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CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT DECISION-MAKING IN KWARA STATE

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ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss the dynamics, scope, and structural constraints that affect citizen participation in the decision-making process involving the local government throughout Kwara State in Nigeria. The study analyses the influence of institutional structures, fiscal independence, and grassroots efforts in community engagement using a mixed-method approach that utilizes recent data on several Local Government Areas (LGAs). The results show that although the civic willingness takes a high level, actual structural opportunities to enable citizens to have a say with their budgetary and developmental projects are harshly limited by institutional bottlenecks and top-down model of administration. Moreover, the analysis finds that the minimally integrated model of grassroots such as School-Based Management Committees (SBMCs) and Community and Social Development Projects (CSDP) have provided a sprinkling of success stories, but have endemic challenges such as isomorphic mimicry and lack of genuine integration legislatively. The elements of political exclusion that are entrenched in the historical control of the executive, with respect to the third level of governance, still render employable governance beyond the reach of the marginalized entities, especially in the youth and rural communities. The paper also ends with a conclusion where the paper recommends the legalization of local government financial autonomy, institutionalizing open-town hall budgeting, and strong capacity building efforts to convert passive consultation into a true collaborative governance.

Introduction

Background

The main institutional contact of citizens and the state is in the local government councils, which are conceptually oriented to facilitate the development of the grassroots democracy and the development of the local areas. Under the federal government system in Nigeria, the third government level has a statutory remit towards delivery of basic public goods, such as rural and primary healthcare in the country, and localized land-use planning. Participatory governance has become important to the effectiveness and viability of these public goods in the past decades as development practitioners began to understand its relevance. Once citizens actively express their priorities in the local decision making, the municipal projects are more relevant to the real needs of the community and thus the survival of projects long term and project ownership in the community. Kwara State, North-Central Nigeria, local administration covers sixteen different Local Government Areas with various combinations of urban, semi-urban and very rural populations.

Traditionally, traditional, top-down administrations of these regions have been based on

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bureaucratic systems of administration which do not take into consideration the finer socio-economic distinctions between regions of the state. Nevertheless, the modern trends towards civic enlightenment and digital government have sparked a new civil society drive towards open governments. There is growing political pressure on a grassroots basis through community associations and grassroots networks among towns such as Ilorin, Offa, and Omu-Aran to be included in the municipality budget and project allocation table. Even with the emergent civic ambitions, there has been long-term structural weaknesses in the institutional setting of local governments within Kwara State. The financial capacity of local government has long been historically stifled by the burden of structural dependence upon the State-Local Government Joint Account (JAAC) which now leaves them as administrative satellites of the state executive, not independent democratic centers. Therefore, the participation of the citizenry can only be comprehended through assessing not only the civic goodwill, but also the institutional capacity of the local state apparatus to accommodate, process and implement community inputs. This paper disaggregates such relations by examining the contemporary frontiers and channels in the definition of civic engagement in the local government system in Kwara.

Problem Statement

The major issue that has afflicted the local government in Kwara State is that there is an extreme lack of connection between the theoretical components of the community inclusion and the actual implementation of the municipal decisions. Although the general tune behind local government reforms is the focus on the empowerment of the grassroots, the nature of operations is in the top-down administrative system in which the local elites as well as the state-level mindset determine how something ought to be developed. This omission leads to a chronic imbalance in distributing of societal resources where community projects worth multimillion of naira will remain unfinished due to their failure to respond to need that are experienced at a certain moment, by the host communities. In addition, arranged systems of regular citizen participation are not only non-existent, but also diminished to a facade operation. Where they exist, town hall meetings, and public budget hearings are often merely figurative rubber-stamping exercises as opposed to genuine deliberative decision-making forums. This structural inability of citizens to check local administrators has spawned an endemic culture of corruption, fiscal abacus and cynicism of the wider population with municipal administrators. Proceeding resultant alienation translates to a gross lack of trust by the populace that directly affect the collection of revenue at the local level since they are not ready to pay rates and taxes to institutions that close them off. More so, there are groups of marginalized demographics, i.e. youth, rural women and peasant farmers who experience homogeneous layers of both socio-economic and structural marginalization by the local decision making organs. The institutional designs have tended to give prominence to elite and traditional patriarchal designs at the expense of screening the voices of the most vulnerable groups among which depend largely on the grassroots public services. Unless strict empirical studies as to the failure of these participatory models are done, the local governments in Kwara State risk the loss of all democratic legitimacy. The study handles this fundamental void by systematically determining the legal, structural and cultural limitations that face genuine civic co-governance.

