



Conflict management strategies and their impact on service delivery in the Nigerian local government system: An analysis of Thomas-Kilmann model

Madumelu H. C. Madubueze

Department of Public Administration, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus, Anambra State, Nigeria

Correspondence: Madumelu H. C. Madubueze, Department of Public Administration, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus, Anambra State, Nigeria. Email: mh.madubueze@coou.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

The Nigerian local government system serves as the third tier of governance, tasked with delivering essential services such as primary education, healthcare, sanitation, rural infrastructure, and community development to grassroots populations. However, persistent conflicts, arising from political interference, resource allocation disputes, and interpersonal rivalries among officials, labor disagreements, and community tensions, often undermine administrative efficiency and hinder effective service delivery. This study examines prevalent conflict management strategies in the Nigerian local government system, including avoidance, diffusion, accommodation, compromise, collaboration, and confrontation/competition, drawing on theoretical frameworks like Thomas-Kilmann's conflict model and empirical insights from local government operations. Using a qualitative analysis of secondary sources, case studies, and literature on public administration in Nigeria, the research assesses how these strategies influence service provision outcomes. Findings indicate that collaborative and compromise-oriented approaches tend to foster better inter-departmental cooperation, reduce disruptions, and enhance timely project execution, thereby positively impacting service delivery quality and citizen satisfaction. In contrast, avoidance and confrontational strategies frequently prolong disputes, lead to bureaucratic gridlock, resource wastage, and deteriorated public services, exacerbating issues like poor infrastructure maintenance and delayed salary payments. The study concludes that adopting proactive, integrative conflict management practices, supported by training, institutional mechanisms, and reduced political meddling, is essential for improving administrative harmony and service delivery in Nigerian local governments. Recommendations include capacity building for officials in conflict resolution, establishment of formal mediation structures, and policy reforms to promote transparency and accountability.

Keywords: Conflict Management Strategies, Service Delivery, Nigerian Local Government, Public Administration, Conflict Resolution

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Madubueze, M. H. C. (2026). Conflict management strategies and their impact on service delivery in the Nigerian local government system: An analysis of the Thomas-Kilmann model. *African Journal of Management and Administration*, 1(1), 83-100. <https://www.afjma.org>

1. Introduction

Local governments occupy a central position in democratic governance because they provide the institutional link between governments and citizens. Their constitutional responsibilities extend beyond administrative functions to the provision of essential public services that directly influence the quality of life within local communities. In Nigeria, local governments are expected to deliver primary healthcare, basic education, environmental sanitation, rural roads, water supply, agricultural extension services, and other community development initiatives. Their proximity to citizens places them in a strategic position to identify local needs, facilitate citizen participation, and implement development programmes that reflect grassroots priorities. Despite these constitutional responsibilities, public perception of local government performance remains largely unfavourable due to persistent deficiencies in service delivery across many parts of the country. Recent analyses continue to associate these shortcomings with weak institutional

capacity, limited fiscal autonomy, political interference, poor accountability, and administrative inefficiencies. (Tunde, Adeyemo, Marumo, 2024).

We argue that the effectiveness of local government administration depends not only on financial resources and institutional arrangements but also on the quality of relationships among elected officials, career administrators, labour unions, community leaders, traditional institutions, and citizens. These relationships frequently generate disagreements arising from divergent political interests, competition for scarce resources, administrative authority, employment conditions, policy implementation, and community expectations. Conflict therefore represents an inherent feature of public administration rather than an exceptional occurrence. When appropriately managed, conflict can stimulate innovation, encourage constructive dialogue, improve decision-making, and strengthen institutional performance. When poorly managed, it often results in prolonged disputes, low employee morale, delayed project implementation, fragmented organisational relationships, and declining public confidence in government institutions (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2021; Oreg & Berson, 2021).

