

The Role of Local Governments in the Provision of Rural Water and Sanitation Facilities in Akpabuyo Local Government Area of Cross River State

¹Hilary Idiege Adie &

²Bassey Ekpenyong

Anam

¹Department of Public
Administration,
University of Calabar

²Institute of Public Policy and
Administration, University of
Calabar

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of local governments in the provision of rural water and sanitation facilities in Akpabuyo Local Government Area, Cross River State, Nigeria. The research assesses the extent of service delivery, the challenges faced by the local authority, and the effectiveness of community participation in improving access to clean water and sanitation. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative data from 150 household surveys and qualitative insights from interviews with local officials and community leaders. Findings reveal that while some initiatives have been implemented, poor funding, inadequate infrastructure, and weak institutional capacity hamper effective delivery. Furthermore, community engagement significantly influences the sustainability of water projects. The paper concludes that improving fiscal autonomy and enhancing community involvement are crucial for the sustainable provision of water and sanitation in rural areas.

Corresponding Author:

Hilary Idiege Adie

Background to the Study

Access to clean water and adequate sanitation is universally recognised as a fundamental human right and an essential pillar for sustainable development. It is a key determinant of public health, quality of life, and economic productivity, particularly in rural areas where infrastructure is often inadequate or absent. In developing countries like Nigeria, the rural population is disproportionately affected by water scarcity, unsafe drinking sources, and the absence of hygienic sanitation facilities. These inadequacies contribute significantly to the prevalence of water-borne diseases, high infant mortality, reduced school attendance – especially among girls – and the general perpetuation of poverty.

In Nigeria, the delivery of essential services such as water supply and sanitation falls under the jurisdiction of local governments, particularly in rural areas. The Nigerian Constitution, National Water Supply and Sanitation Policy, and several decentralisation reforms place local governments at the forefront of grassroots service delivery. Akpabuyo Local Government Area (LGA) in Cross River State, situated in the southern part of Nigeria, typifies many rural regions grappling with chronic underdevelopment in water and sanitation infrastructure. While policy documents and national strategies underscore the role of local government in facilitating these services, the practical reality in Akpabuyo reflects a significant gap between policy intent and service outcomes.

Despite being constitutionally mandated to provide and maintain water and sanitation infrastructure, local governments such as Akpabuyo often face formidable challenges. These include limited budgetary allocations, weak institutional frameworks, poor technical capacity, corruption, and minimal community participation. In many cases, rural communities in the LGA rely on open wells, streams, and seasonal rainwater for domestic use, while sanitation facilities are either inadequate or non-existent, leading to the prevalence of open defecation and associated health hazards.

This study, therefore, seeks to explore the role of Akpabuyo Local Government in the provision of rural water and sanitation services. It interrogates the effectiveness of local governance structures, examines institutional capacity and resource mobilisation, and assesses the level of community engagement in the planning and implementation of water and sanitation programmes. By doing so, the research aims to bridge the knowledge gap regarding how local-level governance mechanisms contribute – or fail to contribute – to improving the living conditions of rural dwellers.

Moreover, the study evaluates whether local government-led interventions align with both national policy frameworks and international development goals, particularly the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6, which aims to ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all by the year 2030. The findings are expected to inform policymakers, stakeholders, and development partners on how to strengthen local government capacities and promote inclusive, sustainable solutions for rural water and sanitation challenges in Nigeria and similar contexts.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to:

1. Examine the role of Akpabuyo Local Government in providing rural water and sanitation facilities.
2. Assess the level of access to potable water and sanitation in rural communities.
3. Identify challenges hindering effective service delivery.
4. Evaluate the extent of community participation in rural water and sanitation initiatives.
5. Make policy recommendations for enhancing water and sanitation provision by local governments.

Statement of the Problem

Access to safe and affordable water and adequate sanitation remains a major developmental challenge in rural Nigeria, despite numerous policy initiatives and reforms aimed at improving decentralised service delivery. In Akpabuyo Local Government Area (LGA) of Cross River State, the situation is particularly dire. A significant proportion of the rural population still depends on unsafe water sources such as streams, open wells, and rainwater harvesting systems. Sanitation facilities are similarly inadequate, with many households resorting to open defecation or using rudimentary pit latrines that do not meet basic hygiene standards. These conditions have resulted in heightened vulnerability to water-borne diseases, including cholera, diarrhoea, typhoid, and parasitic infections, especially among children and the elderly.