Research Objectives/Questions

The primary objective of this study is to critically evaluate the nature, extent, and systemic determinants of citizens' participation in local government decision-making processes across Kwara State. Specifically, the study seeks to map the existing institutional channels available for civic engagement and determine the frequency and quality of public involvement in local budgetary formulations. Additionally, it aims to uncover the deep-rooted legislative, financial, and administrative constraints that inhibit local governments from executing citizen-driven developmental priorities. By investigating these dynamics, the study intends to provide actionable, data-driven frameworks for reforming grassroots administration.

To achieve these institutional objectives, this research paper is guided by the following core questions:

- What formal and informal structures currently exist for citizen engagement within

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Kwara State's local governments, and how effective are they in capturing public inputs?

- To what extent does the historical lack of fiscal and administrative autonomy among Kwara's local governments limit their capacity to respond to citizen demands?
- What distinct structural barriers prevent marginalized demographics, such as youth and rural communities, from influencing municipal planning and resource distribution?

This paper can be viewed as providing a clear empirical connection between the theory of public administration and the social-political realities of North-Central Nigeria by attempting to answer these questions. Its final aim is to shed light on how institutional restructuring can transform passive civic consultation into active, binding co-governance. This question is crucial to the policymakers, civil societies, and development agencies in the international communities to resuscitate sub-national democratic governance within the West African sub-region.

Literature Review

Key Theories and Previous Studies

The conceptual basis of the study is based on the groundbreaking study by Sherry Arnstein on the Ladder of Citizen Participation, dividing the different modes of participation by levels of participation that begin with non-participation, leading to tokenism and finally, the real citizen power. When extended to the subnational administrative environment in Nigeria, this framework reveals how the majority of civic engagement practices in the nation are bound in their respective ways to the Informing or Consultation levels. Past research in West Africa attest to the fact that in the absence of legal transfer of decision making powers and budg*et al*location to members of the communities, the public hearings as an exercise serve as a mere eye-wash. This relationship is well manifested in local government bodies where executives have the ability to do as they please with the resources and make any input by citizens essentially useless. The recent empirical literature pays direct attention to the structural limitations to subnational governance in North-Central Nigeria. Researchers such as Muhammed (2025) observe that structural dependency has rendered the historical performance of the local governments in general, and the Ifelodun LGA to be heavily crippled, leaving little space to allow community-based development of the rural areas. This is also exacerbated by the writing of Danjuma (2025) and Salahu and Ogunsola (2025), who show that decentralization in Nigeria ends up both sending a load of administrative burden down without any financial resources or local legislative capacity transfer.

As a result, the third level of government functions as a bureaucratic salaried clearance area as opposed to a free ground of local planning as dictated by the community. Moreover, there have been more narrowly-focused interventions as well, such as School-Based Management Committees (SBMCs) or Community and Social Development Projects (CSDP) funded by donors. Pagarani (2022) cautions that the global trend in promoting frameworks such as SBMCs in Kwara State tends to cause isomorphic mimicry- a phenomenon in which institutions borrow the external appearance of contemporary participatory governance but totally lacks the internal capabilities or even political desire to alter the dynamics of real decision-making. However, reports by Yusuf, Adekunmi and Ayanda (2020) and Etim (2025) discover that structural community placed directly in the hands of funds comes out the strongest when it comes to project sustainability as is the case with certain CSDP modules. Herein lies an evident conflict between the community initiatives supported by donor funding and the old-fashioned, immensely politicized local government management.