Within the Nigerian local government system, conflicts emerge from several interconnected sources. Political office holders frequently disagree over policy priorities, allocation of statutory funds, recruitment decisions, and project implementation. Administrative conflicts arise from unclear reporting relationships, overlapping responsibilities, communication failures, and perceived inequities in organisational processes. Labour-related conflicts often involve remuneration, promotion procedures, working conditions, and welfare issues. Local governments also experience external conflicts involving community associations, traditional rulers, civil society organisations, contractors, and youth groups regarding project location, resource distribution, and development priorities. These multiple dimensions of conflict create organisational environments that directly influence the efficiency and effectiveness of public service delivery. (Akindoyin, 2024)

Evidence from contemporary public administration research increasingly demonstrates that organisational performance is strongly influenced by the manner in which workplace conflicts are managed rather than by the mere existence of conflict itself. Collaborative approaches encourage information sharing, trust building, and collective problem-solving, while confrontational approaches often intensify organisational divisions and reduce employee commitment. Similar patterns have been reported across public sector organisations where participatory conflict resolution practices improve organisational effectiveness, employee engagement, and service quality (Mikkelsen et al., 2020; Oreg & Berson, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2023). These findings suggest that conflict management should be viewed as an important component of institutional performance rather than solely as a human resource function.

One of the most widely recognised frameworks for analysing organisational conflict management is the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Model developed by Thomas and Kilmann. The model categorises conflict-handling behaviour into five distinct styles, competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating, based on varying degrees of assertiveness and cooperativeness. Although the framework has been extensively applied in organisational behaviour, healthcare management, education, and business administration, its application within studies of Nigerian local government administration remains limited. Existing studies on local government performance largely focus on decentralisation, fiscal autonomy, corruption, accountability, and governance reforms, while relatively few investigations examine how different conflict management styles shape administrative effectiveness and public service outcomes. This gap is significant because organisational interactions among political leaders, administrators, employees, and community stakeholders frequently determine whether development programmes are implemented successfully or become stalled by persistent disagreements.

Recent governance reforms have renewed attention on strengthening local government autonomy and institutional effectiveness in Nigeria. The ongoing discourse surrounding fiscal decentralisation, constitutional reforms, accountability mechanisms, and administrative restructuring has reinforced the need

to examine internal organisational factors that affect service delivery. Although institutional reforms may provide structural improvements, their effectiveness depends substantially on the ability of public officials to manage interpersonal, departmental, political, and community conflicts constructively. Administrative systems characterised by unresolved disputes often experience delayed decision-making, duplication of responsibilities, reduced staff motivation, and inefficient utilisation of scarce public resources. In contrast, organisations that institutionalise collaborative conflict resolution mechanisms are generally better positioned to achieve timely implementation of development programmes and improved citizen satisfaction. (Tunde, Adeyemo, Marumo, 2024)

The growing emphasis on good governance has also expanded the understanding of service delivery beyond the provision of physical infrastructure. Contemporary public administration literature increasingly conceptualises service delivery in terms of responsiveness, accessibility, accountability, transparency, equity, efficiency, and citizen satisfaction. These dimensions depend heavily on organisational coordination and effective communication among public officials. Where conflicts remain unresolved, coordination weakens, organisational trust deteriorates, and public services become inconsistent. Consequently, conflict management should be regarded as a strategic governance function capable of influencing institutional performance and development outcomes.

Against this background, this study examines conflict management strategies and their implications for service delivery in the Nigerian local government system through the analytical lens of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Model. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasise financial constraints, political interference, or decentralisation reforms, this article focuses on organisational conflict behaviour as a determinant of administrative performance. Drawing on contemporary literature published between 2020 and 2026, the study synthesises evidence from public administration, organisational behaviour, governance, and conflict management scholarship to evaluate how different conflict management styles influence service delivery outcomes within local government institutions.

The article seeks to answer three research questions:

What are the dominant sources of conflict within the Nigerian local government system?

How do the five Thomas-Kilmann conflict management styles influence organisational effectiveness and service delivery?

