Autonomy Deficits and Grassroots Development in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria: Evidence from Infrastructure and Human Capital Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Local governments are strategically positioned to provide essential public services and promote development at the grassroots. However, their effectiveness in Nigeria is frequently constrained by political interference, restricted administrative discretion and limited control over financial resources. These autonomy deficits may weaken the capacity of local councils to provide infrastructure and develop the human resources required for effective service delivery. This study examined the relationship between inadequate local government autonomy and grassroots development in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Specifically, it assessed whether political, administrative and financial autonomy constraints are associated with infrastructural and human capital development challenges. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted. The study focused on Uyo, Ikot Ekpene and Eket Local Government Areas, representing the three senatorial districts of Akwa Ibom State. Using the Taro Yamane formula, a sample of 400 respondents was determined from the projected state population of 5,272,029. Respondents were selected through a multistage sampling procedure. Data were collected using a structured four-point Likert-scale questionnaire with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.96. Of the 400 questionnaires administered, 384 were returned, representing a 96.0% response rate. Descriptive statistics and Pearson's Product–Moment Correlation were used for data analysis. Respondents identified restricted access to financial resources, deductions from local allocations, state influence over project selection and prolonged approval procedures as major impediments to infrastructural development. Constraints on financial and administrative autonomy were also associated with limited staff training, leadership development and professional capacity-building programmes. The correlation analysis revealed strong positive relationships between inadequate autonomy and infrastructural development constraints ($r = 0.712, p < 0.001$) and between inadequate autonomy and human capital development constraints ($r = 0.798$, $p < 0.001$). The stronger relationship with human capital development suggests that autonomy constraints may be particularly consequential for institutional capacity and personnel development. Inadequate political, administrative and financial autonomy significantly constrains grassroots development in Akwa Ibom State. Strengthening local government discretion over finances, personnel and development priorities could improve infrastructure and institutional capacity. Such autonomy should be accompanied by transparent budgeting, independent auditing, citizen oversight and effective accountability mechanisms. The study provides context-specific empirical evidence from Akwa Ibom State by simultaneously examining the infrastructural and human capital pathways through which autonomy deficits constrain grassroots development.

Keywords: Local government autonomy; grassroots development; infrastructural development; human capital development; Akwa Ibom State.

INTRODUCTION

Government exists primarily to promote citizens' welfare through the provision of essential public services and the creation of conditions that support socioeconomic development. Within this framework, local government occupies a strategic position as the tier of government closest to the population. Its proximity to local communities enables it to identify community-specific needs, mobilise residents and implement development programmes that directly affect citizens' daily lives. Local government is therefore widely regarded as an important instrument for decentralised administration, democratic participation, national integration and sustainable grassroots development (Arowolo, 2008).

The establishment of local governments is largely justified by the need to bring governance and public services closer to the people, particularly those living in rural and underserved communities. Local councils are expected to facilitate the provision and maintenance of basic infrastructure and social services, promote local economic activities, and create opportunities for citizen participation in governance. The effectiveness of local government administration consequently has significant implications for community welfare, public confidence and the overall legitimacy of the governmental system. Where councils function efficiently, they can respond more quickly to local needs and complement the development efforts of state and federal governments.

Despite their strategic importance, local governments in Nigeria have often been criticised for their limited capacity to perform their statutory functions effectively. Inadequate infrastructure, poor service delivery and weak institutional responsiveness remain common features of many local communities. Scholars have attributed these shortcomings to several interconnected factors, including inadequate funding, corruption, weak financial management, shortages of qualified personnel, poor work attitudes, ineffective leadership and excessive political interference. These constraints have reduced the capacity of local governments to initiate and implement programmes that could improve the socioeconomic conditions of grassroots populations.

Among these challenges, inadequate local government autonomy has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Chukwuemeka et al. (2014) argue that the legal and political framework governing local government administration in Nigeria does not sufficiently protect councils from interference by higher levels of government. Such interference may affect the election or appointment of local officials, access to statutory allocations, recruitment and management of personnel, selection of development projects and implementation of council policies. Diejomaoh and Eboh (2010) similarly maintain that inadequate autonomy and persistent state government intervention have contributed significantly to the poor service-delivery performance of local governments.

A major effort to strengthen local government administration in Nigeria was the 1976 Local Government Reform. The reform introduced a relatively uniform system of local government administration, recognised local government as a distinct tier of government and assigned councils specific financial and functional responsibilities. It represented a significant departure from the fragmented local administrative arrangements that had previously operated across the country (Oviasuyi et al., 2010). The reform was intended to provide an institutional framework through which human and material resources could be mobilised for grassroots development.

Nevertheless, the existence of a formal institutional framework has not necessarily translated into effective local governance. The developmental performance of local governments depends not only on the responsibilities assigned to them but also on the resources, authority and institutional capacity available for carrying out those responsibilities. Where councils lack adequate control over their finances, personnel and development priorities, their ability to respond to local needs is substantially weakened. Similarly, where available resources are poorly managed, the benefits of autonomy may not translate into improved service delivery. Local government autonomy must therefore be accompanied by transparency, accountability, competent administration and meaningful citizen participation.

Local government autonomy in this context refers to the degree of political, administrative and financial discretion available to councils in managing their affairs within the limits of the law. Political autonomy concerns the ability of local communities to elect their representatives and hold them accountable. Administrative autonomy relates to control over personnel, organisational structures and programme implementation, while financial autonomy involves access to revenue and discretion over its allocation. These dimensions are closely related because political authority without adequate financial resources or administrative control may have little practical effect on grassroots development (Udoyiu et al., 2024a).

In Akwa Ibom State, concerns regarding the developmental performance of local governments remain particularly relevant because a considerable proportion of the population resides in communities where access to infrastructure and essential public services depends significantly on local government intervention (Essien et al., 2024). Although councils are expected to serve as instruments of rural transformation and community development, evidence of inadequate infrastructure, limited personnel development and weak service delivery raises important questions about their institutional capacity and degree of autonomy (Udoyiu et al., 2024b).

