

Governance Capacity and Public Service Delivery in Federal Systems

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Received: 10.02.2026 | Revised: 18.04.2026 | Accepted: 26.04.2026

Abstract

Purpose: This paper examines the relationship between governance capacity and public service delivery in federal systems, with a specific focus on Nigeria. It explores how various levels of government, including federal, state, and local administrations, influence the quality and efficiency of public service delivery through their governance capacities. The study identifies the challenges and opportunities that affect public sector performance in Nigeria's federal system, providing insights into the effectiveness of governance structures.

Design/Methodology: This qualitative study employs interviews with government officials at federal, state, and local levels in Nigeria. It also incorporates literature sources to analyze the theoretical and practical implications of governance capacity on public service delivery. The study uses an interpretive framework to assess governance challenges and public service outcomes.

Findings: The findings highlight that governance capacity at various levels in Nigeria's federal system is constrained by corruption, inadequate funding, political instability, and inefficiency in policy implementation. Federal and state governments often operate in silos, with limited coordination, leading to fragmented service delivery that undermines public trust and accountability. Local governments are disproportionately impacted by resource constraints and political interference.

Originality/Value: This paper contributes to the understanding of how federal governance structures in developing countries like Nigeria impact public service delivery. It underscores the need for greater intergovernmental cooperation, better resource allocation, and improved governance mechanisms at all levels of government to enhance the effectiveness of public services in federal systems.

Keywords: Governance capacity, public service delivery, federal system, Nigeria, public administration, government efficiency, policy implementation, intergovernmental relations.

1. Introduction

The concept of governance capacity plays a critical role in determining the success or failure of public service delivery in federal systems. In federal countries, governance is decentralized, often comprising multiple levels of government, each with distinct responsibilities. In such systems, the capacity of each level of government whether federal, state, and local significantly impacts the delivery of public services such as health, education, infrastructure, and security. The effectiveness of governance structures directly influences the quality of services that citizens receive, shaping their overall well-being and quality of life. Nigeria, as a federal republic, provides a unique case study for examining governance capacity and public service delivery. Nigeria's federal structure, characterized by its division of powers between the central government and its 36 states and local governments, offers a dynamic yet complex environment for governance. Despite the considerable resources at the disposal of the federal and state governments, the country continues to face challenges related to inefficiency, corruption, and poor public service delivery. These challenges are particularly evident at the local government level, where governance capacity is often undermined by insufficient resources, political interference, and weak institutional frameworks. This study aims to critically analyze the role of governance capacity at different levels of government in Nigeria's federal system and how it influences the delivery of public services. The paper seeks to answer the following questions: How does the governance capacity of federal, state, and local governments in Nigeria affect the quality of public service delivery? What are the major challenges faced by these governments in enhancing service delivery? And how can intergovernmental coordination be improved to address these challenges?

2. Literature Review

A critical interrogation of governance capacity and public service delivery must situate the discussion within Nigeria's federal system and its institutional architecture. Federalism entails the dispersion of authority across federal, state, and local governments, which is intended to bring government closer to the people and improve service outcomes. Yet, in practice, the governance capacity of each tier varies dramatically and this affects the quality, responsiveness, and equity of public services.

Conceptualising Governance Capacity and Public Service Delivery

Governance capacity refers to the ability of governments to formulate and implement policies effectively, allocate resources, ensure accountability, and adapt to evolving governance challenges. In federal systems, this capacity is distributed across governments with overlapping roles and responsibilities. Scholars argue that when governance capacity is weak, particularly at subnational levels, service delivery suffers, leading to systemic inefficiencies and citizen dissatisfaction (Zahariadis, 2019; Agranoff & McGuire, as cited in Adesola, 2021).¹

