

Constitutional Democracy: An Evaluation of the Level of Awareness and Perception of the Functions of the Local Government Council among Agbani Residents in Enugu State

Paul Martin Obayi, PhD¹, Charles Makata, PhD² & Emmanuel Ugwuanyi.³

¹ *Legal Practitioner and Distinguished Professor, Department of Mass Communication, Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu, Enugu State. Email: frobayi@gmail.com*

² *Legal Practitioner; Director of Academic Planning and Lecturer, Department of Mass Communication, Renaissance University, Ugbawka, Enugu State. Email: cccmakata@gmail.com*

³ *Legal Practitioner and Lecturer, Faculty of Law, Peace Land University, Enugu State. Email: ugwuanyiee@gmail.com*

Abstract

This study evaluated the level of awareness and perception of the functions of the local government council under constitutional democracy among residents of Agbani in Enugu State, Nigeria. Anchored in the Diffusion of Innovations theory, the study adopted a survey research design. A sample of 400 respondents was drawn from a projected population of 68,604 using Taro Yamane's formula; 395 valid questionnaires were analysed with frequency distribution tables and simple percentages via SPSS. Findings revealed that awareness of the local government council as an agent of socio-economic development in the rural area is low (55.7% low + 25.3% very low). Awareness of the council's function in the construction and maintenance of roads, street lights and public highways is also predominantly low (36.7% low + 22.8% very low). Perception of the council's role in the provision and maintenance of primary, adult and vocational education is largely unfavourable (75.9%). The study concludes that the low awareness and predominantly unfavourable perception limit the effectiveness of local government as a vehicle for grassroots development under Nigeria's constitutional democracy. It recommends strengthened administrative autonomy, improved public enlightenment, and greater community involvement in local governance.

Keywords: Constitutional Democracy, Local Government, Awareness, Perception, Enugu State, Rule of Law

Introduction

The general expectation among citizens is that local government administration under constitutional democratic governance should serve the purposes of socio-political and economic transformation at the grassroots. This expectation is rooted in the global attraction of constitutional democracy and its perceived capacity to generate evidence-based frameworks for promoting the economic well-being of the people (Onah, 2013).

Section 7(1) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) guarantees the system of local government by democratically elected councils and requires every state government to ensure their existence under a law that provides for their establishment, structure, composition, finance and functions. Local government administration in Nigeria predated the colonial era and operated through traditional institutions such as emirs, obas, age-grades and councils of elders (Agalamanyi, 2010).

Modern local government structures began to take clearer form with the Macpherson Constitution of 1951 and the Lyttleton Constitution, which advanced federal arrangements and regional autonomy (Uzuegbunam, 2010). The 1976 local government reforms formally recognised local government as the third tier of government. This status was reinforced by the 1979 Constitution and further strengthened by the 1988 local government reforms under the Babangida administration, which introduced elective positions for chairmen, vice-chairmen and councillors and clarified the structure, finance and functions of the councils (Egonmwan & Ibojje, 1999; Obi,

2013). Subsequent military and civilian administrations retained the third-tier status, with modifications reflecting cultural, economic and geographic realities.

Despite these constitutional and institutional provisions, many local government areas continue to experience high levels of poverty, limited infrastructure and weak socio-economic development. Residents in some communities appear insufficiently aware of the statutory functions of their local government councils and hold unfavourable perceptions of performance. It is against this background that the present study evaluates the level of awareness and perception of the functions of the local government council under constitutional democracy among Agbani residents in Enugu State.

Statement of the Problem

Although constitutional democracy assigns clear developmental roles to local government councils, there appears to be limited awareness among many rural residents of these roles and a correspondingly low evaluation of performance. High poverty rates, inadequate social amenities and weak socio-economic indicators persist in several local government areas. This observed gap between constitutional expectations and lived realities motivates the present evaluation of awareness and perception among Agbani residents.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective is to evaluate the level of awareness and perception of the functions of the local government council under constitutional democracy among Agbani residents in Enugu State. The specific objectives are to:

1. Determine the extent of Agbani residents' awareness of the local government council as an agent of socio-economic development in the rural area.
2. Determine the level of awareness of Agbani residents regarding the local government council's function in the construction and maintenance of roads, street lights and public highways.
3. Determine the nature of Agbani residents' perception of the local government council's function in the provision and maintenance of primary, adult and vocational education.