It is generally expected that granting local governments reasonable political, administrative and financial autonomy would improve their capacity to formulate locally responsive policies, allocate resources efficiently and implement development programmes (Udoyiu & Washington, 2023). However, autonomy should not be understood as absolute independence or freedom from oversight. Rather, it should involve sufficient operational discretion within a transparent legal and accountability framework. Effective supervision, regular auditing, responsible financial management and citizen oversight remain necessary for ensuring that local resources are used for their intended purposes (Udoyiu & Edward, 2024).

Against this background, the study investigates whether inadequate local government autonomy contributes to slow grassroots development in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. It specifically examines the relationship between autonomy constraints and two critical dimensions of development: infrastructural development and human capital development. The study is empirically significant because it provides evidence on respondents' perceptions of state interference and its implications for the developmental performance of local governments. Theoretically, it contributes to the literature on decentralisation, local governance and public administration by clarifying how political, administrative and financial autonomy may influence local development outcomes. Its findings may also provide a basis for policy reforms aimed at strengthening accountability, improving service delivery and promoting sustainable development at the grassroots.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualisation, Structure and Models of Local Government

Local government constitutes the level of government closest to citizens and is established to administer public affairs within a defined geographical area. Although local government systems exist in most countries, they differ in their constitutional status, historical development, institutional structure, responsibilities and degree of autonomy (Ezeani, 2006). These differences have produced diverse scholarly interpretations of the concept. Agi (2002), for example, describes local government as a subordinate political authority established by a state to decentralise political power and public administration. Similarly, Akpan (2008) conceptualises it as a distinct tier of government with constitutionally or legally assigned responsibilities, elected political officials and a reasonable degree of administrative autonomy.

Emezi (1984) views local government as a system of administration established within local communities to maintain law and order, provide essential social services, and promote citizens' participation in improving their living conditions. This perspective suggests that local government provides an institutional framework through which communities can organise their affairs, articulate their needs and participate in decisions that directly affect their welfare. Ola (1984) similarly argues that local government promotes democracy by enabling residents to participate in governance and acquire the political knowledge and experience required for wider democratic engagement. It therefore functions as an important platform for political socialisation, leadership development and grassroots participation.

The performance of local government is also measured by its contribution to development and the satisfaction of citizens' needs. Abada (2007) maintains that local government should be assessed by the extent to which its programmes improve the socioeconomic conditions of the local population. Nwofia (2017) identifies legal identity, territorial jurisdiction, population, democratic representation, specific statutory responsibilities, structural continuity and relative autonomy as defining features of local government. These characteristics establish local government as both a service-delivery institution and a platform for democratic participation, accountability, responsiveness and community mobilisation.

The efficiency-services perspective regards service provision as the principal justification for local government. According to Ola (1984), responsibilities that can be performed more effectively and economically at the local level should be assigned to local authorities, together with the powers and resources required for their implementation. Local governments are assumed to possess greater knowledge of local conditions and priorities because of their proximity to the population. Accordingly, they are better positioned to provide community roads, markets, sanitation, primary healthcare, basic education and other locally oriented services.

Agunyai et al. (2013) describe local government as a representative and relatively autonomous institution established under state legislation to provide services within a village, district, city or other defined locality. Ibietan (2010) similarly regards it as the component of government responsible for matters that primarily concern the inhabitants of a particular area. Anger (2012) emphasises the subordinate but representative character of local government, while Arowolo (2008) describes it as a non-sovereign territorial community possessing the legal authority and organisational capacity to regulate its local affairs. Mukoro (2001) further identifies representation, local revenue generation and the provision of locally specific services as fundamental elements of the system.

The 1976 Guidelines for Local Government Reform provided an influential institutional definition of local government in Nigeria. The guidelines conceived local government as governance exercised through legally established representative councils with specific powers over defined areas. Such councils were expected to exercise substantial control over local affairs, personnel and finances; initiate and implement development projects; complement state and federal programmes; and promote the participation of citizens and traditional institutions in responding to local needs.

Nigeria's local government structure contains political and bureaucratic components. Decrees Nos. 23 and 50 of 1991 reinforced the separation between the executive and legislative arms. The executive arm consists principally of the chairman, vice-chairman, secretary and supervisors. The chairman, who is directly elected with the vice-chairman, serves as the chief executive and accounting officer of the council. The vice-chairman performs responsibilities assigned by the chairman and supports the coordination of executive functions (Aransi, 2017).

The secretary to the local government provides administrative and policy support, coordinates the implementation of council decisions and advises the chairman on governmental matters. Supervisors provide political direction to the departments assigned to them and are accountable to the chairman. Together, the chairman, vice-chairman, secretary and supervisors constitute the local government executive committee, which determines general policy direction and coordinates the activities of the council (Ocheni et al., 2012).

The bureaucratic component comprises the head of personnel management, departmental heads and subordinate personnel. The head of personnel management coordinates administrative and personnel matters, while departmental heads translate approved policies into programmes and supervise the sections under their control. Subordinate personnel perform specialised administrative, technical and operational responsibilities. Local government employees generally belong to the Unified Local Government Service (Udoyiu & Udoyiu, 2026). The Local Government Service Commission, established by the state government, is responsible for the appointment, posting, promotion and discipline of senior personnel. State civil servants may also be seconded to local governments, while technical assistance may be obtained from relevant state agencies.

Several models of local government have been identified, including the presidential, parliamentary, prefectural, communist, council–manager and commission models. The presidential model is characterised by the separation of executive and legislative powers. Executive authority is vested in a directly elected chairman or mayor, while elected councillors exercise legislative, financial oversight and policy-making responsibilities. The chairman appoints political officers, may assent to or veto council legislation, and can be removed through legally prescribed procedures. Separation of powers and institutional checks and balances are therefore central to this model (Okoli, 2000).

Under the parliamentary model, executive and legislative responsibilities are largely fused. The chairman and other principal officials are members of the council, and much of the council's work is undertaken through committees. This arrangement may promote cooperation between the executive and legislature, although the autonomy granted to councils varies across political systems (Fajobi, 2010). The prefectural model, historically associated with the French administrative tradition, integrates local government closely with central administration. Although elected councils and mayors may exist, a centrally appointed prefect exercises substantial supervisory and administrative authority. Consequently, local autonomy is relatively limited (Ikelegbe, 2005).