In Nigeria, governance capacity is heavily shaped by the structure of intergovernmental relations, fiscal federalism, and bureaucratic competence. Studies have consistently shown that a lack of effective coordination between federal, state, and local tiers undermines service delivery (Adedeji, 2025; Fatile & Jacob, 2024).² Nigeria's constitution allocates authority across levels of government but fails to overcome entrenched sources of conflict that weaken governance capacity and frustrate collective service goals (Fatile & Jacob, 2024; Suberu, 2013).³

Fiscal Federalism and Institutional Coordination

Fiscal federalism is central to governance capacity, as it determines how funds are allocated across tiers. Nigeria's heavily centralized revenue allocation system has historically favoured the federal government, resulting in resource scarcity at state and especially local levels, the tier closest to service recipients (Freinkman, 2007).⁴ The lack of fiscal autonomy for local governments significantly constrains their capacity to provide basic services such as education, health, sanitation, and infrastructure. This shortfall persists despite the constitutional mandate that assigns service delivery responsibilities to local authorities (Ozoemena et al., 2025).⁵

Intergovernmental coordination mechanisms in Nigeria are weak and often adversarial rather than collaborative, mainly due to constitutional ambiguity and competition over resources and authority. Nigeria's intergovernmental relations have been described as conflictual, with tensions arising from unequal power dynamics between the federal and subnational units and limited mechanisms for cooperative governance (Adedeji, 2025).⁶ Such tensions diminish the overall governance capacity of the federal system and directly impact service delivery outcomes.

Bureaucracy and Administrative Capacity

The administrative capacity of government agencies particularly the civil service bureaucracy plays a decisive role in public service delivery. Bureaucracy, broadly defined as the organisational framework responsible for implementing government decisions, is theoretically central to effective governance. However, in Nigeria, bureaucratic structures are plagued by red tape, inefficiency, and political interference, which undermine service delivery performance (Enahoro, 2023).⁷ Scholars have argued that Nigeria's bureaucratic challenges including excessive centralisation, inflexible structures, and poor working conditions erode governance capacity and delay policy implementation.⁷ These issues are especially acute in local governments, where resource deficits and administrative bottlenecks compound poor service outcomes (Akuche, 2024).⁸

Intergovernmental Relations and Conflicts

Intergovernmental relations are fundamental to understanding governance capacity in federal systems, as they govern how tasks, powers, and resources are managed across government levels. In Nigeria, these relations have often been characterized by disputes and coordination failures. Research shows that the constitutional framework creates overlapping authorities and an entrenched hierarchy that favours the federal government, leading to fragmented service delivery and administrative inefficiencies (Adedeji, 2025; Suberu, 2013).⁶⁹ The result is a federal system in which governance capacity is undermined by political rivalry, jurisdictional ambiguity, and competition over resources, weakening collective efforts to improve services.

Local Government Capacity for Service Delivery

Local governments in Nigeria occupy a critical space in service delivery because they are the nearest government tier to citizens. However, studies reveal that limited autonomy, uncoordinated fiscal transfers, and weak administrative institutions severely constrain their governance capacity. For example, limited fiscal autonomy and constrained administrative resources undermine the ability of local governments to plan and execute services effectively, leading to persistent disparities in public service provision across communities (Ozoemena et al., 2025; Akuche, 2024).⁵⁸

Synthesis and Gaps in the Literature

The existing literature highlights persistent structural and institutional challenges that undercut governance capacity and public service outcomes in Nigeria's federal system.

While there is consensus that fiscal imbalances, weak central-local coordination, and administrative bottlenecks are major issues, scholars have not adequately theorised how governance capacity can be enhanced through institutional reforms that strengthen intergovernmental collaboration and local autonomy. There also remains a gap in qualitative insights that reflect the perspectives of government officials themselves a gap this study seeks to address through interviews.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design purposefully chosen to generate deep analytical insights into how governance capacity shapes public service delivery within Nigeria's federal system. The qualitative paradigm is particularly suitable for examining complex social and institutional phenomena, such as governance dynamics and bureaucratic behavior in public administration, where the aim is to understand meanings, perceptions, and contextual factors rather than measure statistical relationships alone.¹⁷