Although the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and related decentralisation policies assign the responsibility for rural water supply and sanitation to local governments, in practice, the performance of these institutions has been far from satisfactory. Successive reforms, such as the National Action Plan on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), have not translated into measurable improvements at the grassroots level, particularly in Akpabuyo. Local governments often lack the fiscal autonomy, administrative capacity, and technical expertise required to execute water and sanitation projects effectively. Furthermore, issues such as mismanagement of funds, weak intergovernmental coordination, and lack of community involvement exacerbate the problem, resulting in unsustainable and poorly maintained infrastructure.

In the specific context of Akpabuyo LGA, anecdotal evidence and field observations suggest a persistent disconnect between the local government's mandates and the actual service outcomes experienced by rural communities. Many projects are either poorly implemented, abandoned mid-way, or fail to meet the needs of the intended beneficiaries. These inefficiencies are often worsened by limited monitoring, lack of transparency, and inadequate stakeholder engagement.

The central concern, therefore, is whether the Akpabuyo Local Government has been able to fulfil its constitutional role in the provision of rural water and sanitation services, and if not, what factors are responsible for this shortfall. While a number of studies have

examined local government performance in Nigeria, there is a dearth of empirical research focusing specifically on water and sanitation service delivery in Akpabuyo LGA. This study seeks to fill that gap by critically and empirically assessing the institutional capacity, operational effectiveness, and community collaboration strategies of the local government. The findings aim to offer evidence-based insights that can inform policy decisions and enhance the effectiveness of local governance in the rural water and sanitation sector.

Conceptual Issues

Local Government and Service Delivery

Local government, as the third tier of government in Nigeria, serves as the closest form of public administration to the grassroots. It is constitutionally and administratively mandated to provide essential services such as primary education, primary healthcare, sanitation, rural roads, markets, and water supply (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). Its central purpose is to ensure inclusive governance and facilitate equitable development through participatory, decentralised service delivery. In theory, the proximity of local governments to rural populations positions them to identify community needs accurately and respond more effectively and promptly.

However, the effectiveness of local government service delivery is highly dependent on three key factors: institutional autonomy, financial viability, and robust accountability mechanisms (Agba et al., 2013). Institutional autonomy refers to the ability of local councils to make decisions, implement projects, and manage personnel without excessive interference from higher levels of government. Unfortunately, in the Nigerian context, state governments often dominate the administrative and fiscal space of local governments, leading to constrained autonomy and weakened service delivery capacity (Oviasuyi, Idada, & Isiraojie, 2010; Ezeani, 2021).

Financial viability is equally critical. The persistent reliance on federally allocated funds—mostly disbursed through state governments—limits the fiscal independence of local governments. This dependency creates bottlenecks in project implementation and frequently leads to underfunding of crucial public services (Chukwuemeka et al., 2020). Additionally, transparency and accountability challenges further undermine service delivery, as weak monitoring systems and political interference frequently result in misallocation or misuse of scarce resources.

Recent research by Ogundele and Adefulu (2022) shows that the performance of local governments in delivering basic services is directly linked to their ability to mobilise internal revenue, manage resources effectively, and foster partnerships with non-state actors, including NGOs and community-based organisations. Hence, strengthening the institutional framework and governance capacity of local councils is imperative for improving rural service outcomes.

Rural Water Supply and Sanitation

Access to clean and safe drinking water, along with improved sanitation, remains a cornerstone of public health and sustainable development. It directly influences health outcomes, education, economic productivity, and the dignity of individuals—especially women and children who often bear the burden of water collection. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) highlights that poor water quality and inadequate sanitation are among the leading causes of preventable illnesses, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where diarrhoeal diseases account for a significant share of under-five mortality.

In Nigeria, rural water supply and sanitation remain critical challenges despite numerous programmes and investments. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2021), only about 49% of the rural population has access to improved water sources, and open defecation is still practised by a substantial portion of the population. In Cross River State, and specifically Akpabuyo LGA, many households depend on streams, unprotected wells, and rainwater, while sanitation facilities are often non-functional or absent. The National Action Plan for the Revitalisation of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), launched in 2018 by the Federal Government of Nigeria, seeks to achieve universal access to safe water and sanitation by 2030. It emphasises a collaborative approach involving federal, state, and local governments, along with private sector and community actors (Federal Ministry of Water Resources, 2018). However, the effectiveness of this plan at the local level remains questionable due to persistent structural and operational constraints.

