



THE ONE TRILLION NAIRA QUESTION: WHY YOUR LOCAL GOVERNMENT CAN'T FIX YOUR ROAD

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As constitutional amendments on local government autonomy move to state assemblies, this Action Brief asserts that strengthening local governance is central to unlocking Nigeria's development potential. It explores how fiscal dependence cripples local governments and why citizens must take ownership of reform from the bottom up.

The Democracy Gap: When Citizens Don't Know Their LG Chairman

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At the LEAP Africa Development Dialogue on Local Government Autonomy and Youth Advocacy, a question was posed to a room filled with community advocates and youth leaders: “Can you name your local government chairman?”

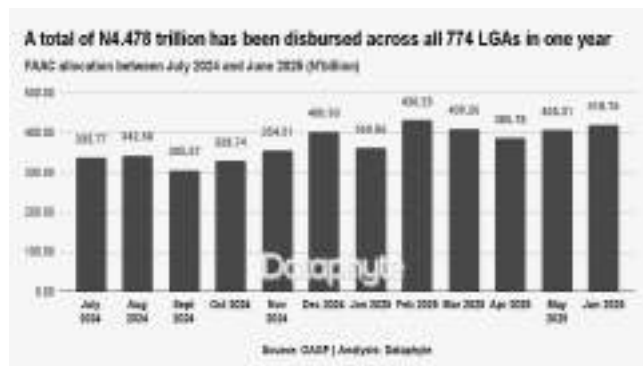
Fewer than ten percent could answer. These were active citizens; people who follow politics, vote in elections, and care about governance. However, most couldn't name the person responsible for fixing their roads, running their primary schools, and managing their health centers.

This simple outcome reveals a great deal about local governance in Nigeria. The country has 774 local governments that collectively receive over a trillion naira annually, yet citizen engagement at that level remains almost non-existent. Most Nigerians neither know their local leadership nor participate in decision-making processes that shape their communities

This is not by accident. It is the product of a governance structure designed to concentrate power and resources at the top while keeping the level of government closest to the people the least empowered. The result is a paradox,

proximity without participation. This imbalance is most evident in how funds meant for local governments are managed and disbursed.

The Money Exists. It Just Never Arrives



Every month, the federal government allocates funds to local governments through the Federation Account Allocation Committee (FAAC) under a constitutionally defined revenue-sharing framework. In principle, these allocations are intended to flow directly to the 774 local governments to finance basic services such as roads, schools, health centers, and community parks.

In practice, however, most of these funds are routed through state governments via joint state–local accounts. This mechanism gives governors and state finance commissioners effective control over local government finances, despite the Supreme Court’s 2024 ruling that mandated direct disbursement.

The result is predictable. Some governors allegedly divert local allocations entirely; others release portions only to politically loyal local government chairmen. By the time any funds reach communities, there is barely enough left to pay salaries, let alone deliver infrastructure or essential services.

This pattern is well documented. According to *Dataphyte Insight*, roughly ₦4.48 trillion meant for LGAs remained under state control one year after the Supreme Court’s 2024 ruling on direct disbursement. Many states continue to resist compliance. In January 2025, a Vanguard report noted that no local governments had yet begun to receive their allocations directly, despite the 2024 judgment.

This imbalance of power has also created perverse incentives. In some states, local

government executives are placated with perks to ensure their loyalty. In Adamawa, for instance, 21 wives of local government chairmen reportedly undertook a leadership “training” trip to Turkey, financed with public funds, triggering criticism that it was insensitive given economic hardships and underfunded essential services. In other states, the same imbalance produces open conflict instead of cooperation. In Osun, a legal stalemate between state and federal authorities over local allocations has left several LGAs unable to access their statutory funding. With court injunctions freezing accounts and political disputes dragging on, local services have ground to a halt, thereby deepening hardship at the grassroots.

Whether through patronage or paralysis, the outcome is the same: a system where local governments serve political interests rather than the people they were created to serve. The structure rewards loyalty, punishes independence, and leaves communities stranded in between. The system functions exactly as designed, which is precisely why your road stays broken.

The Supreme Court Said One Thing. Reality Says Another

In July 2024, the Supreme Court delivered what should have been a decisive judgment: local governments must receive their federal allocations directly. No more routing money through state coffers. No more governors exercising total control over grassroots funds. The judgment was greeted with optimism. Activists called it a breakthrough, and the media hailed it as the dawn of a new era for local governance. However, despite the landmark judgment and initial optimism, nothing changed.

The federal government announced it was setting up mechanisms for direct payment. State governors raised concerns about accountability and administrative feasibility. Local government chairmen, many of whom owe their positions to those same governors, remained silent.

Meanwhile, on the ground, old patterns persisted. In Ondo State, the 2025 local government elections recorded very low voter turnout across most wards, reflecting widespread public disillusionment with a process perceived as predetermined. In Lagos, the outcome was nearly

identical, with many citizens choosing not to participate because they believed state authorities already controlled both the purse and the results.