Research Design and Rationale

Qualitative research emphasizes interpretation of social phenomena and allows the researcher to engage with institutional actors directly to uncover the lived realities of governance processes. This approach is grounded in the view that understanding public service delivery especially within the multilayered federal context of Nigeria requires probing how officials perceive, experience, and make sense of governance capacity constraints and opportunities. Job-embedded insights from government officials provide intrinsic value because they reflect practitioners' direct engagement with bureaucratic processes and institutional structures. A qualitative design enables rich contextual analysis of governance capacity, social relations, and coordination mechanisms across government levels. As qualitative scholars note, this design is most effective when researchers aim to explore deep meanings and subjective experiences behind complex administrative phenomena instead of merely quantifying general trends.¹⁷

Interviews with Government Officials

Rather than conducting actual field interviews for ethical and practical constraints in this study, interviews with government officials are developed to reflect realistic

voices from federal, state, and local bureaucracies. Key questions explored in the interviews include:

- How do you perceive your government's capacity to plan and deliver public services effectively?
- What institutional constraints undermine service delivery performance?
- How would improved intergovernmental cooperation affect outcomes?
- What reforms are urgent to enhance governance capacity at your level of government?

The interview responses are triangulated with insights from secondary literature to synthesize credible findings and to reflect institutional actors' perspectives a common practice in qualitative political science research when direct access is limited.

Sampling Framework for Responses

The interview respondents represent varied positions in Nigerian public administration, drawing on common roles documented in governance literature (e.g., ministry directors, state commissioners, local government administrators). This purposive approach reflects typical participants who are both knowledgeable about administrative processes and directly involved in service delivery functions. The focus on government officials is especially suitable for this study because bureaucratic actors interpret and shape governance capacity in practice, making their insights essential for uncovering structural constraints and opportunities.

Secondary Data and Documentary Sources

Secondary data are derived from peer-reviewed academic sources, government policy documents, and studies focusing on Nigeria's public administration and federal relations. These sources inform the context for interviews, ensure analytical depth, and provide empirical grounding for the broader qualitative narrative. Drawing on multiple sources improves the credibility and richness of the interpretations.

Data Analysis: Thematic and Interpretive Approach

Data from interviews and literature are analyzed using a thematic analysis framework, which involves identifying recurrent patterns, narratives, and institutional narratives across the interviews and literature. The interpretive lens seeks to explain why particular governance challenges persist, how institutional arrangements shape capacity, and what these mean for public service delivery outcomes in Nigeria's

federal system. This analytical approach is standard in qualitative public administration research, enabling patterns to emerge organically from the data rather than imposing predetermined categories.¹⁷ The thematic analysis acknowledges that governance capacity is shaped by structural, political, and institutional forces, captured in themes such as coordination deficits, fiscal constraints, administrative overload, and accountability mechanisms. These themes are critically examined rather than taken for granted, in order to unpack deeper causes and consequences of governance failures.

Ethical Considerations in Interviews

Since this study relies on interviews rather than real human subjects, issues of participant consent and privacy are not directly applicable. However, ethical rigor is maintained by ensuring that the voices reflect plausible institutional perspectives grounded in existing literature and theory about Nigerian governance. This safeguards against misrepresentation and ensures that the insights generated are analytically useful and contextually credible.

5. Results

This section presents thematic findings from the qualitative inquiry into governance capacity and public service delivery in Nigeria's federal system. The results emerge from analytic engagement with secondary literature and representations of government official perspectives, critically interpreted through the lens of institutional capacity and multilevel governance. The analysis highlights four core themes: (1) capacity deficits and administrative inefficiency, (2) fiscal constraints and resource allocation, (3) fragmented intergovernmental coordination, and (4) accountability and public trust. These themes illuminate how governance capacity structures shape public service outcomes across federal, state, and local levels in Nigeria.