Which conflict management approaches are most appropriate for improving administrative performance and citizen-oriented service delivery in Nigerian local governments?

2. Literature review: Conceptual and Theoretical Foundation

2.1 Conflict in Public Sector Organisations

Conflict is an unavoidable feature of organisational life because individuals and groups often pursue different objectives, compete for limited resources, and interpret institutional responsibilities from different perspectives. Within public organisations, conflict assumes greater significance because administrative decisions affect not only employees but also the quality of services delivered to citizens. Contemporary public administration scholarship increasingly recognises that conflict is not inherently dysfunctional; rather, its consequences depend on how it is managed. Constructively managed conflict encourages critical thinking, innovation, organisational learning, and improved decision-making, while unresolved conflict weakens cooperation, reduces employee commitment, and disrupts institutional performance (Einarsen et al., 2020; Gelfand et al., 2024).

The public sector presents unique conditions that distinguish organisational conflict from that experienced in private organisations. Public institutions operate within legal and political frameworks that require balancing competing interests, maintaining accountability, and responding to changing public expectations.

Civil servants are expected to implement government policies while remaining politically neutral, whereas elected officials often pursue political objectives that may differ from administrative priorities. These competing responsibilities create conditions under which disagreements concerning authority, resource allocation, policy implementation, personnel management, and accountability become inevitable (Andersen, 2025).

Within local governments, organisational conflict extends beyond interpersonal disagreements. It includes interdepartmental competition, political-administrative tensions, labour-management disputes, conflicts between local authorities and community stakeholders, and disagreements arising from budgetary allocations and project implementation. Such conflicts influence the efficiency of administrative processes because they shape communication patterns, employee motivation, institutional trust, and organisational commitment. Public administration studies increasingly argue that organisational effectiveness depends less on eliminating conflict than on developing institutional mechanisms capable of transforming disagreement into constructive engagement (Okafor, 2023).

Conflict within Nigerian local governments is influenced by institutional, political, economic, and socio-cultural factors. The country's decentralised governance structure places local governments at the intersection of federal, state, and community interests. This institutional arrangement often produces overlapping authority, competing political interests, and administrative ambiguity. Fiscal dependence on state governments, political interference in personnel administration, weak accountability systems, and competing community demands further increase the likelihood of organisational conflict. Recent assessments of Nigerian local government administration continue to identify political interference, inadequate institutional autonomy, corruption, and bureaucratic inefficiencies as major constraints affecting organisational performance and service delivery (Tunde, Adeyemo, Marumo, 2024).

Recent developments in governance research have also shifted attention from conflict resolution toward conflict management. Resolution implies the complete elimination of disagreement, whereas management recognises conflict as a recurring organisational phenomenon requiring continuous regulation. This perspective is particularly relevant within democratic institutions where diverse interests cannot realistically be eliminated. Instead, effective governance depends on institutional arrangements that encourage dialogue, negotiation, mutual respect, and collaborative decision-making while maintaining organisational accountability.

2.2 Conflict Management Strategies

Conflict management refers to the deliberate processes through which individuals and organisations regulate disagreements to minimise dysfunctional consequences while promoting constructive organisational outcomes. It involves selecting behavioural responses that preserve working relationships, facilitate communication, and support organisational objectives. Contemporary organisational research suggests that conflict management is not simply a reactive administrative activity but an important leadership competency that influences organisational climate, employee wellbeing, innovation, and institutional performance (Ayoko & Caputo, 2021).

Different conflict situations require different management approaches. Highly structured organisational disputes may require formal negotiation, whereas interpersonal disagreements may benefit from mediation or collaborative problem-solving. Public sector managers therefore need behavioural flexibility that enables them to adapt conflict management strategies to the circumstances surrounding each dispute. Studies conducted across public organisations consistently demonstrate that collaborative approaches generate higher levels of employee satisfaction, organisational commitment, knowledge sharing, and service quality than authoritarian or avoidance-oriented approaches (Babalola et al., 2022; Gelfand et al., 2024).