The communist model is founded on democratic centralism and the integration of local administration into national socioeconomic planning. Local institutions function primarily as instruments for implementing centrally determined policies and therefore possess limited independent authority. By contrast, the council–manager model separates political decision-making from professional administration. An elected council formulates policies and appoints a technically qualified manager to administer the locality (Washington et al., 2025). The model emphasises professionalism, efficiency, political neutrality and result-oriented service delivery. In the commission model, elected commissioners collectively exercise legislative and executive responsibilities, with individual commissioners often supervising specific departments. In practice, national systems may combine elements of more than one model.

Local Government Autonomy and Grassroots Development

Local government autonomy is frequently misunderstood as complete independence from higher levels of government. Such an interpretation is inappropriate because local governments operate within sovereign states and are subject to constitutional and statutory frameworks. Absolute autonomy would effectively transform local governments into sovereign entities. Local government autonomy should therefore be understood as the legally protected degree of discretion available to local authorities in managing their political, administrative and financial affairs without excessive interference.

Nwabueze (1983) describes autonomy within a federal system as the capacity of each level of government to maintain a distinct institutional existence and perform its responsibilities without being reduced to an appendage of another government. Autonomy becomes meaningful when a governmental unit is not legally compelled to accept arbitrary direction from another tier in matters constitutionally assigned to it. Similarly, the former Centre for Democratic Studies defined local government autonomy in terms of the relative discretion available to councils in managing their own affairs.

Davey (1971) explains autonomy through three interrelated elements: responsibilities, resources and discretion. Local authorities must have clearly defined responsibilities, sufficient financial and administrative resources, and the discretion to make and implement decisions within the law. Achimugu et al. (2013) consequently identify several requirements for meaningful local autonomy: a separate legal personality, clearly defined responsibilities, institutional distinction from the federal and state governments, authority to enact local regulations, control over policy formulation and implementation, and the capacity to recruit, promote, develop and discipline personnel.

Autonomy is therefore multidimensional. Political autonomy concerns the ability of citizens to elect local representatives and hold them accountable. Administrative autonomy involves control over personnel, organisational structures and programme implementation. Financial autonomy refers to the authority to generate, receive, allocate and account for revenue. Policy autonomy relates to the council’s discretion to formulate and implement programmes that reflect local priorities. The degree of autonomy enjoyed by local governments is ultimately reflected in their relationships with state and federal institutions.

The developmental significance of autonomy is strongly connected to financial capacity. Orewa (1966) argues that effective local service delivery depends on an improved revenue base and an efficient revenue-collection system. Local governments require adequate financial resources to provide infrastructure, healthcare, education, sanitation, markets and other essential services. However, Nigerian local governments encounter persistent difficulties in generating and managing revenue. These challenges have weakened their ability to respond effectively to community needs.

Adedokun (2007) traces some revenue-administration problems to patronage-based recruitment practices inherited from the colonial period and sustained through the politicisation of personnel appointments. Musgrave (1989) identifies weak auditing and financial-control systems as additional constraints, particularly in relation to internally generated revenue. Orewa (1966) also associates poor revenue performance with insufficient knowledge and limited commitment among some elected officials. Bello-Imam (1990) and Ezeani (2004) emphasise the shortage of trained and competent revenue personnel, while Saaleh and Stanley (2011) relate local financial weakness to Nigeria's federal structure and the resulting dependence of councils on statutory allocations.

Corruption and financial mismanagement further undermine local revenue generation and development performance. Ikejiani-Clark (1995) and Ezeani (2004) contend that fraud, under-declaration of collected revenue, weak assessment procedures and the misappropriation of council funds reduce the resources available for development. Financial autonomy must therefore be accompanied by transparency, effective auditing, citizen oversight and institutional accountability. Autonomy without accountability may merely decentralise corruption, whereas autonomy supported by strong governance institutions can strengthen responsiveness and improve service delivery.

The relationship examined in this study is presented in Figure 1. Local government autonomy represents the independent variable, expressed through legal, political, administrative, personnel and financial discretion. Grassroots development constitutes the dependent variable and is reflected in service delivery, infrastructure, citizen participation, socioeconomic welfare and human capital development.

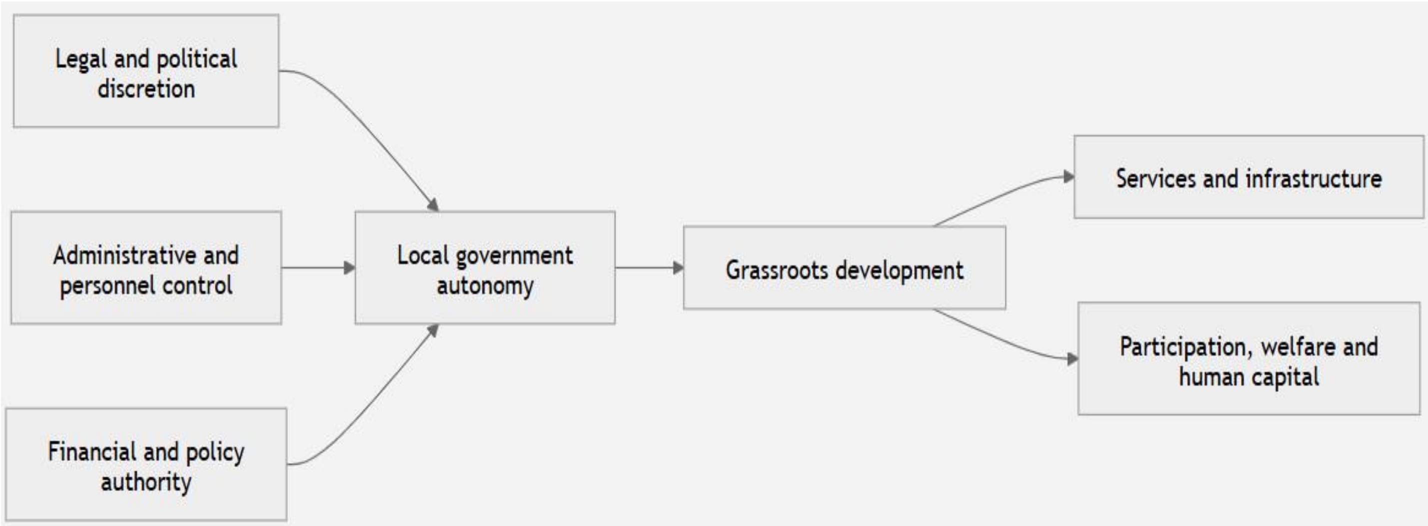

Figure 1. Conceptual relationship between local government autonomy and grassroots development. Source: Author's conceptualisation based on the reviewed literature.