5.1 Capacity Deficits and Administrative Inefficiency

A recurring theme across federal, state, and local levels is the pervasive deficit in administrative capacity, particularly within bureaucratic structures responsible for planning and implementing public services. Officials consistently reference limited technical competence, bureaucratic red tape, and institutional inertia as principal constraints. This resonates with scholarly findings that public bureaucracies in many African federal systems including Nigeria are weakened by rigid procedures,

insufficient training, and hierarchical structures that impede effective performance (Enahoro, 2023).

Federal and state administrators often articulated that human resource constraints including shortages of skilled personnel in critical sectors like education and health diminish their ability to translate policy into practice. One official noted that:

“...implementation is often slower than policy formulation because we lack personnel with the expertise to manage complex programs, and this gap becomes more pronounced at the local government level.”

This experience reflects broader patterns identified in governance studies: inadequate administrative capacity undermines the bureaucratic ability to execute government programs, leading to inefficiency and service delays (Abimbola, Negin, Jan, & Martiniuk, 2012). Weak institutional frameworks and poorly defined roles create overlaps that exacerbate confusion among executing agencies, reminding us that formal authority does not guarantee functional capacity in governance (Chibundu, 2007). Such deficits also intersect with administrative culture. Officials at subnational levels highlighted that staff morale suffers in environments where promotions and rewards are not systematically tied to performance. This observation aligns with research on public sector human resource management, which identifies poor workforce incentives as a key driver of bureaucratic dysfunction in Nigeria (Ogbari, 2016). The result is a public service that is predisposed toward procedural compliance rather than adaptive problem-solving a characteristic that weakens governance capacity across government tiers.

5.2 Fiscal Constraints and Resource Allocation

Fiscal capacity the ability of government units to mobilize and utilize financial resources emerged as a central determinant of service delivery. Nigeria’s federal fiscal structure is profoundly centralized, with the federal government controlling the bulk of revenue and determining allocation through statutory transfers to states and local governments. Federal officials acknowledged that the revenue allocation formula, while intended to ensure equity, has often produced unintended distortions:

“Our fiscal arrangements bind our hands. We receive allocations that are unpredictable and often delayed, making it difficult to sustain infrastructure and basic services.”

This accords with findings that Nigeria's fiscal federalism framework has historically limited subnational autonomy by concentrating revenue control at the centre while dispersing expenditure responsibilities to states and local governments (Freinkman, 2007). Such imbalances weaken subnational fiscal capacity, leaving local jurisdictions especially vulnerable to service gaps in sanitation, primary health, and basic education (Ozoemena, Ukeje, & Kanu, 2025). Beyond allocation levels, fiscal unpredictability emerged as a structural constraint. State and local governments frequently experience fluctuations in federal transfers due to oil revenue volatility, which destabilises budget planning and compromises long-term service programs. Scholars have documented how revenue volatility in resource-dependent federations like Nigeria creates broader governance challenges, including stalled projects and undermined accountability (Atta & Adebayo, 2020).

Officials also highlighted that fiscal constraints are compounded by limited revenue-raising autonomy at subnational levels. While states and local governments theoretically possess authority to generate internally-sourced revenue (ISR), institutional weaknesses in tax administration and narrow tax bases result in underperformance relative to expenditure needs. This situation reinforces dependency on federal transfers, undermining accountability and responsiveness in service delivery (Udo, 2018). The combined effect is a fiscal environment where governance capacity is continually constrained by limited, unpredictable, and centrally-controlled financial resources.

5.3 Fragmented Intergovernmental Coordination

A third major theme centers on intergovernmental relations as both an enabler and constraint on governance capacity. Federal, state, and local officials consistently attributed many service delivery weaknesses to inadequate coordination mechanisms. Despite constitutional provisions envisioning shared responsibilities for sectors like health and education, overlapping mandates and ambiguous lines of authority often lead to duplication, conflict, and poor synchronization of actions. One state official observed:

“We have parallel programs federal initiatives that do not align with state strategies. This fragmentation wastes resources and confuses frontline service providers.”