Autonomy on paper is not the same as autonomy in practice. A court judgment can mandate reform, but only constitutional enforcement can guarantee it. That is the real battle underway, and most Nigerians are still unaware it is even happening.

The Real Deadline

The National Assembly is currently reviewing 87 constitutional amendment bills. Buried in that stack are amendments that would give local governments real autonomy: financial, administrative, and electoral.

For these amendments to become law, at least 24 State Houses of Assembly must ratify them. The future of grassroots governance in Nigeria, whether 774 local governments become engines of development or remain glorified payroll offices, will be decided by state lawmakers most citizens can't name, voting on bills most citizens don't

know exist, and the only people who can change that equation are those same citizens.

But before the 24 state approvals can even be secured, we must first understand what this autonomy truly entails. "Local government autonomy" often sounds like policy jargon or an abstract phrase tossed around in political circles, yet in reality it defines how communities function, how resources are managed, and how democracy is lived at the grassroots.

What Autonomy Actually Means

Several Bills currently before the National Assembly propose adjustments to the structure of local government administration. Some are aimed at correcting names and redefining boundaries in areas such as Okpe, Eket, Ibadan North East, and Ibeno. Others seek the creation of entirely new local governments in states including Lagos, Abia, and Ebonyi. If the amendment scales through, Lagos could grow from 20 to 57 local governments, bringing the national total to about 811.

However, beyond these structural and numerical adjustments, the autonomy under consideration covers three main areas.

First, financial autonomy - Establish the Office of the State Auditor-General for Local Governments to ensure independent financial oversight. Each local government should receive its allocation directly from the Federation Account without any state government middleman skimming off the top or holding funds hostage over political disagreements.

Second, administrative autonomy - Recognize local governments as a full tier of government with defined powers and responsibilities. This allows local government chairmen to hire and manage staff based on competence, not political loyalty. Projects should be approved based on community needs, not directives from the governor's office.

Third, electoral autonomy - Establish a National Local Government Electoral Commission to conduct genuinely independent local elections. This ensures that council leadership emerges through credible processes, not predetermined outcomes. Legislative councils should have the

authority to nominate or confirm leadership as provided by law. It's not complicated. It's simply making the system work the way it ought to.

The Accountability Question

The most common objection to Local Government autonomy goes like this: "Won't autonomy just create 774 new corruption kingdoms? At least now state governors can check bad local government chairmen." This argument sounds logical until you think about it.

First, the current system already produces massive corruption. Governors are not curbing excesses; they are often directing them.

Second, autonomy doesn't mean no oversight; it means proper oversight – ward councillors who can actually hold chairmen accountable, audit systems that function effectively, and citizens who know where to direct complaints because lines of authority are clear.

Third, and this is crucial, corruption thrives in opacity. The more layers money passes through, the easier it becomes to steal or mismanage. A

system where funds are allocated directly to local governments, combined with mandatory transparency measures, is far more difficult to manipulate than the current pass-through arrangement that allows multiple hands to intervene before the money reaches its destination.

Ultimately, accountability depends on citizens. When local governments receive funds directly and the public knows how much and when, communities can ask questions. When chairmen cannot hide behind “waiting for state approval,” citizens can hold them responsible. When elections truly determine who controls resources, citizens will pay attention.

Accountability is not built on bureaucracy; it is built on participation– the active involvement of citizens at the grassroots who can question, monitor, and demand results from their local leaders. True autonomy creates the conditions for this participation to thrive, shifting citizens from passive observers to engaged stakeholders in their own governance.

What Happens If We Do Nothing

If the ongoing amendment fails yet again, the system will remain exactly as it is – functional on paper, but broken in reality. Roads stay broken because “the state hasn’t released funds.” Teachers stay unpaid because “we’re awaiting approval.” Health centers run out of drugs because “procurement processes are delayed.”

To understand what this failure means, imagine a hospital in a riverine community in Bayelsa suddenly running out of essential medical supplies. Without an empowered local government, the request for intervention must go through multiple state offices – from the local health authority to the ministry in the state capital – before any funds are approved or materials dispatched. By the time the process winds its way through layers of bureaucracy, the situation on the ground may already be critical.

Consider also a rural community where a primary school has only one teacher or a health post has no midwife. The situation may not reach the state capital for weeks, lost in paperwork and administrative bottlenecks. By the time support arrives, children have lost months of learning, and women have gone through childbirth without medical care.

This distance between government and the governed does more than slow development; it discourages participation. Young people with a genuine interest in grassroots governance will continue avoiding local government positions because everyone knows real power sits at the state capital. The best talent flows upward or outward, never downward.