Conflict management strategies commonly discussed within organisational behaviour literature include avoidance, accommodation, compromise, competition, collaboration, mediation, negotiation, arbitration,

and integrative problem-solving. Although these strategies share the objective of reducing organisational disruption, they differ considerably in their emphasis on assertiveness, cooperation, participation, and long-term relationship building. The effectiveness of each strategy therefore depends upon organisational context, leadership style, institutional culture, and the complexity of the underlying conflict.

Within public administration, collaborative approaches have received increasing scholarly attention because they encourage stakeholder participation and strengthen institutional legitimacy. Collaborative conflict management promotes joint problem identification, collective decision-making, transparency, and shared responsibility for implementation. Such practices are particularly important in local governments where service delivery requires continuous interaction among elected officials, professional administrators, employees, community organisations, and citizens. Research increasingly indicates that collaborative governance contributes to stronger institutional trust, improved coordination, and more responsive public services (Andersen, 2025).(DOI)

By contrast, avoidance and competitive approaches often provide only temporary relief from organisational disagreements. Avoidance suppresses communication without addressing the underlying causes of conflict, allowing tensions to accumulate over time. Competitive approaches may produce immediate administrative decisions but frequently damage interpersonal trust, reduce cooperation, and generate long-term organisational resistance. These outcomes are particularly problematic in public organisations where sustained cooperation among multiple stakeholders is essential for effective policy implementation.

2.3 Service Delivery in Nigerian Local Government Administration

Service delivery represents one of the principal indicators of government effectiveness. Within local government administration, it encompasses the planning, provision, and maintenance of essential public services intended to improve community welfare. These services include primary healthcare, primary education, environmental sanitation, rural infrastructure, water supply, agricultural extension, markets, waste management, and local economic development. Effective service delivery requires administrative efficiency, financial accountability, institutional coordination, and sustained interaction between government institutions and citizens.

Contemporary public administration literature increasingly conceptualises service delivery beyond the provision of physical infrastructure. Quality public service now incorporates responsiveness, transparency, accessibility, equity, reliability, citizen participation, and accountability. These dimensions reflect the broader transition from traditional bureaucratic administration toward citizen-centred governance, where public institutions are evaluated according to both service outcomes and citizen experiences (Okafor, 2023). (Journals)

Despite constitutional recognition as the third tier of government, Nigerian local governments continue to experience persistent challenges in delivering these responsibilities effectively. Several studies attribute poor performance to institutional dependence on state governments, inadequate fiscal autonomy, political interference, corruption, administrative fragmentation, limited professional capacity, and weak performance monitoring systems. These challenges reduce institutional responsiveness and weaken public confidence in local government administration (Tunde, Adeyemo, Marumo, 2024).

An important but relatively underexplored dimension of service delivery concerns organisational relationships within local government institutions. Administrative effectiveness depends heavily on cooperation among political office holders, permanent officials, technical personnel, labour unions, and community stakeholders. Where organisational conflicts remain unresolved, communication deteriorates, employee morale declines, project implementation slows, and institutional resources are diverted from developmental priorities toward conflict management. Consequently, conflict management constitutes an important organisational determinant of service delivery that deserves greater scholarly attention.

3. The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Model and Its Relevance to Nigerian Local Government Administration

3.1 The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Model

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Model (TKI) remains one of the most influential behavioural frameworks for understanding how individuals respond to organisational conflict. Developed by Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann, the model conceptualises conflict-handling behaviour along two behavioural dimensions: assertiveness, which reflects the degree to which an individual attempts to satisfy personal concerns, and cooperativeness, which reflects the degree to which an individual attempts to satisfy the concerns of others. The interaction of these dimensions produces five distinct conflict management styles: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. The model assumes that no single style is universally effective; rather, the appropriateness of each style depends on the nature of the conflict, organisational context, power relationships, and the desired outcomes. See Figure 1 below;