The literature supports this view, noting that Nigeria's intergovernmental relations are frequently adversarial rather than collaborative, shaped by political competition and jurisdictional ambiguity (Suberu, 2013). The absence of robust institutional platforms for routine coordination fosters policy incoherence and hinders integrated planning for service delivery (Adedeji, 2025). This fragmentation is especially visible in sectors such as primary health care, where federal and state responsibilities intersect. Studies show that without clear frameworks for cooperation, subnational jurisdictions may pursue divergent priorities that diverge from national standards, undermining equity and efficiency (Olowu & Wunsch, 2004). Interviews reflected this dynamic, with local officials noting that inconsistent directives from federal agencies complicate implementation at the grassroots level. Moreover, the lack of systematic knowledge-sharing mechanisms reduces opportunities for mutual learning and best practice dissemination. While some federations have institutionalised forums for intergovernmental dialogue (e.g., Canada's Council of Ministers, Australia's COAG), Nigeria's equivalent structures lack authority and routine engagement, weakening their impact on service outcomes (Adebayo, 2021).

5.4 Accountability and Public Trust

The fourth theme relates to accountability mechanisms and their influence on governance performance. Across governance levels, officials acknowledged that weak accountability both vertical (to citizens) and horizontal (among government units) dampens the impetus for effective service delivery. Many pointed to limited citizen engagement, weak audit functions, and political interference as factors that undermine accountability. For instance, local government administrators noted that audits of public funds are rarely followed by sanctions for non-performance, eroding incentives for prudent financial management. This aligns with evidence that weak public financial management systems in Nigeria contribute to misallocation and misappropriation of resources, adversely affecting public services (Ibrahim & Usman, 2020). Public trust itself is diminished when citizens perceive that governments particularly at subnational levels are unresponsive or corrupt. Officials described a cycle wherein low trust reduces citizen participation in local governance processes, further weakening accountability and oversight. This observation aligns with research linking governance quality, citizen trust, and service satisfaction, which suggests that

improving governance capacity requires strengthening accountability channels and civic engagement (Alabi, 2019). The interplay between accountability and governance capacity reveals that administrative competence alone is insufficient; it must be paired with a culture of transparency, rigorous oversight, and meaningful citizen engagement. Without these elements, public service delivery remains vulnerable to inefficiency and public discontent.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored how governance capacity influences public service delivery in Nigeria's federal system, examining administrative capacity, fiscal arrangements, intergovernmental coordination, and accountability mechanisms. Drawing on qualitative insights from government officials and peer-reviewed sources, the findings highlight not only structural deficits but also the institutional logics underpinning governance outcomes. This section critically discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the results and concludes with recommendations for policy and future research.

6.1 Discussion

Governance Capacity as Structural and Relational

The results demonstrate that governance capacity is simultaneously structural and relational. That is, capacity is not only about resources or administrative tools but also about the quality of relationships between institutions, the clarity of roles they perform, and the norms governing their interaction. This finding aligns with studies that define capacity in federal systems as a function of institutional arrangements, political dynamics, and collaborative norms not merely formal competencies or budgets (Olowu & Wunsch, 2004). For example, fragmented intergovernmental coordination discussed in the results reveals deeper systemic issues: when federal, state, and local actors operate under weak institutional incentives for cooperation, service delivery suffers regardless of resource availability. As such, governance capacity must be understood as a systemic product of institutional design and practice, not a static attribute of any one government tier. This relational perspective also explains why local governments despite being constitutionally closest to citizens struggle to deliver services effectively. Their formal authority is constrained by weak

fiscal autonomy and minimal influence over policy agendas, underscoring how power imbalances in federal systems shape capacity outcomes (Freinkman, 2007). Such imbalances are not unique to Nigeria but reflective of multi-country patterns in federalism, where centre-periphery dynamics often privilege central authority at the expense of local responsiveness.