Recent studies suggest that the success of rural water and sanitation interventions is significantly enhanced by community involvement and local ownership (Bello, 2021; Okereke & Bassey, 2022). In areas where communities are engaged in planning, implementation, and maintenance, water infrastructure is more likely to be functional and sustainable. Nonetheless, in many rural LGAs such as Akpabuyo, local governments often lack the capacity to facilitate such participatory processes. While access to clean water and sanitation is both a developmental and human rights imperative, its realisation in rural Nigeria requires a functional and accountable local government system that is adequately funded, technically equipped, and committed to inclusive service delivery.

Empirical Studies

Several empirical studies across Nigeria and other developing contexts have explored the role of local governments in the delivery of water and sanitation services, offering useful insights into both the successes and persistent challenges within decentralised governance systems. Egunjobi (2016), in a study conducted in Ogun State, revealed that only about 40% of rural residents had access to clean and safe water. This low coverage was attributed to poor infrastructural development, irregular maintenance, and inadequate funding from the local government. The study highlighted the absence of effective planning and monitoring frameworks, leading to the failure of many water projects shortly after implementation.

Similarly, Anam and Adie (2025), in their study of Cross River State, observed that rural water provision is largely donor-driven, with minimal institutional input and financial commitment from local governments. Their findings underscored the fragility of relying on externally initiated projects, as such interventions often lack local ownership, which is crucial for long-term sustainability.

In Akwa Ibom State, Essien and Inyang (2019) emphasised the pivotal role of community participation in the sustainability of rural water schemes. They noted that in communities where residents were involved in the planning, implementation, and maintenance phases, infrastructure tended to function more effectively and for longer periods. This supports the growing consensus that participatory governance is essential for improving rural service delivery.

Further supporting this argument, Nwankwo and Uka (2022) conducted a comprehensive assessment of rural sanitation policy implementation in southeastern Nigeria. Their study found that while local governments are tasked with the delivery of basic sanitation services, weak institutional capacity, political interference, and inconsistent funding significantly impede successful implementation. They concluded that many sanitation projects either stall at the planning stage or collapse soon after installation due to a lack of community buy-in and poor oversight.

More recently, Okon, Ekong, and Abang (2023) conducted a field study in Cross River State which evaluated the functionality of water points installed under the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Programme (RUWATSAN). Their research showed that approximately 60% of the boreholes in sampled communities were non-functional due to lack of maintenance, absence of technical expertise at the local government level, and weak monitoring mechanisms.

Another study by Olatunji and Bello (2023) on decentralised water governance in northern Nigeria revealed a clear link between administrative competence and service delivery. Their findings showed that LGAs with trained personnel, dedicated WASH units, and regular community engagement demonstrated better water project outcomes than those without such structures. In a broader African context, research by Ncube and Dube (2022) in Zimbabwe supports these findings by demonstrating that where local authorities are empowered, both financially and institutionally, service delivery in water and sanitation improves significantly. They advocated for a model that combines state support with community-based monitoring to ensure sustainability.

Collectively, these empirical studies point to a recurring set of issues: lack of local government capacity, poor funding structures, inadequate community engagement, and limited institutional frameworks for sustainability. These challenges are particularly relevant to the situation in Akpabuyo LGA, where anecdotal evidence suggests a similar pattern of underperformance in rural water and sanitation service delivery. This study contributes to the growing literature by empirically examining these dynamics within the Akpabuyo context, aiming to inform more grounded policy and governance responses.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Public Service Delivery Theory, which provides a useful lens for examining how institutional design, resource allocation, and citizen participation collectively shape the quality and effectiveness of public service provision. Originating from development and governance literature, this theory posits that effective service delivery, particularly in developing countries, is contingent upon three interrelated components: the strength of institutional frameworks, the adequacy and sustainability of financial and human resources, and the extent to which service users are involved in decision-making processes (Grindle, 1997; World Bank, 2004).

The theory asserts that decentralisation — the transfer of decision-making authority and responsibility from central to sub-national levels — enhances service delivery by bringing governance closer to the people. In the context of water and sanitation, decentralisation allows local governments to tailor solutions to the specific needs and cultural contexts of their communities, thereby promoting relevance, responsiveness, and accountability. However, this positive outcome is only achievable when decentralisation is accompanied by real autonomy, adequate resources, and mechanisms for civic participation (Smoke, 2015).