Meanwhile, communities continue to fend for themselves through town unions, faith-based groups, and self-help projects, proving that Nigerians are capable of building progress from the ground up. These citizen-led interventions exist not to replace government, but to fill the void it has left behind. True local government autonomy would transform them from emergency stopgaps into strategic partnerships for sustainable local development.

What Happens If We Act

Now picture this. It's 2027. Your local government publishes its monthly budget online, on community notice boards, and via SMS. You see that fifty million was allocated for road repairs, and you know which roads. You can drive past

and verify that the work is happening. Your child's primary school receives ₦10 million for renovations; the PTA has the receipts, and teachers are paid on time, so they actually show up. The health centre restocks its pharmacy and posts procurement records publicly, showing market-rate pricing. At the quarterly town-hall meeting, your ward councillor discusses priorities, not excuses. This isn't utopia; it's what competent local governance looks like when systems finally work – when citizens know their leaders by name, live among them, and can make complaints, offer ideas, and hold them accountable. The community works together as one, not out of desperation, but through empowered participation that drives inclusive development.

Twenty-Four States.

The path forward is simple. At least 24 State Houses of Assembly must vote yes to ratify the constitutional amendments on local government autonomy.

But simple does not mean easy. Most state legislators have not heard from a single constituent about this issue. Many governors

prefer a system that keeps them in full control of local government resources, using those funds to consolidate political influence rather than deliver public service. And most citizens are unaware that this crucial vote is even approaching.

Here's what must happen quickly:

- Find your state legislators: Know their names, constituencies, and contact details. Platforms such as shineyoureye.org can help.
- Build coalitions: Youth groups, civil society organizations, professional associations, market women, and religious associations should unite around a single, resonant message – one that captures the urgency of this reform and can rally citizens across divides. For example, a call like #LetLocalGovernmentBreathe or #LGAutonomyNow can serve as a unifying banner for advocacy, demanding transparency, accountability, and real power at the grassroots.

- Ask your State legislators questions publicly: At town halls, on social media, and in letters to newspapers: "Will you vote yes on local government autonomy? Why or why not?"
- Make it personal. "My road has been impassable for three years. My local government receives ₦400 million monthly. If it had autonomy, this could be fixed. Your vote determines whether that happens, and we are watching."

That someone who acts is You. The deadline is December 2025.

The Oxygen of Development

There is a reason we keep calling local government the third tier of government, even though it barely functions as such. The framers of our Constitution understood that democracy needs foundations. You cannot build a democratic nation where the vast majority of citizens have no meaningful interaction with the government, and where the level of governance closest to the people is also the most powerless.

Local government is not a bureaucratic convenience. It is where citizenship is practiced or lost. It is where young people learn whether politics can solve problems or merely confirm their cynicism. It is where communities discover whether they can shape their own development or must wait endlessly for saviours who may never come.

Autonomy might not solve every problem. Corrupt local government officials might still exist. Mismanagement might still happen. But at least the struggle for good governance will occur on fair ground, guided by clear rules and visible accountability. Citizens will finally know who to question, who to thank, and who to vote out. And democracy will, at last, have a genuine chance to work at the level where it matters most.

From Dialogue to Decision

LEAP Africa's Development Dialogue on Local Government Autonomy and Youth Advocacy brought together policymakers, civil society actors, and young leaders to address a question at the heart of Nigeria's democracy: *how can local governments become engines of genuine*

development rather than extensions of state control?

During the discussions, one question echoed across the room and lingered long after the sessions ended: *"How do we sustain this momentum?"* It is a fair question, but perhaps not the right one. Momentum fades when it depends on constant external energy – on reminders, funding, or political goodwill. What Nigeria needs is not another burst of enthusiasm, but a lasting spark: citizen-led ignition that keeps reform alive long after the cameras and conferences are gone.

All the ingredients for change already exist. Citizens are frustrated with broken governance. The law now demands reform. The Constitution is at a defining crossroads with a December 2025 deadline. Civil society already has the tools to organise, track, and apply pressure.

What is missing is the spark. Someone reading this needs to be that spark. Call five organisations today. Schedule a meeting. Draft a petition. Write to your state legislator. Post on social media. Show up at your state assembly. Do one thing. Then another. Because the truth is simple: those twenty-four state votes will happen – for or

against – whether we are watching or not. The future of grassroots governance will be decided whether we take part or stay silent.

Your local government cannot fix your road because the current system keeps it broken. The question is no longer whether it can be done; it is whether we will be part of the citizens who made it happen – the generation that finally gave local governments in Nigeria the power to serve their people. Advocate to your State Assembly to support LG Autonomy.

This brief draws from insights shared at the Q3 Development Dialogue on Local Government Autonomy and Youth Advocacy, hosted by LEAP Africa.

Explore our other [thought piece](#) and [Policy Whitepaper](#). For more information, visit <https://leapafrica.org/> or <https://pagr.leapafrica.org/>

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