Methodology

Research Design

This paper will be a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design where both types of data can be collected and analyzed at the same time. Such a dual method is important because having statistical trends based on survey questionnaires is richly contextualized by the story, based on lived experiences of community stakeholders gained through qualitative interviews. The triangulation of these different streams of data allows the study to remove the structural biases of any of the administrative assessment methods. Quantitative phase is the measure of the general attitudes of civic awareness, participation rate and institutional trust and

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the qualitative phase is the measurement of the micro-political obstacles, elite capture, and institutional resistance that takes place within the city halls. The study area is geographically situated in the three different Senatorial Districts of Kwara State (Kwara Central, Kwara North and Kwara South) in order to have representative social-economic and cultural coverage.

A purposive sampling was done of six Local Government Areas, namely Ilorin West and Asa (an urbanized, semi-urbanized Central that represents Central), Edu and Kaiama (an agrarian, geographically expansive North that represents North), and Ifelodun and Offa (representing the socio-economically active South). This purposeful spatial pattern enables the research to consider the differences in the local government capacity, local civic education, infrastructural shortage, and local political culture distinctions across the state. The population targeting this study is the adult community resident aged 18 years and above, community leaders, career bureaucrats in the local governments, elected or appointed council administrators and leaders of civic society organisations (CSOs). The quantitative survey was sampled with 600 respondents who were sampled through a multi-stage stratified random sampling method. Under the qualitative aspect, 24 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and 6 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)- one per sampled LGA-were undertaken. This sampling matrix means that the voices of the marginal groups, like market women associations and the youth groups are infused into the framework so that they can be properly incorporated with the voices of formal administrative elites.

Data Collection and Analysis

The quantitative data collection was implemented by administering a structured, closed ended questionnaire, called, Citizen Participation and Local Governance Questionnaire (CPLGQ). The questionnaire was broken into thematic sections which traced demographic data, degree of awareness about what the local councils do, how often one visits the town hall, and whether one feels fiscal transparency. The questionnaire was coded in local language (Yoruba, Nupe, and Bariba) and delivered using digital data collection tools (mobile, mobile based) by trained research assistants to get good reliability in the field. The simultaneous collection of qualitative data was carried out based on semi-structured interview guides, which aimed at investigating the institutional bottlenecks and the effects of the JAAC on project implementation and examples of civic exclusion. The thought process of this study divides based on the type of the data streams and an integrated discussion is arrived at. The statistical package of mathematical computer hardware known as Statistical Package of the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to clean, code and analyze quantitative data to incorporate descriptive statistics, frequency distributions, percentages as well as mean scores to give structural trends. Transcripts of qualitative audio tapes in the KIIs and FGDs were coded word-to-word, translated into English where applicable and coded undergoingly to a thematic analysis of NVivo. This was achieved through open coding, axial coding and identification of similar structural themes which were used to contextualize and elucidate the statistical patterns apparent in the quantitative tables. Ethics The entire field research process was strictly adhered to in terms of ethics. Ethical clearance by institutions was taken before field deployment which formal administrative permissions which were taken after the respective secretariats of the Local Government Councils. All respondents to the survey and participants in the interviews expressed informed consent in writing or orally (with clear guarantees of their anonymity and confidentiality), and clearly expressed that they participated in the survey or the interview on a voluntary basis. The data integrity is kept high with a pre-test (pilot study) in an unselected LGA which identified semantic ambiguities and calibrated the structural layout of field questions.

Findings/Results

The empirical results of this research show that there is a wide discrepancy between citizens willing to engage in the governance process and the existing institutional channels they can pursue in the local governments in Kwara State. The quantitative information shows that communities are highly motivated to develop in civic terms, but they are crippled in practicalities due to the administrative obscurity.

Below are the structured data tables reflecting the core empirical insights gathered during the field research.

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Table 4.1.1: Citizen Attendance and Frequency of Engagement in Local Government Town Halls

Frequency of Attendance	Male Respondents (%)	Female Respondents (%)	Total Sample Percentage (%)
Never Attended	42.1%	68.3%	55.2%
Rarely (Once a Year)	35.4%	22.1%	28.7%
Occasionally (Quarterly)	16.5%	7.4%	12.0%
Regularly (Monthly/Special Invitation)	6.0%	2.2%	4.1%
Total	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

Source: Field Survey Data, 2026; adapted from frameworks utilized in Ilesanmi (2025) and Adebayo (2023).