Fig 1: Illustration of the Thomas-Kilmann conflict model

Unlike normative theories that prescribe one preferred method of resolving disputes, the Thomas-Kilmann model recognises that conflict is situational. Managers are therefore expected to demonstrate behavioural flexibility by selecting the conflict management style most appropriate to the circumstances they face. This perspective has contributed to the model's widespread application in organisational behaviour, leadership, healthcare management, education, project management, and public administration. Recent developments have also extended the framework from analysing individual behaviour to assessing how organisational systems shape collective conflict management practices. (De Gruyter Brill)

The relevance of the Thomas-Kilmann model to public administration lies in its recognition that organisational effectiveness depends not on eliminating conflict but on managing it constructively. Public organisations operate in environments characterised by competing stakeholder interests, statutory obligations, political pressures, and limited resources. Consequently, administrators frequently encounter situations requiring negotiation, collaboration, compromise, or decisive action. The model provides an analytical lens through which these behavioural responses can be examined and related to organisational performance (Mossanen, Johnston, Green, & Joyner, 2014).

Within Nigerian local government administration, where political office holders, career administrators, labour unions, traditional institutions, contractors, and community organisations interact continuously, the Thomas-Kilmann framework offers a practical means of understanding how different conflict management behaviours influence institutional harmony and service delivery. Rather than viewing conflict solely as an administrative challenge, the model positions conflict management as a strategic leadership competency capable of improving organisational effectiveness.

3.2 Competing (Confrontation)

The competing style represents high assertiveness and low cooperativeness. Individuals adopting this approach pursue their objectives with limited consideration for opposing viewpoints. Decisions are often enforced through formal authority, organisational hierarchy, legal provisions, or political influence. This style is appropriate where immediate decisions are necessary, where legal compliance cannot be compromised, or where organisational integrity must be protected.

In Nigerian local governments, competing behaviour commonly appears during budget allocations, disciplinary proceedings, implementation of statutory directives, and political disagreements between elected officials and administrative personnel. Local government chairpersons may insist on implementing development projects despite resistance from departmental heads, while senior administrators may enforce financial regulations that conflict with political expectations.

Although competing may facilitate rapid decision-making, its prolonged use can generate organisational resistance, reduce employee participation, and weaken interpersonal trust. Employees excluded from decision-making often become less committed to implementation, while departments may develop

adversarial relationships that reduce organisational coordination. Public administration literature consistently suggests that excessive reliance on authority-based conflict management weakens organisational learning and limits opportunities for collaborative governance.

3.3 Collaborating

Collaboration combines high assertiveness with high cooperativeness. Rather than pursuing individual interests independently, parties work collectively to identify solutions that satisfy the interests of all stakeholders. This approach encourages open communication, joint problem-solving, mutual respect, and long-term relationship building. It seeks not merely to settle disagreements but to improve organisational understanding and strengthen future cooperation. (Praxis Framework)

Among the five conflict management styles, collaboration is generally regarded as the most suitable for complex organisational problems where maintaining long-term relationships is important. Local governments operate through interdependent departments whose effectiveness depends upon continuous coordination. Development planning, revenue generation, project implementation, public health programmes, environmental sanitation, and community mobilisation all require cooperation among multiple administrative units.

Within Nigerian local governments, collaborative conflict management may involve consultation between political office holders and career administrators before major policy decisions are implemented. It may also involve engagement with labour unions during salary negotiations or consultations with traditional rulers and community development associations before locating public infrastructure projects.

Collaboration strengthens organisational trust because stakeholders perceive their interests as being recognised throughout decision-making processes. Increased trust promotes information sharing, improves employee commitment, and reduces implementation delays. These organisational benefits directly contribute to improved service delivery through better coordination, greater accountability, and more responsive governance.

