Framework for Enhanced Community Empowerment

Comprehensive reforms require coordinated interventions addressing multiple dimensions. Constitutionally, immediate priorities include full financial autonomy through explicit abolition of State Joint Local Government Accounts, mandating direct federal payments, prohibiting state deductions except those explicitly authorized, establishing independent monitoring mechanisms, and providing legal remedies for violations. Electoral independence requires reforming State Independent Electoral Commissions, potentially establishing Regional Electoral Commissions covering multiple states to reduce gubernatorial control, requiring National Assembly confirmation of members, providing secure federal funding, mandating INEC oversight, and imposing automatic consequences for fraudulent elections. Protecting elected officials requires prohibiting arbitrary dissolution, limiting removal grounds to impeachment for gross misconduct following due process, establishing independent tribunals, guaranteeing full constitutional term tenure, and providing federal

intervention authority when states violate tenure rights.

Long-term constitutional reforms should review federal-state-local revenue allocation formulas, increasing local government allocation to at least 25-30% of federation account from current 20.60%, establishing constitutional minimum allocations for poorest local governments, creating equalization funds addressing disparities, and including oil-producing communities in derivation benefits. Fourth Schedule functions should be expanded and clarified, granting concurrent authority over primary education and healthcare, clarifying land administration authorities, providing environmental regulation enforcement authority, and enabling contracts, borrowing, and partnerships without state approval. Constitutional recognition of traditional institutions should provide advisory roles, prohibit executive or legislative functions, establish consultation mechanisms on cultural heritage matters, and ensure leadership selection respects human rights particularly gender equality.

Institutionally, capacity building requires establishing a National Local Government Training Institute providing pre-service training for newly elected officials, continuing professional development, specialized training in financial management and participatory planning, executive leadership programs, and exchange programs enabling cross-learning. Professionalizing local government civil service requires merit-based recruitment, competitive salary structures, career paths enabling progression, and Local Government Service Commissions insulating personnel decisions from political interference. Strengthening planning and budgeting capacity requires mandating multi-year development plans, providing technical assistance for evidence-based planning, establishing standardized formats enabling performance comparison, creating dedicated budget offices, and implementing program-based budgeting linking resources to outcomes.

Fiscally, revenue enhancement requires expanding local government revenue sources through clarifying taxing authority over property and business premises, enabling user fees for services, granting authority to levy development charges, allowing retention of fines, and enabling municipal bonds for infrastructure financing. Strengthening collection capacity requires establishing professional Revenue Agencies, implementing technology-enabled collection, conducting comprehensive property enumeration, establishing taxpayer databases, partnering with banks, and implementing public education campaigns. Transparent budgeting requires mandating publication of annual budgets and quarterly reports,

requiring accessible online information, establishing internal audit units, subjecting all to annual independent external audits, and publishing audit reports publicly. Federal support beyond statutory allocations should establish performance-based grants, conditional grants for priorities, capacity-building grants, equalization grants for poorest local governments, and innovation grants supporting pilot programs.

Participatorily, institutional structures should include statutory Ward Development Committees in every ward with 15-20 elected diverse representatives identifying priorities, reviewing projects, monitoring implementation, and providing feedback with formal consultative roles. Sectoral stakeholder forums should create Health Facility Management Committees, School-Based Management Committees, Market Traders Associations, Water Users Associations, and Agricultural Extension Committees. Community Development Councils should be formalized through legal frameworks, registration processes ensuring accountability, federal grants for self-help projects, partnerships between local governments and organizations, and ensuring inclusion of marginalized groups.

Participatory processes should implement participatory budgeting dedicating 15-30% of capital budgets to participatory processes through neighborhood assemblies proposing and prioritizing projects, citizen budget committees evaluating proposals, voting on final selections, and requiring implementation with citizen oversight. Public hearings should mandate quarterly ward town halls, hearings on major projects, annual State of Local Government addresses, live-streaming meetings, and providing advance notice with accessible venues. Social audits and community scorecards should train community monitors, provide access to project documents, conduct participatory reviews of implementation quality, develop scorecards rating service delivery, and require public responses to findings. Citizen feedback mechanisms should establish SMS-based platforms, local government mobile apps, suggestion boxes, citizen service centers, and guarantee timely responses with escalation procedures.

Civil society organizations should conduct civic education on local government functions and citizen rights, support formation of community groups and cooperatives, campaign for constitutional reforms and policy changes, and conduct budget tracking and expenditure monitoring publishing research on performance. Traditional institutions should receive formal recognition as cultural and advisory institutions, collaborate with local governments on community mobilization and conflict resolution, and

champion education, health, and development while evolving toward more inclusive practices. Development partners should provide technical and financial assistance for reforms, fund innovation and rigorous evaluation, engage in policy dialogue, and support civil society enabling effective monitoring and advocacy.