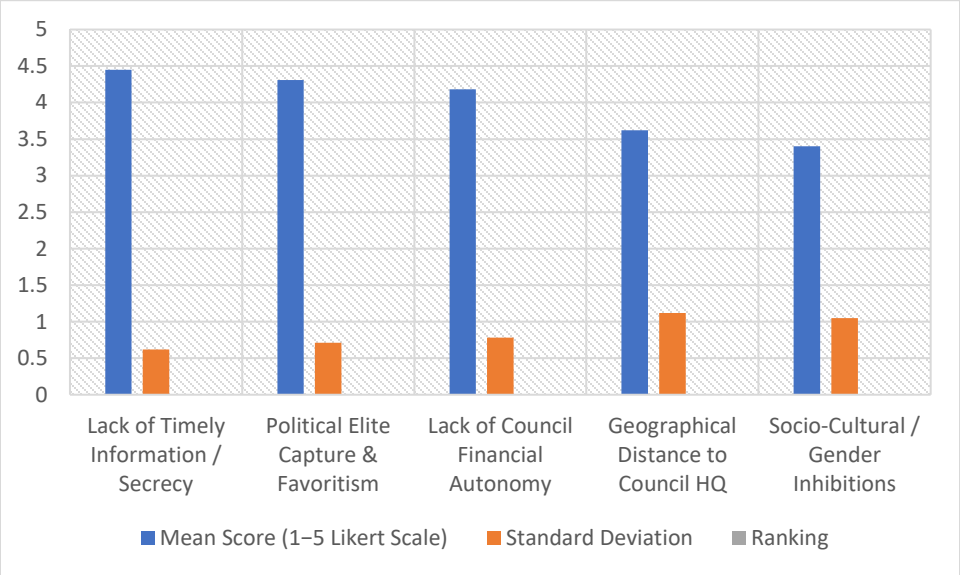
The table of data presented in table 4.1.1 shows quite clearly that there is a severe shortage of regular public interaction with a large 55.2% of the entire sample population never attending a single local government town hall meeting or budget consultation forum. There is sharp and clear gender difference in this exclusion; 68.3% of respondents of female gender show complete non-attendance as compared to 42.1% of their male counterparts. This habit highlights the ongoing patriarchal structure of classic governance spaces within Kwara State in which invitations to the public and socio-political experiences usually pass through them to the community head of men and traditional elites. Moreover, the proportion of those who consistently attend their local government councils has remained low at a fringe 4.1%, and this means that grass root governance has been rather an elite activity. Focus groups have provided qualitative information about how information about town halls is not often communicated beyond localized political party offices. As a result, the mass majority of common citizens will have no idea whatsoever when, where developmental decisions are being made, which places local administration even further out of context of the purpose of their establishment, as the idea of grassroots democracy.

Table 4.1.2: Perceived Obstacles to Effective Public Participation in Council Planning

Core Perceived Constraints	Mean Score (1−5 Likert Scale)	Standard Deviation	Ranking
Lack of Timely Information / Secrecy	4.45	0.62	1st
Political Elite Capture & Favoritism	4.31	0.71	2nd

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Lack of Council Financial Autonomy	4.18	0.78	3rd
Geographical Distance to Council HQ	3.62	1.12	4th
Socio-Cultural / Gender Inhibitions	3.40	1.05	5th



Source: Field Survey Data, 2026; constructed using metrics validated by Badiora (2021) and Momoh & Imokhai (2025).