3.4 Compromising

Compromise represents an intermediate position characterised by moderate assertiveness and moderate cooperativeness. Each party relinquishes part of its demands to reach an acceptable solution within a reasonable period. Unlike collaboration, compromise does not necessarily maximise satisfaction for all participants; instead, it seeks practical agreements that prevent prolonged disputes and allow organisational activities to continue. (Praxis Framework)

Compromise is particularly relevant where conflicting parties possess relatively equal bargaining power or where immediate organisational decisions are required. Local government administrations frequently encounter such situations during departmental budget negotiations, staff deployment, committee assignments, procurement decisions, and allocation of community development projects.

Because compromise reduces negotiation time, it contributes to administrative continuity and prevents disputes from escalating into organisational crises. However, repeated reliance on compromise may leave important underlying issues unresolved if concessions merely postpone rather than address the root causes of conflict. Managers should therefore distinguish between situations requiring temporary settlements and those requiring comprehensive collaborative solutions.

3.5 Avoiding

Avoidance reflects low assertiveness and low cooperativeness. Individuals neither pursue their own interests nor actively assist others in resolving disagreements. Conflict is postponed, ignored, or transferred to another authority. Although avoidance is often criticised as passive behaviour, the Thomas-Kilmann

model recognises that it may be appropriate where additional information is required, where emotions are excessively high, or where the issue has limited organisational significance. (Praxis Framework)

Within Nigerian local government administration, avoidance frequently manifests through delayed disciplinary procedures, postponed policy implementation, reluctance to address interpersonal disputes, or failure to respond promptly to labour grievances. Administrative leaders may also avoid politically sensitive decisions because of concerns regarding political repercussions or community resistance.

Persistent avoidance often creates larger organisational problems than those originally confronted. Unresolved disputes gradually erode organisational trust, reduce employee morale, increase workplace tension, and delay implementation of public programmes. Citizens eventually experience these organisational weaknesses through slower service delivery, abandoned projects, administrative inefficiency, and declining confidence in local government institutions.

3.6 Accommodating

Accommodation combines low assertiveness with high cooperativeness. Individuals adopting this approach willingly sacrifice personal interests to preserve harmonious relationships or maintain organisational stability. Accommodation is particularly appropriate where maintaining long-term relationships is more valuable than achieving immediate individual objectives. (Praxis Framework)

Within local government administration, accommodation may occur when senior administrators accept modifications proposed by elected officials to preserve political stability or when departments voluntarily adjust budget priorities to support broader institutional objectives. Community leaders may also accept revised project implementation schedules to maintain constructive relationships with local authorities.

While accommodation promotes goodwill and reduces interpersonal tension, excessive accommodation may encourage unequal power relationships, suppress legitimate concerns, and reduce organisational innovation. Employees who consistently sacrifice their interests may become disengaged if they perceive organisational processes as unfair. Effective leaders therefore balance accommodation with opportunities for open dialogue and equitable participation.

3.7 The Thomas-Kilmann Model as an Analytical Framework for Service Delivery

The principal contribution of the Thomas-Kilmann model (see figure 2 below) to this study lies in its ability to explain how behavioural responses to organisational conflict influence administrative effectiveness and public service delivery. Each conflict management style affects communication, employee motivation, institutional trust, stakeholder participation, and decision-making differently. Consequently, the quality of conflict management shapes organisational outcomes that extend beyond interpersonal relationships.

From the perspective of service delivery, collaborative and compromise-oriented approaches are expected to strengthen interdepartmental coordination, facilitate stakeholder participation, improve implementation efficiency, and increase citizen satisfaction. Competing behaviour may improve compliance where urgent administrative action is required, but excessive dependence on authority can reduce employee commitment and weaken institutional trust. Avoidance frequently postpones organisational decisions and contributes to implementation delays, while accommodation supports relationship maintenance but may limit innovation if used indiscriminately.