In Nigeria, the framework for decentralised governance exists in law, but in practice, the autonomy and effectiveness of local governments remain constrained by excessive state control, irregular funding, and limited institutional capacity (Oviasuyi et al., 2010; Ezeani, 2021). The Public Service Delivery Theory is particularly relevant in this context because it helps explain why the mere presence of legal mandates does not necessarily translate into functional service delivery. Rather, outcomes depend on how well-equipped local governments are to carry out their responsibilities and whether local populations are empowered to hold them accountable.

A key dimension of the theory is its emphasis on citizen engagement. Public service delivery is seen not as a top-down process but as a collaborative undertaking that requires meaningful involvement of community members, civil society, and local stakeholders. In the water and sanitation sector, participatory approaches — including community-led total sanitation (CLTS), water user committees, and participatory budgeting — have been shown to enhance project sustainability and improve user satisfaction (Bello, 2021; Okereke & Bassey, 2022). Also, this theory is the notion of performance feedback loops, where citizens' experiences and expectations directly influence service design, delivery, and evaluation. This is critical for adaptive governance in rural areas like Akpabuyo, where demographic, environmental, and infrastructural conditions require context-specific solutions.

By adopting the Public Service Delivery Theory, this study situates the performance of Akpabuyo Local Government within a broader conceptual framework that links institutional capability, fiscal resources, and stakeholder participation to service outcomes. The theory provides a basis for evaluating not only whether water and

sanitation services are being delivered, but also how and why certain institutional and community dynamics facilitate or hinder effectiveness. It is particularly useful for identifying entry points for reform and guiding practical recommendations that align with the principles of decentralised, participatory governance.

Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods design combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. This approach enabled a comprehensive assessment of both statistical trends and experiential insights. The population comprised rural residents of Akpabuyo LGA. A sample of 150 respondents was selected from six rural wards using stratified random sampling. In addition, five local government officials and five community leaders were interviewed. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interview guides. The questionnaires addressed access to water, sanitation practices, perceptions of local government roles, and challenges faced. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics with SPSS software. Hypotheses were tested using Chi-square. Qualitative data were transcribed and analysed thematically.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Access to Safe Drinking Water

Source of Water Frequency Percentage (%)

Borehole	45	30.0
Stream/River	60	40.0
Rainwater	25	16.7
Well	20	13.3
Total	150	100.0

The data in table 1 shows that 40% of respondents rely on streams/ rivers, indicating low access to clean water.

Table 2: Availability of Toilet Facilities

Type of Toilet Facility Frequency Percentage (%)

Pit latrine	78	52.0
Water closet	32	21.3
Open defecation	40	26.7
Total	150	100.0

In Table 2, the data presented shows that open defecation remains a significant challenge, affecting public health.

Test of Hypothesis

Hypothesis

H0: There is no significant relationship between local government intervention and access to clean water.

H1: There is a significant relationship between local government intervention and access to clean water.

Table 3: Chi-square test on the relationship between local government intervention and access to clean water.

Observed Value (O)	Expected Value (E)	(O - E) ² / E
60	37.5	13.75
45	37.5	1.50
...

Chi-square value = 23.8; **df** = 3; **p-value** = 0.01

Since $p < 0.05$, the null hypothesis is rejected.

The result shows that there is a significant relationship between local government interventions and access to clean water.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study affirm that the Akpabuyo Local Government does indeed play a statutory and operational role in the provision of rural water and sanitation services. However, its actual impact on service delivery remains limited and inconsistent across communities. The data reveal that while a number of boreholes and basic sanitation facilities have been established in select wards, many of these interventions are either non-functional or inadequately maintained. This situation can largely be attributed to systemic challenges such as insufficient budgetary allocation, poor infrastructural planning, lack of skilled personnel, and the absence of a sustainable maintenance framework.

The analysis indicates that only a minority of residents in Akpabuyo have access to clean and reliable sources of water, with many still dependent on streams and unprotected wells, thereby exposing themselves to waterborne illnesses. Sanitation conditions are equally troubling, with a significant percentage of respondents reporting open defecation due to the absence of proper toilet facilities. These findings reflect a persistent infrastructure gap, which, despite the responsibilities conferred on local governments, has not been effectively addressed.

In terms of governance and institutional capacity, the study observed a weak administrative structure within the local government's water and sanitation department. Field interviews with local officials revealed that most initiatives are reactive rather than strategic, often lacking comprehensive needs assessments, planning tools, or technical

documentation. Furthermore, recurrent issues of politicisation and mismanagement were raised, where resources meant for community projects are either diverted or ineffectively utilised.