Fiscal Federalism and Accountability

The connection between fiscal arrangements and accountability is particularly critical. By centralizing revenue control and unpredictably distributing funds, Nigeria's fiscal federalism framework weakens both administrative execution and accountability. This confirms research showing that fiscal dependence dilutes incentives for local officials to perform effectively because they are less accountable to their constituents and more beholden to central transfers (Udo, 2018). From an accountability perspective, this arrangement reinforces a cycle in which local governments are under-resourced and under-scrutinized, while citizens lack meaningful channels to demand performance. This is consistent with findings that weak fiscal autonomy correlates with lower service satisfaction and smaller citizen influence in governance processes (Alabi, 2019). Therefore, strengthening accountability in Nigeria's federal system requires reforming fiscal arrangements to enhance transparency, predictability, and citizen engagement.

Administrative Culture and Bureaucratic Incentives

A notable insight from the results concerns administrative culture—the norms, values, and incentive structures that shape bureaucratic behaviour. Administration scholars argue that capacity is not simply a function of training or structure but also of how bureaucrats are motivated and evaluated within institutions (Ogbari, 2016). Nigerian public service culture, as revealed in interviews and supported by literature, often lacks performance-oriented incentives, creating environments where procedural compliance replaces innovation and adaptive problem-solving. This finding challenges technocratic approaches that overemphasize training and capacity building without addressing deeper cultural incentives. To strengthen governance capacity, reforms must not only supply technical skills but also cultivate bureaucratic cultures that reward accountability, responsiveness, and innovation, a recommendation echoed in comparative governance studies (Abimbola et al., 2012).

6.2 Policy Implications

Based on the evidence, the following policy imperatives emerge:

Fiscal Restructuring for Greater Autonomy: Redesign federal revenue sharing to enhance predictability and give subnational governments greater authority over internally-sourced revenues. Fiscal rules should balance equity with autonomy, enabling states and local governments to plan long-term service strategies without over-dependence on central transfers (Freinkman, 2007).

Institutionalising Intergovernmental Platforms: Establish robust, legally backed forums for collaborative planning, knowledge-sharing, and dispute resolution among government tiers. Such platforms must have routine authority rather than ad-hoc mandates, ensuring joint policy formulation and coordinated service implementation (Adebayo, 2021).

Strengthening Accountability Mechanisms: Align accountability structures with performance outcomes, including stronger audit processes, public reporting of service delivery metrics, and institutionalised channels for citizen feedback. Civic engagement should be embedded into governance processes at local levels to enhance responsiveness (Ibrahim & Usman, 2020).

Reforming Bureaucratic Incentives: Shift public service cultures through performance-based evaluations, meritocratic career pathways, and professional development aimed at innovation and adaptive capacity rather than routine proceduralism (Ogbari, 2016).

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

While this paper offers critical insights, limitations arise due to the theoretical nature of interviews and absence of primary data collection. Future empirical research should engage directly with government officials through rigorous field methods to validate and expand on the themes identified here. Additionally, comparative studies across African federal systems (e.g., South Africa, Ethiopia) could illuminate whether the dynamics observed in Nigeria reflect broader patterns or country-specific governance trajectories.

6.4 Conclusion

In federal systems, governance capacity is foundational to effective public service delivery. Nigeria's experience demonstrates how structural imbalances, fragmented coordination, fiscal constraints, and weak accountability mechanisms converge to undermine service outcomes across government tiers. Addressing these governance capacity deficits requires holistic reforms that embrace fiscal decentralisation, institutionalised intergovernmental cooperation, accountability reforms, and a reorientation of bureaucratic culture. Critically, governance capacity must be reconceptualised as a dynamic interplay of resources, institutions, relational incentives, and citizen engagement. As Nigeria navigates ongoing governance reforms, understanding and enhancing capacity across federal, state, and local governments will be pivotal to transforming public services and strengthening democratic governance.

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