The framework assumes that greater autonomy enhances the institutional capacity of local governments to identify community priorities, mobilise resources, implement programmes and respond to citizens. Conversely, excessive interference by higher levels of government may weaken local decision-making, delay programme implementation and reduce accountability to the local population.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is anchored in decentralisation theory, particularly as developed by Rondinelli (1981) and Heywood (1997). The theory explains the transfer of authority, responsibilities and resources from central government to subordinate, semi-autonomous or local institutions. Its central proposition is that public responsibilities can be performed more efficiently and responsively when decisions are made by institutions that are closer to the affected population.

Two important forms of decentralisation are deconcentration and devolution (Olowu, 1990). Deconcentration involves the redistribution of administrative responsibilities from central offices to regional or local offices operating within the same governmental hierarchy. Although responsibilities are geographically dispersed, ultimate authority remains with the central government. Devolution involves a more substantial transfer of authority, resources and responsibility to legally recognised local institutions, usually governed by elected representatives. Devolution therefore provides a stronger theoretical basis for local government autonomy because it grants local authorities meaningful discretion in decision-making and programme implementation.

Decentralisation theory maintains that empowered local institutions can deepen democracy, improve public participation and strengthen government responsiveness. It may also correct development policies that disproportionately favour urban centres by directing attention and resources towards rural communities. Local authorities are generally better positioned to identify community-specific needs, coordinate integrated rural development programmes and promote collaboration between government, civil society and community organisations.

However, decentralisation does not automatically produce development. Its outcomes depend on the extent of authority transferred, the adequacy of financial and human resources, the competence of local personnel, institutional accountability and the willingness of higher levels of government to respect legally defined local responsibilities. Where responsibilities are transferred without corresponding resources or decision-making authority, decentralisation may become merely symbolic. The theory is therefore appropriate for examining whether the autonomy granted to local governments in Akwa Ibom State enhances their capacity to promote grassroots and human capital development.

Literature Synthesis and Research Gap

The reviewed literature establishes that local government is intended to promote democratic participation, deliver essential services and facilitate development at the grassroots. It also demonstrates that these responsibilities require legal authority, administrative discretion, competent personnel and adequate financial resources. Nevertheless, Nigerian local governments continue to experience state interference, weak internal revenue generation, dependence on statutory allocations, inadequate personnel capacity, poor financial control and corruption.

Although previous studies have examined local government autonomy and institutional performance in Nigeria, comparatively limited attention has been given to how inadequate autonomy affects human capital development at the grassroots, particularly in Akwa Ibom State. Much of the literature concentrates broadly on fiscal relations, political interference, revenue generation and service delivery without empirically examining their implications for human capacity and community welfare across selected local government areas.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the relationship between local government autonomy and grassroots development, with particular attention to human capital development in selected local government areas of Akwa Ibom State. It thereby provides context-specific evidence on how political, administrative and financial autonomy influences the capacity of local governments to respond to local needs and improve citizens' welfare.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Study Area

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design to collect data from respondents at a single point in time. This design was appropriate because it facilitated the systematic assessment of respondents' perceptions of local government autonomy, state–local government relations, and rural development. Quantitative data were collected using a structured, closed-ended questionnaire, while personal interviews provided supplementary information.

The study was conducted in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The state derives its name from the Qua Iboe River and is located within Nigeria's coastal South–South geopolitical zone. It is bordered by Cross River State to the east, Rivers and Abia States to the west, and the Atlantic Ocean to the south. Akwa Ibom State comprises three senatorial districts—Uyo, Ikot Ekpene, and Eket—and contains both urban and predominantly rural settlements. Its administrative structure and socioeconomic diversity make it suitable for investigating local government administration and rural development.

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Population, Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

The target population comprised residents of Akwa Ibom State, including civil and public servants, students, business owners, and other relevant categories of residents. The study adopted the 2015 population projection prepared by the Akwa Ibom State Ministry of Economic Development for planning purposes. Based on this projection, the population of the state was 5,272,029, comprising 1,054,406 urban residents and 4,217,623 rural residents.

Table 1. Projected population of Akwa Ibom State by place of residence, 2007–2015

Residence	2006 census	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Urban	780,410	806,944	834,380	862,749	892,082	922,413	953,775	986,204	1,019,735	1,054,406
Rural	3,121,641	3,227,777	3,337,521	3,450,997	3,568,331	3,689,654	3,815,102	3,944,816	4,078,940	4,217,623
Total	3,902,051	4,034,721	4,171,901	4,313,746	4,460,413	4,612,067	4,768,877	4,931,020	5,098,675	5,272,029

Source: Akwa Ibom State Ministry of Economic Development (2014).

The required sample size was determined using the Taro Yamane formula for a finite population (Yamane, 1967):

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)}$$

where $n$represents the required sample size, $N$is the population size, and $e$is the acceptable margin of error, set at 0.05. Substituting the study population into the formula gives:

$$n = \frac{5{,}272{,}029}{1 + 5{,}272{,}029(0.05^2)}$$

$$n = \frac{5{,}272{,}029}{13{,}181.0725} = 399.97 \approx 400$$

Accordingly, a sample size of 400 respondents was adopted.

A multistage sampling procedure was employed. First, one local government area was selected from each of the three senatorial districts: Uyo Local Government Area from Uyo Senatorial District, Ikot Ekpene Local Government Area from Ikot Ekpene Senatorial District, and Eket Local Government Area from Eket Senatorial District. Subsequently, respondents were selected from the three local government areas using a simple random sampling technique.