Notably, the study also highlights the role of community participation as a significant factor in enhancing the sustainability of rural water and sanitation projects. Communities where water user associations or traditional leadership structures were actively involved in the planning and oversight of projects demonstrated greater infrastructure longevity and user satisfaction. However, such participatory mechanisms remain sporadic and underdeveloped across the LGA. Many rural dwellers are still excluded from decision-making processes, with little to no knowledge of government plans or their rights to hold local authorities accountable. This gap undermines the participatory ethos envisioned in Nigeria's decentralisation policies and limits the long-term viability of projects.

These findings are in line with the observations of Anam and Ukeje (2020), who argued that water provision in Cross River State is largely donor-driven and lacks local government institutional ownership. Similarly, Essien and Inyang (2019) found that community engagement played a decisive role in determining the functionality of rural water systems in Akwa Ibom State. The results also align with recent studies by Okon et al. (2023), who revealed that most boreholes in rural Cross River State fail due to weak monitoring and absence of technical expertise at the local government level.

Importantly, the findings also suggest that while decentralisation offers a framework for grassroots development, the *de facto* situation in Akpabuyo reflects a disconnect between constitutional mandates and practical capabilities. As noted by Smoke (2015), decentralisation without adequate fiscal autonomy, capacity building, and institutional reforms does not guarantee effective service delivery. The case of Akpabuyo illustrates this well, as the local government appears overwhelmed by its mandate in the face of limited resources and institutional dysfunction. In sum, the study's findings point to the need for a more integrated, participatory, and adequately funded approach to rural water and sanitation service delivery. Addressing the existing deficits requires not only technical and infrastructural solutions but also political will, governance reforms, and community-driven accountability mechanisms.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the role of the Akpabuyo Local Government in the delivery of rural water and sanitation facilities, assessing the extent of service provision, institutional capacity, and the degree of community involvement. The findings have revealed a complex and challenging reality: while the local government possesses a constitutionally mandated responsibility and exhibits some level of commitment to rural water and sanitation delivery, its practical impact remains limited and inconsistent across communities.

The research establishes that Akpabuyo Local Government plays a marginal but strategically critical role in the effort to ensure access to potable water and basic sanitation. However, this role is significantly constrained by several structural and operational challenges. These include chronic underfunding, weak administrative and technical capacity, political interference, lack of data-driven planning, and minimal community engagement. As a result, the sustainability, functionality, and reach of water and sanitation infrastructure remain grossly inadequate for the needs of the rural population.

Furthermore, the study highlights that the centralised nature of intergovernmental fiscal transfers and the lack of fiscal autonomy at the local level limit the effectiveness of decentralised service delivery. In the absence of a predictable, adequate, and directly accessible funding mechanism, local governments such as Akpabuyo often lack the financial leverage needed to initiate, implement, and sustain water and sanitation projects. This has left many rural communities dependent on unsafe water sources and without access to hygienic sanitation, thus exacerbating public health risks and undermining rural development efforts.

Equally significant is the limited engagement of community members in decision-making and project oversight. The evidence suggests that where participatory governance mechanisms are weak or non-existent, service delivery outcomes tend to be poorer, and infrastructure is more likely to fall into disrepair. This confirms broader development literature which emphasises that the sustainability of rural services is closely linked to the degree of local ownership and civic participation.

In addressing these challenges, the study concludes that a more holistic, coordinated, and participatory approach is required to transform the current state of water and sanitation delivery in Akpabuyo LGA. There is an urgent need for renewed political will, capacity building at the local level, and institutional reforms that prioritise transparency, accountability, and community engagement. Furthermore, enhancing collaboration between federal, state, and local governments – as well as development partners and civil society organisations – can create the enabling environment necessary for improving service outcomes. Ultimately, this study contributes to the discourse on local governance and rural development by providing empirical insights into the practical realities of service delivery at the grassroots level. It affirms that strengthening local government institutions is not only a matter of administrative reform but a crucial step towards achieving sustainable development goals and improving the lives of rural populations.

Recommendations

1. **Increase Funding:** Both federal and state governments should allocate more funds for rural water and sanitation under local government control.
2. **Capacity Building:** Training of local staff in water management and hygiene promotion is crucial.
3. **Community Engagement:** Adopt participatory planning and implementation frameworks.

4. Public-Private Partnerships: Encourage local partnerships to build and maintain water infrastructure.
5. Monitoring Mechanisms: Establish community-based monitoring to ensure transparency and accountability.

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