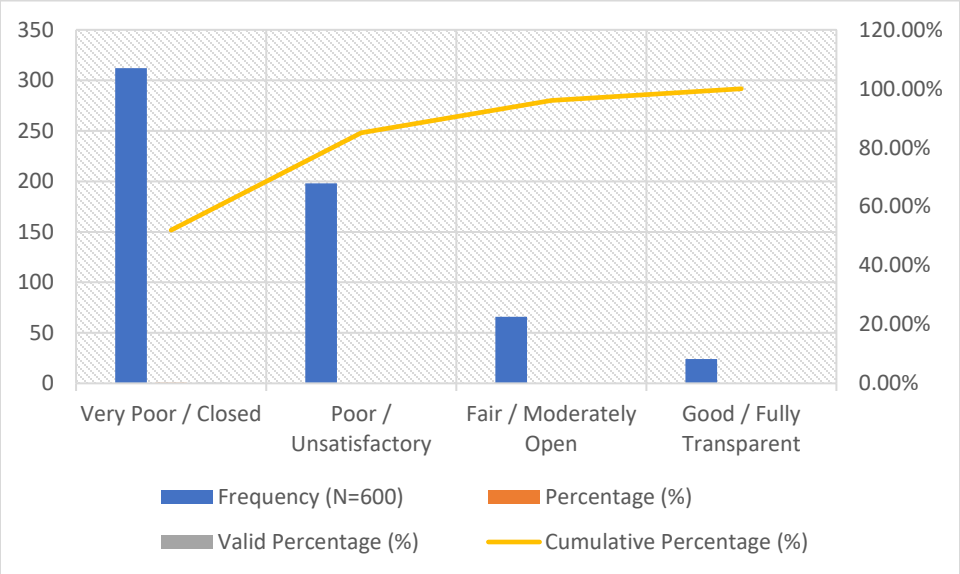
Table 4.1.2 ranks the primary institutional and structural constraints that prevent citizens from participating effectively in local governance decisions. The highest-ranked barrier is the "Lack of Timely Information / Secrecy" with a mean score of 4.45, closely followed by "Political Elite Capture & Favoritism" at 4.31. This statistical breakdown indicates that local government units operate within an entrenched culture of administrative opacity, treating public budgetary data as confidential political materials rather than instruments of public accountability.

The high ranking of "Lack of Council Financial Autonomy" (4.18) reveals an interesting dimension: citizens are acutely aware that their local governments lack the real power to execute projects. Interviewed civil servants and community leaders noted that because the state executive controls the financial strings via joint accounts, citizen inputs during local budget hearings become performative exercises. Since the local councils lack the funds to execute citizen demands, communities naturally pull back from participating in what they perceive as an exercise in futility.

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Table 4.1.3: Assessment of Fiscal Transparency and Project Tracking in Sampled LGAs

Rating of Fiscal Transparency	Frequency (N=600)	Percentage (%)	Valid Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Very Poor / Closed	312	52.0%	52.0%	52.0%
Poor / Unsatisfactory	198	33.0%	33.0%	85.0%
Fair / Moderately Open	66	11.0%	11.0%	96.0%
Good / Fully Transparent	24	4.0%	4.0%	100.0%
Total	**600**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**



Source: Field Survey Data, 2026; modeled after fiscal transparency indicators found in Akinleye & Yunus (2025) and Lawal (2025).

The empirical data summarized in Table 4.1.3 illustrates the public's perception regarding fiscal openness and project tracking within Kwara State's local governance architecture. An overwhelming majority of 85.0% of the respondents rate the fiscal transparency of their local government councils as either "Very Poor" (52.0%) or "Poor" (33.0%). This widespread public dissatisfaction highlights a deep systemic failure in the implementation of open

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contracting and accessible public accounting standards at the subnational level. Conversely, a nominal 4.0% of the surveyed population views their councils as fully transparent, which correlates with isolated donor-funded community projects where strict disclosure is mandatory. This baseline statistical trend signals a severe crisis of accountability. When local financial records, budg*et al*locations, and execution files remain heavily locked away from public view, it strips communities of their capacity to trace corruption, track projects, or demand fair resource distribution across their respective wards.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