Data Sources, Research Instrument and Data-Collection Procedure

Both primary and secondary data were used. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire and personal interviews. Secondary data were obtained from official government documents and reports on population, local government administration, and rural development in Akwa Ibom State. Other sources included textbooks, peer-reviewed journal articles, newspapers, and relevant unpublished academic materials.

The structured questionnaire was developed in accordance with the study objectives and hypotheses. It consisted of two sections. Section A elicited information on the respondents' demographic characteristics, while Section B contained items addressing local government autonomy, state government interference, state–local government relations, administrative effectiveness, and rural development. The items were measured using a four-point Likert-type scale comprising Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. Personal interviews were also conducted to obtain supplementary information and clarify issues covered by the questionnaire.

The face and content validity of the instrument were established through expert review. The questionnaire and interview questions were examined by the research supervisor to determine their relevance, clarity, adequacy, and alignment with the study objectives. The recommendations arising from this review were incorporated into the final instrument before field administration.

Instrument reliability was assessed through a pilot study involving 20 respondents who possessed characteristics similar to those of the target population but were excluded from the main study. The pilot-study data were subjected to Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis, which yielded a coefficient of 0.96. This value exceeded the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70 and demonstrated a high level of internal consistency. The instrument was therefore considered reliable for the main study.

Methods of Data Analysis

The completed questionnaires were coded, entered, and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 20. Descriptive statistical methods, including frequencies, percentages, and tabular presentations, were used to summarise respondents' demographic characteristics and questionnaire responses.

The Pearson Product–Moment Correlation coefficient was employed to assess the strength and direction of the relationships between the independent and dependent variables and to test the formulated hypotheses. All hypotheses were evaluated at the 5% significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$). A null hypothesis was rejected when the corresponding probability value was less than 0.05; otherwise, it was not rejected.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Response Rate and Analytical Procedure

This section presents and discusses the empirical findings on the relationship between local government autonomy and grassroots development in Akwa Ibom State. The analysis focused on two dimensions of grassroots development: infrastructural development and human capital development. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to answer the research questions, while Pearson's Product–Moment Correlation was employed to test the hypotheses.

A total of 400 copies of the questionnaire were administered to the sampled respondents. Of these, 384 copies were correctly completed and returned, representing a response rate of 96.0%. The remaining 16 copies, representing 4.0%, were either not returned or were unsuitable for analysis. The high response rate was considered adequate for the statistical analysis. Consequently, the descriptive results were based on 384 respondents, except where missing responses were identified.

Local Government Autonomy and Infrastructural Development

The first research question examined the extent to which inadequate local government autonomy constrains infrastructural development in local government areas of Akwa Ibom State. Respondents evaluated five statements relating to the remittance of revenue, state influence over project selection, deductions from local government allocations, approval requirements for capital projects and notification of the State House of Assembly.

As presented in Figure 2, a substantial majority of respondents perceived inadequate financial and administrative autonomy as a major constraint on local infrastructural development. The strongest response related to the non-remittance of the proportion of state internally generated revenue reportedly due to local governments. A total of 347 respondents, representing 90.4%, either agreed or strongly agreed that the non-remittance of such funds limits the ability of local governments to provide infrastructure. Only 9.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. This finding indicates that respondents considered access to legally assigned financial resources fundamental to the capacity of councils to undertake local development projects.

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Similarly, 276 respondents, representing 71.9%, agreed that state government influence over the selection of projects sometimes results in projects that do not adequately reflect the priorities of local communities. Although this item recorded the lowest level of agreement among the infrastructural development indicators, more than two-thirds of the respondents supported the statement. The result suggests that external control over local project selection can weaken responsiveness to the specific needs and preferences of residents.

Regarding deductions from local government allocations, 296 respondents, representing 77.1%, agreed that such deductions constrain the implementation of infrastructural projects. In comparison, 22.9% disagreed. This pattern reinforces the perception that the financial relationship between the state and local governments affects the ability of councils to plan, finance and complete development projects.

Administrative approval procedures also emerged as an important constraint. A total of 337 respondents, representing 87.8%, agreed that requiring local councils to obtain state government approval before undertaking capital projects creates delays. Only 12.2% disagreed. In addition, 297 respondents, representing 77.3%, maintained that requiring local governments to notify the State House of Assembly about proposed projects slows the initiation and execution of capital projects.