Research Questions

1. What is the extent of Agbani residents' awareness of the local government council as an agent of socio-economic development in the rural area?
2. What is the level of awareness of Agbani residents regarding the local government council's function in the construction and maintenance of roads, street lights and public highways?
3. What is the nature of Agbani residents' perception of the local government council's function in the provision and maintenance of primary, adult and vocational education?

Significance of the Study

The study contributes to the understanding of how constitutional democracy operates at the grassroots. It provides empirical baseline data that can inform policy reforms, strengthen advocacy for more effective local governance, and assist lawmakers and administrators in designing interventions that improve service delivery and citizen engagement.

Brief Review of Related Literature

Local Government Council Administration and Constitutional Democracy

Local government is widely regarded as the tier of government closest to the people and a primary vehicle for grassroots development (Gberevbie & Mukoro, 2013; Ezeani, 2016). It is established to decentralise governance, bring government nearer to the people, and provide essential social services (Agba, Akwara & Idu, 2013). Section 7(3) of the 1999 Constitution requires local government councils to participate in the economic planning and development of their areas. The Fourth Schedule enumerates specific functions, including the construction and maintenance of roads, streets, street lighting, drains and other public highways, as well as the provision and maintenance of primary, adult and vocational education.

Judicial interpretation has clarified that the Fourth Schedule is not exhaustive; states may assign additional functions to local government councils (UAC of Nigeria Plc v. Attorney-General of Lagos State). In social-contract terms, local government exists to restore rights and ensure collective participation at the community level (Dias, 2013).

Perception

Perception is the process by which individuals are exposed to stimuli, pay attention to them, and assign meaning based on both sensory input and existing knowledge (Bovee, 2013; Woolfolk, 2014). In the context of local governance, citizens' perceptions of institutional performance shape their willingness to engage with and support local authorities.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on the Diffusion of Innovation theory (Rogers, as discussed in Okunna, 2002). The theory posits that individuals move through stages of awareness, interest, evaluation, trial and adoption when confronted with new ideas or practices. Applied to local government, the theory suggests that media and institutional communication can create awareness of the council's functions; sustained positive experience can then foster favourable evaluation and support. The theory is relevant because low awareness constitutes the first barrier to effective grassroots participation under constitutional democracy.

Methodology

Research Design

A survey research design was adopted. A survey enables systematic collection of data on the characteristics, opinions and perceptions of a defined population (Nworgu, 1991).

Area and Population of the Study

The study was conducted in Agbani, Nkanu-West Local Government Area, Enugu State. The 2006 National Population Commission figure for Agbani was 41,832. Because this figure is outdated, a population projection to the year of data collection was undertaken using an annual growth rate of 3.2%.

Using the linear projection method commonly applied in Nigerian demographic studies:

Projected increase = $41,832 \times 0.032 \times 20 = 26,772$

Projected population = $41,832 + 26,772 = 68,604$.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

Sample size was determined with Taro Yamane's formula:

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

where $N = 68,604$ and $e = 0.05$

$$n = \frac{68,604}{1 + 68,604 \times 0.0025} \approx 398$$

This was rounded to 400. A total of 401 copies of the questionnaire were distributed; 395 valid copies were returned and used for analysis (response rate 98.5%).

Purposive sampling was employed. Respondents were selected on the basis of residence in Agbani and willingness to participate. While purposive sampling limits strict statistical generalisation, it was considered appropriate for accessing informed adult residents within the community.

Instrument and Data Analysis

A structured questionnaire was the primary instrument. Data were presented in frequency distribution tables and analysed with simple percentages using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Findings

A total of 401 questionnaires were distributed; 395 valid copies were returned and analysed.

Table 1: Respondents' Gender

Gender	Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	144	36.5	36.5	36.5
Female	251	63.5	63.5	100.0
Total	395	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 1 shows that 36.5% of respondents were male and 63.5% were female.