The empirical findings of this research develop a vivid image of local governance in Kwara State, which fits well in theoretical cautions of cosmetic decentralization. The non-attendance rates recorded in town halls with municipal status in Table 4.1.1 is not necessarily an indicator of civic indifference; instead, it is an institutional structure that is oriented towards creating obstacles to entry favorably. This trend confirms the arguments that Ilesanmi (2025) and Mohammed (2025) present, who underline that without the real possibility of local councils being reduced to top-down bureaucratic machines, which provide no real channel of binding civic responses, the idea of community engagement cannot really take place. The massive marginalization of women is also a cautionary note on the urgent necessity to break the mainstream of traditional patriarchal control through legal requirement of demographic quotas within the municipal consultative assemblies. Moreover, a discussion of the best obstacles listed in Table 4.1.2 reveals that structural administrative secrecy leads directly into cynicism in the populace. Where local governments are shrouded in darkness, the citizens do not regard their local government as the unifying force of local development, instead, they look at them as instruments of enriching the elite. This fact has been substantially reinforced by Badiora (2021) and Akinleye and Yunus (2025), which highlight that people being excluded of land-use planning and fiscal allocations are the direct results of a culture of secrecy in the administration. Also, there is the absence of financial autonomy of local government, which is a structural problem.

So long as state executives continue to have in their hands real control over municipal budgets, local budget defense meetings will not be a real aspect of governance but the performance of theater. Lastly, the all-over negative score of fiscal transparency presented in Table 4.1.3 highlights inadequacy of the third level of government in adopting modern procurement reforms in the country. This invisibility gives the grounds of isomorphic mimicry when it comes to school committees as mentioned by Pagarani (2022) in the context of Kwara. Local governments use shallow terminologies of transparency that are required by donors in the international stage, but ensure that their real financial accounts remain inaccessible to local citizens. To break this loop, it is necessary to change voluntary disclosures to a legally established open-budget framework. The subnational institutions can only be transformed into transparent and responsive machinery to sustainable rural development by empowering communities to provide them with direct mechanisms to monitor the progress of the project.

Conclusion

Summary

This paper has critically analyzed the structural, financial and institutional environment that surrounds citizen involvement in the decision making procedure of local government in Kwara state. The empirical data show that regardless of the high levels of civic readiness to participate in the process of municipal planning, there is a drastically low level of public participation which is structurally marginalized and excluded. Top-down bureaucratic models, institutional secrecy and elite capture characterize the operational reality of local administration in the sampled LGAs. These aspects are in combination to drive the common citizens to the extreme periphery of power particularly women, the youth and the rural population. Moreover, the study points at the fact that the crippling lack of local fiscal autonomy, produced by the state level control over joint accounts, essentially castrates administrative capacity of municipal councils.

The local governments have long since since their town hall meetings have been a dead form of show-production since they serve only as payment

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centers of staff, but not as an independent developmental centre. Although the records provided by donor-based systems and single communities development associations provide grounds that the direct financial control granted to the intended communities has extremely sustainable project results, the arrangements are unique, but not the norm in the Kwara public administration system. Lastly, the absence of transparency in budget implementation and tracking of the project undertakings has destroyed this trust between the local state and the citizens. This loss of popularity in government is not only disabling the democratic right to subnational institutions, but it is also paralysing inside collection and revenue, generating a vicious cycle of dependency and administrative corruption. This is one trend that needs to be reversed by going beyond superficial reforms. Effective change will require an overhaul of local decision making and its formatting, funding and implementation, which requires a thorough legal basis.

Recommendations

Based on the empirical and qualitative insights generated in this study, the following actionable recommendations are proposed:

- **Enforce Absolute Fiscal and Administrative Autonomy:** The federal and state legislatures must fully implement and protect the Supreme Court's mandate on local government financial autonomy. This ensures that statutory allocations bypass the State-Local Government Joint Account (JAAC) and flow directly to council coffers, empowering local governments with the actual financial capacity to execute citizen-prioritized projects.
- **Legally Mandate Open-Budget Town Halls:** Kwara State should enact a Local Government Open Governance Law that strictly compels every municipal council to hold open, binding public budget consultations. These forums must be widely publicized across rural media channels at least 30 days in advance, with legally binding quotas that guarantee the active inclusion of women, youth, and marginalized community groups.
- **Deploy Digital Fiscal Transparency Portals:** Every Local Government Council secretariat must establish an open-access digital tracking portal where monthly financial allocations, local tax revenues, public procurement contracts, and line-by-line project expenditures are uploaded in simple, non-technical formats. This structural tool will empower civil society organizations and host communities to monitor project execution in real-time, effectively dismantling elite capture.

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