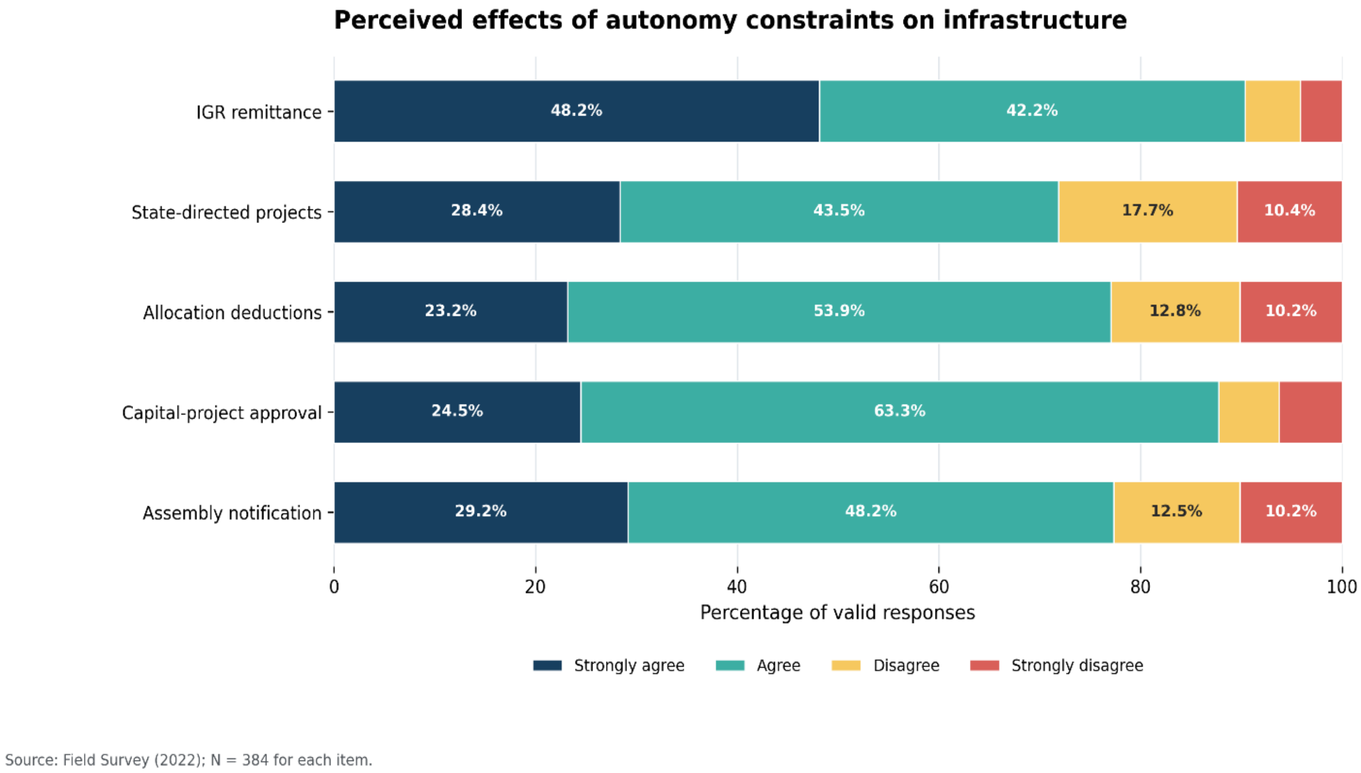

Figure 2. Distribution of respondents' perceptions of the effects of inadequate local government autonomy on infrastructural development. Source: Field Survey (2022); N = 384.

The response pattern in Figure 2 shows that agreement exceeded disagreement across all five indicators. The combined average agreement was approximately 80.9%. The findings therefore indicate a broadly shared perception that inadequate financial and administrative autonomy hinders infrastructural development. The most prominent constraints were inadequate access to revenue and delays associated with capital-project approval. These conditions may reduce the capacity of local governments to independently identify community priorities, prepare realistic budgets and execute projects within appropriate timeframes.

Local Government Autonomy and Human Capital Development

The second research question examined how inadequate local government autonomy affects human capital development. The relevant questionnaire items addressed staff training, the establishment of entrepreneurship development centres, leadership training, human resource development workshops and sponsorship for overseas training or short professional courses.

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Figure 3 shows that 296 respondents, representing 77.1%, agreed or strongly agreed that inadequate autonomy makes it difficult for local governments to sponsor staff training and development programmes. Only 22.9% disagreed. This finding suggests that respondents considered financial and administrative discretion essential for improving the knowledge, skills and professional competence of local government personnel.

Respondents were more divided on the establishment of entrepreneurship development centres. A total of 201 respondents, representing 52.3%, agreed that inadequate autonomy limits the financial resources available for such centres, while 47.7% disagreed. Although agreement remained slightly higher, the relatively narrow difference indicates less consensus than was recorded for the other human capital indicators. This variation may reflect differences in respondents' awareness of entrepreneurship programmes or their understanding of whether establishing such centres falls within the responsibilities of local governments.

The strongest agreement was recorded for leadership training. Of the 384 respondents, 368, representing 95.8%, agreed that inadequate financial autonomy prevents local governments from organising leadership development programmes for executive officials. Only 4.2% disagreed. This result highlights the perceived importance of financial resources in strengthening the leadership and administrative capacity of political officeholders.

A similarly strong response was recorded for human resource workshops. Based on the 382 recorded responses for this item, 332 respondents, representing 86.9%, agreed that insufficient financial autonomy limits the ability of councils to organise human resource development workshops. Fifty respondents, representing 13.1%, disagreed. Two responses were not recorded for this item and were treated as missing rather than being assigned to any response category.

Furthermore, 342 respondents, representing 89.1%, agreed that inadequate financial autonomy restricts opportunities to sponsor staff for overseas training and short professional courses. Only 10.9% disagreed. Although overseas training may not always be financially feasible, the response pattern indicates broader concerns about councils' capacity to invest in continuing professional development.