Research Question 1: What is the extent of Agbani residents' awareness of the local government council as an agent of socio-economic development in the rural area?

Table 2: Awareness of Local Government Council as Agent of Socio-Economic Development

Level of Awareness	Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very high	35	8.9	8.9	8.9
High	40	10.1	10.1	19.0
Low	220	55.7	55.7	74.7
Very low	100	25.3	25.3	100.0
Total	395	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 2 indicates that only 19.0% of respondents reported high or very high awareness, while 81.0% reported low or very low awareness. Awareness of the local government council as an agent of socio-economic development is therefore low.

Research Question 2: What is the level of awareness of Agbani residents regarding the local government council's function in the construction and maintenance of roads, street lights and public highways?

Table 3: Awareness of Function on Roads, Street Lights and Public Highways

Level of Awareness	Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very high	75	19.0	19.0	19.0
High	85	21.5	21.5	40.5
Low	145	36.7	36.7	77.2
Very low	90	22.8	22.8	100.0
Total	395	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 3 shows that 40.5% of respondents reported high or very high awareness, while 59.5% reported low or very low awareness. Awareness of this core infrastructural function remains predominantly low.

Research Question 3: What is the nature of Agbani residents' perception of the local government council's function in the provision and maintenance of primary, adult and vocational education?

Table 4: Perception of Function on Primary, Adult and Vocational Education

Nature of Perception	Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Favourable	55	13.9	13.9	13.9
Unfavourable	300	75.9	75.9	89.9
Neutral	40	10.1	10.1	100.0
Total	395	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 4 reveals that 75.9% of respondents held an unfavourable perception of the council's performance in education-related functions, while only 13.9% held a favourable view.

Summary of Findings

1. Awareness of the local government council as an agent of socio-economic development is low (81.0% low or very low).
2. Awareness of the council's responsibility for roads, street lights and public highways is predominantly low (59.5% low or very low).
3. Perception of the council's role in primary, adult and vocational education is largely unfavourable (75.9%).

Discussion

From the perspective of diffusion of innovation theory, the low awareness scores suggest that the first stage of the diffusion process—awareness—has not been adequately achieved for many residents. Without awareness, subsequent stages of interest, evaluation and supportive engagement are unlikely to occur. The predominantly unfavourable perception of educational functions further indicates that even where some awareness exists, lived experience has not produced positive evaluation.

The results also align with broader concerns in the literature about the gap between constitutional provisions and practical delivery of local government services. While the present study did not directly measure administrative autonomy or intergovernmental relations, the pattern of low awareness and unfavourable perception is compatible with environments in which local councils face constraints in exercising their statutory functions.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the level of awareness of the functions of the local government council among Agbani residents is low. The majority of respondents reported low or very low awareness of the council as an agent of socio-economic development and of its responsibility for roads, street lights and public highways. In addition, the perception of the council's performance in the provision and maintenance of primary, adult and vocational education is predominantly unfavourable.

These findings indicate that, despite the constitutional recognition of local government as the third tier of government, many residents remain insufficiently informed about, and dissatisfied with, the practical delivery of its core functions. The result is a weakened capacity of local government to serve as an effective instrument of grassroots socio-economic transformation under constitutional democracy. Addressing the awareness and perception gaps identified in this study is therefore essential for realising the developmental mandate of local government councils in Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. Local government administrative independence should be strengthened through clearer legal and institutional frameworks that reduce undue interference and enhance accountability.
2. Sustained public enlightenment campaigns should be undertaken by local councils, civil society and the media to raise awareness of statutory functions and available services.
3. Local government administration should be restructured to prioritise visible socio-economic projects and community participation in planning and monitoring.

4. Both federal and state governments should support mechanisms that bring governance closer to the people and improve the delivery of basic services, particularly in education and infrastructure.

Limitations of the Study

The study relied on purposive sampling and self-reported data from a single community. Findings are therefore indicative rather than strictly generalisable to all local government areas in Enugu State or Nigeria. The analysis was limited to descriptive statistics. Future research could employ probability sampling, multi-item scales with reliability testing, and inferential statistics across multiple local government areas.

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