7. Conclusion

This study reveals substantial gaps between constitutional promises and political realities in Nigerian local governance. Nigeria's 1999 Constitution guarantees local government existence and assigns specific functions, yet provisions have been systematically undermined through State Joint Local Government Accounts, arbitrary dissolution of elected councils, fraudulent elections, and state interference. The 2024 Supreme Court judgment represents the judiciary's most robust affirmation of local government rights, yet implementation remains contested, demonstrating that constitutional text alone cannot guarantee autonomy without political will and enforcement mechanisms.

Effective decentralization is impeded by interconnected barriers operating across political, institutional, fiscal, and socio-cultural dimensions. Politically, elite capture, godfatherism, and state government resistance driven by economic and political motivations prevent genuine democratic local governance. Institutionally, capacity constraints, centralized bureaucratic cultures, and coordination failures limit effectiveness. Fiscally, dependence on federal allocations, State Joint Local Government Account manipulation, and weak internal revenue generation create financial vulnerability. Socio-culturally, tensions between traditional and modern authority, low civic literacy, political apathy, and exclusion of marginalized groups limit meaningful participation. These barriers reinforce each other, creating systemic challenges requiring comprehensive, coordinated interventions.

Despite formidable obstacles, Nigerian experience demonstrates possibilities. Lagos State's CDAs show urban communities can organize and partner with government though challenges of elite domination and sustainability persist. Oyo State's CSDA demonstrates Community-Driven Development approaches can increase service access and build local capacity. Adamawa State's voluntary local government autonomy proves political will can overcome legal ambiguities. Supreme Court interventions show judicial authority can constrain executive overreach. These examples, while limited and fragile, indicate change is possible when political will, institutional innovation, and community mobilization converge.

Applying Arnstein's Ladder and Sen's capability approach illuminates Nigerian realities, revealing that most local governance operates at lower and middle rungs of manipulation, consultation, and placation, rarely reaching partnership or citizen control. Moving toward higher rungs requires genuine power redistribution, not merely improved consultation. Sen's framework reveals decentralization's potential to expand all five instrumental freedoms while highlighting current unfreedoms constraining local communities. Development must be reconceptualized from GDP growth to capability expansion, with communities defining what constitutes flourishing.

Priority actions emerge for different stakeholders. Federal government must enforce the 2024 Supreme Court judgment, initiate constitutional amendments, establish support programs, and strengthen monitoring. State governments must respect local autonomy, conduct credible elections, support capacity building, and enable revenue generation. Local governments must assert constitutional rights, strengthen internal governance, engage communities meaningfully, and build coalitions. Civil society must conduct civic education, advocacy, capacity building, and accountability monitoring. Development partners must support reforms, fund innovation and research, engage in policy dialogue, and support civil society. Traditional institutions must embrace partnership, champion inclusive development, evolve progressively, and facilitate conflict resolution.

Future research should capture community-level perspectives through primary research, conduct systematic comparative state-level analysis, evaluate specific intervention impacts rigorously, examine traditional-modern governance integration, analyze political economy factors, track reform implementation longitudinally, and investigate youth and gender engagement, technology and participation, and climate change implications for local governance.

Meaningful decentralization and genuine community empowerment are achievable but not inevitable. They require political leaders relinquishing illegitimate power, civil servants serving citizens rather than patrons, communities organizing and demanding accountability, traditional leaders championing inclusive development, civil society persevering despite obstacles, and researchers producing evidence informing reform. The vision is clear: Nigerian local governments functioning as genuine, autonomous, democratically accountable institutions serving their communities with citizens actively participating in decisions affecting their lives, development priorities reflecting community needs, resources

managed transparently, services delivered equitably, and marginalized groups included meaningfully.

This vision is not utopian fantasy but constitutional requirement and practical necessity. Nigeria's Constitution already guarantees local government autonomy; the task is implementation. The 2024 Supreme Court judgment provides legal foundation. Civil society provides mobilization capacity. Communities provide local knowledge and legitimate authority. All pieces exist. What remains is assembling them into coherent, sustained reform effort. The stakes are high: Nigeria's democratic consolidation, development trajectory, and ultimately the wellbeing of over 200 million Nigerians depend substantially on getting local governance right. Nigeria can do better. The journey toward genuine decentralization will be long and difficult with setbacks and resistance, but the destination—responsive, accountable, effective local governance serving empowered communities—is worth every effort.

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