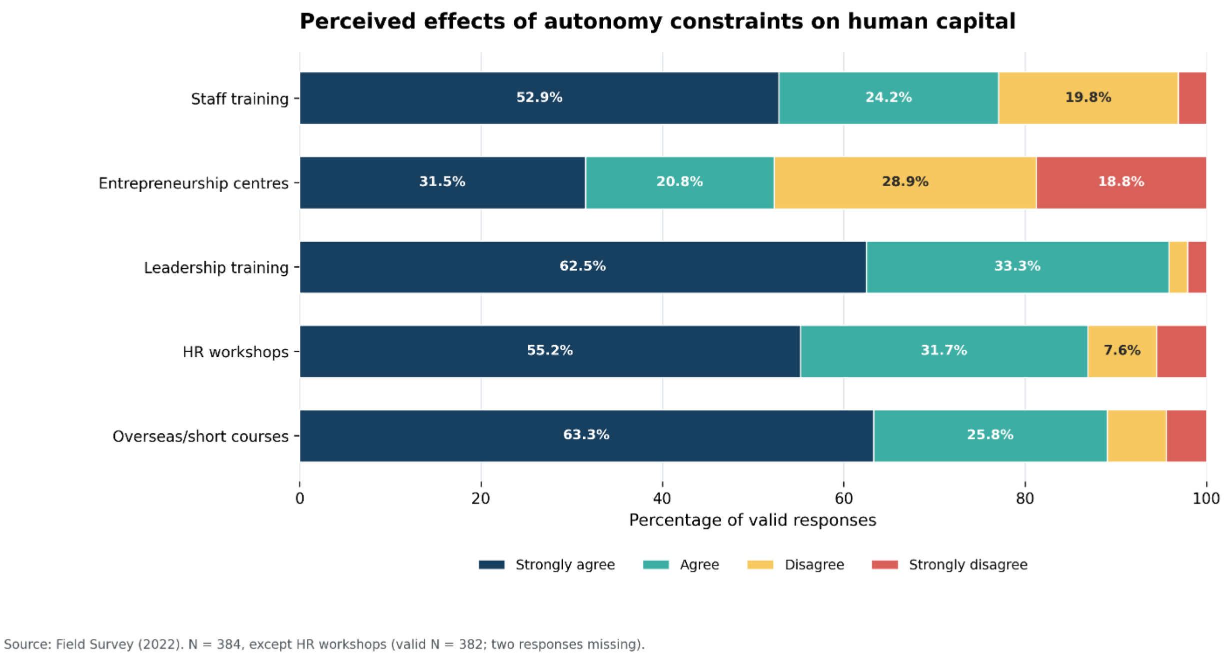

Figure 3. Distribution of respondents' perceptions of the effects of inadequate local government autonomy on human capital development. Source: Field Survey (2022). N = 384, except the human resource workshop item, for which valid N = 382.

As illustrated in Figure 3, agreement exceeded disagreement for all five indicators. Leadership training recorded the highest combined agreement, followed by sponsorship for overseas or short professional courses, human resource development workshops and general staff training. Entrepreneurship development centres recorded the lowest agreement. Overall, the results demonstrate that respondents associated inadequate local government

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autonomy, particularly financial autonomy, with limited opportunities for personnel training, leadership development and institutional capacity building.

Test of Hypotheses

Pearson's Product–Moment Correlation was used to determine the strength and direction of the relationships between inadequate local government autonomy and the two dimensions of development constraints. The hypotheses were tested at the 5% significance level. A null hypothesis was rejected where the probability value was less than 0.05.

The coefficients were interpreted within a range of −1 to +1. A coefficient approaching +1 indicates a strong positive linear relationship, while a coefficient approaching −1 indicates a strong negative relationship. A coefficient close to zero indicates a weak or negligible linear relationship. In this analysis, higher scores represented greater autonomy constraints and greater development constraints. Thus, a positive coefficient indicates that increasing autonomy constraints are associated with increasing barriers to development.

Table 2. Summary of Pearson correlation results

Hypothesis	Variables	Valid N	Pearson's r	Recalculated p-value	Decision
H_{01}	Inadequate local government autonomy and infrastructural development constraints	383	0.712	<0.001	Reject H_{01}
H_{02}	Inadequate local government autonomy and human capital development constraints	383	0.798	<0.001	Reject H_{02}

Source: SPSS Version 20 analysis of Field Survey data (2022). Significance level: $\alpha = 0.05$.

The first null hypothesis stated that there is no significant relationship between inadequate local government autonomy and infrastructural development constraints in Akwa Ibom State.

The analysis produced a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.712$, indicating a strong positive relationship. The corresponding probability value was below 0.001 and therefore lower than the adopted significance level of 0.05. The first null hypothesis was consequently rejected.

The result implies that higher levels of financial, political and administrative autonomy constraints are associated with greater difficulties in providing local infrastructure.

Local governments that lack control over their financial resources, project selection and implementation procedures are therefore likely to encounter more substantial difficulties in providing and maintaining local infrastructure.

The second null hypothesis stated that there is no significant relationship between inadequate local government autonomy and human capital development constraints. The analysis generated a coefficient of $r = 0.798$, indicating a strong positive relationship. The associated probability value was below 0.001; therefore, the second null hypothesis was rejected.

The result indicates that increasing restrictions on local government autonomy are associated with greater constraints on human capital development. Where councils lack control over financial and administrative resources, their ability to organise staff training, leadership programmes, professional workshops and other capacity-building initiatives may be considerably reduced.

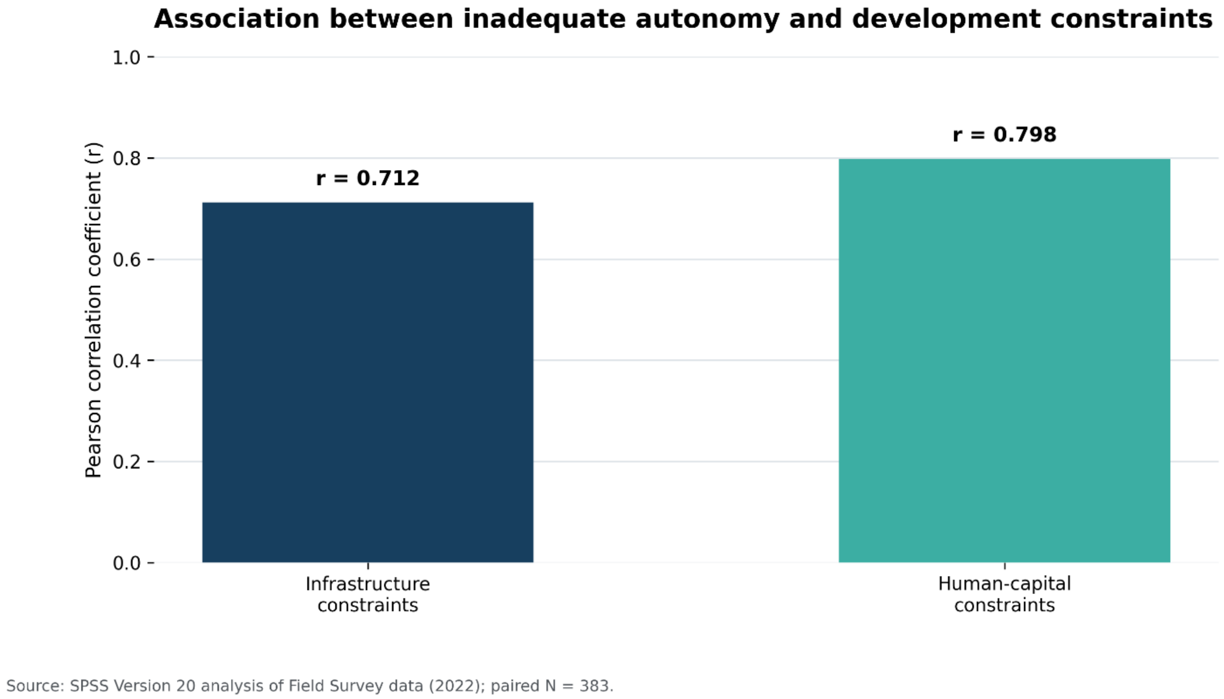

Figure 4. Strength of the relationships between inadequate local government autonomy and infrastructural and human capital development constraints. Source: SPSS Version 20 analysis of Field Survey data (2022); paired N = 383.

Figure 4 demonstrates that both relationships were strong and positive. However, the relationship between inadequate autonomy and human capital development constraints ($r = 0.798$) was stronger than the relationship with infrastructural development constraints ($r = 0.712$). This difference suggests that restrictions on local government autonomy may be particularly relevant to personnel development and institutional capacity. Nevertheless, because the analysis is correlational, the results establish statistical associations and should not be interpreted as conclusive evidence of causality.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings demonstrate that local government autonomy is strongly associated with the ability of councils to promote infrastructural and human capital development. Respondents identified inadequate financial resources, deductions from local allocations, state influence over project selection and prolonged approval procedures as important constraints on infrastructural development. These conditions can prevent local governments from identifying community priorities, developing appropriate budgets and implementing projects within reasonable periods.

The infrastructural development findings support Diejomaoh and Eboh (2010), who observed that many local governments in Nigeria operate largely as extensions of state governments. According to these authors, extensive interference by higher levels of government, particularly state governments, weakens the institutional independence and developmental effectiveness of local councils. Such interference may involve control over local financial resources, intervention in project selection and restrictions on the implementation of development programmes.

The findings are also consistent with Agba et al. (2014), who argued that local government autonomy in Nigeria remains heavily influenced by federal and state institutions. Local councils rely substantially on statutory allocations and the release of funds through the State Joint Local Government Account. This dependence may limit their ability to plan and implement projects according to local priorities. Where the release of funds is delayed, reduced or subjected to extensive external control, councils may be unable to complete roads, markets, water projects, healthcare facilities and other essential infrastructure.

Ammani (2012) and Akindele et al. (2002) similarly maintain that state control over allocations intended for local governments weakens administrative and developmental capacity. The present findings extend this argument by showing that respondents perceived both financial deductions and procedural approval requirements as constraints. Even where resources are theoretically available, local development may be delayed when councils must pass through multiple approval and notification processes before implementing capital projects.

These results do not imply that state or legislative oversight is unnecessary. Oversight remains important for ensuring legality, accountability and compliance with financial and development standards. The central concern is excessive or politically motivated control that prevents councils from exercising reasonable discretion over responsibilities legally assigned to them. Effective autonomy should therefore be balanced with transparent budgeting, regular auditing, public participation and appropriate institutional accountability.

The second major finding established a strong relationship between inadequate local government autonomy and human capital development constraints. Respondents generally agreed that financial limitations prevent councils from sponsoring staff training, organising leadership programmes and conducting professional development workshops. Human capital is fundamental to effective local administration because development policies and projects depend on competent political leaders, administrators and technical personnel.

This finding aligns with Ugbo (2014), who associated inadequate human resource development in the Nigerian local government system with insufficient financial resources and poor service delivery. When personnel are not regularly trained, they may lack the technical, managerial and digital competencies required to address contemporary administrative challenges. Inadequate capacity building can also weaken project planning, financial management, community engagement, monitoring and evaluation.

The high level of agreement concerning leadership training suggests that respondents considered executive competence an important component of local government performance. Local autonomy involves more than access to financial resources; it also requires capable leadership that can translate available resources into appropriate policies and measurable outcomes. Financial autonomy without competent personnel, transparent administration and effective planning may not automatically improve grassroots development.

The comparatively lower agreement concerning entrepreneurship centres indicates less consensus about that particular responsibility. Nevertheless, a narrow majority recognised that inadequate financial resources may constrain local entrepreneurship initiatives. Local governments can contribute to community economic development by supporting vocational training, small businesses, youth empowerment and locally appropriate enterprise programmes. Their ability to perform these roles depends on adequate resources and discretion over development priorities.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the influence of local government autonomy on infrastructural and human capital development at the grassroots level in Akwa Ibom State. The findings established that inadequate political, administrative and financial autonomy significantly constrains the developmental capacity of local government councils. Limited control over financial resources, project selection, personnel administration and programme implementation reduces the ability of councils to respond effectively to the needs and priorities of local communities.

The study further found that state government interference in local government administration has weakened institutional independence and accountability. Local government chairmen often operate under substantial political and financial influence from state authorities, creating a patron–client relationship that limits independent decision-making. Consequently, councils encounter difficulties in implementing capital projects, maintaining infrastructure, organising staff training, conducting leadership development programmes and supporting other human capital initiatives. Meaningful grassroots development is therefore unlikely to be achieved where local governments lack sufficient authority and resources to discharge their statutory responsibilities.

Based on these findings, relevant constitutional and statutory provisions governing state–local government relations should be reviewed, particularly those relating to the State Joint Local Government Account. Local governments should receive their statutory allocations transparently and promptly and should exercise reasonable control over their political, administrative and financial affairs. However, autonomy should not imply the absence of oversight. Appropriate accountability mechanisms should be established to monitor expenditure, procurement, project implementation and service delivery. Regular independent audits, transparent budgeting, public disclosure of financial records and citizen participation should be institutionalised. Local government officials who misappropriate public resources or violate established financial regulations should be investigated and prosecuted in accordance with the law.

The study contributes to knowledge by demonstrating that the developmental performance of local governments is closely associated with the degree of autonomy available to them. It specifically provides evidence that autonomy constraints affect both physical infrastructure and human capital development in Akwa Ibom State. Strengthening local government autonomy, alongside effective supervision and accountability, would enhance institutional responsiveness, improve service delivery and promote sustainable grassroots development. Local government reform should therefore focus on balancing operational independence with transparency, citizen oversight and responsible financial management.

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