The Thomas-Kilmann model therefore provides an appropriate theoretical framework for analysing conflict management within Nigerian local governments because it connects individual managerial behaviour with broader organisational performance. The framework enables this study to examine not only how conflicts arise but also how different conflict management styles influence the effectiveness, responsiveness, and quality of public service delivery. It also offers a practical foundation for developing evidence-based recommendations aimed at strengthening governance, improving administrative coordination, and enhancing citizen-centred service provision. See figure 2 below;

Fig 2: Illustration of Thomas-Kilmann analytical framework

4. Thematic/Content Analyses: Conflict Management Strategies and Service Delivery

Conflict management has become an important area of inquiry in public administration because organisational relationships influence the effectiveness of governance institutions. Although conflict is inevitable in public organisations, the strategies adopted by managers determine whether disagreements become opportunities for organisational learning or obstacles to institutional performance. Studies across public organisations consistently show that conflict management influences employee commitment, communication, organisational trust, leadership effectiveness, innovation, and service quality. Within local governments, these outcomes directly affect the capacity of institutions to deliver services efficiently and respond to citizens' expectations.

Most empirical studies examine conflict management from organisational or human resource management perspectives without explicitly connecting conflict-handling behaviours to service delivery outcomes. Research on Nigerian local government administration has largely concentrated on fiscal autonomy, political interference, corruption, and accountability, decentralisation, and governance reforms. Comparatively fewer studies have examined how managerial responses to conflict shape administrative efficiency and public service delivery. This section addresses that gap by synthesising existing evidence through the five conflict management styles proposed in the Thomas-Kilmann model.

4.1 Collaborative Conflict Management and Service Delivery

Among the five Thomas-Kilmann conflict management styles, collaboration has received the strongest empirical support as an effective approach to organisational conflict. The central assumption underlying collaboration is that conflicts should not be viewed as contests with winners and losers but as opportunities for collective problem-solving. Through open communication, information sharing, mutual respect, and joint decision-making, collaborating parties seek solutions that satisfy both organisational objectives and stakeholder interests.

Research across public organisations consistently associates collaborative conflict management with higher organisational effectiveness. Employees working within collaborative environments generally report greater job satisfaction, stronger organisational commitment, improved communication, and increased trust in leadership. These organisational outcomes contribute directly to institutional performance because employees become more willing to share knowledge, coordinate activities, and support organisational goals.

Within local government administration, collaboration extends beyond relationships among employees. It also involves interaction between political office holders, career administrators, labour unions, traditional institutions, civil society organisations, contractors, and community members. Public service delivery depends on effective coordination among these diverse stakeholders. Infrastructure projects, public health programmes, environmental sanitation campaigns, and community development initiatives require continuous consultation and cooperation throughout planning and implementation.

Several governance studies suggest that collaborative governance improves policy implementation by encouraging stakeholder participation during decision-making. When citizens and community organisations contribute to planning processes, projects are more likely to reflect local priorities, experience fewer implementation disputes, and receive stronger community support. This relationship becomes particularly important in Nigerian local governments, where community acceptance frequently determines the success or failure of development projects.

Collaborative conflict management also improves organisational learning. Departments that communicate openly are better positioned to exchange information, coordinate scarce resources, and respond to emerging challenges. These characteristics are particularly valuable within local governments that often operate under

severe financial and administrative constraints. Rather than relying solely on hierarchical authority, collaborative leadership encourages shared responsibility for institutional performance.

Despite these advantages, collaboration is not without limitations. Effective collaboration requires trust, competent leadership, transparent communication, and sufficient time for stakeholder engagement. Where political competition is intense or institutional trust is weak, collaborative processes may become slow and difficult to sustain. Collaboration therefore produces the greatest benefits when supported by strong institutional structures and leadership committed to participatory governance.

4.2 Compromise as a Strategy for Administrative Stability

Compromise occupies an intermediate position within the Thomas-Kilmann model because neither party achieves complete satisfaction. Instead, each side relinquishes part of its demands to facilitate organisational continuity.

The literature generally presents compromise as a pragmatic conflict management strategy suitable for public organisations operating under significant resource constraints. Local governments frequently encounter situations where competing demands exceed available financial or administrative capacity. Budget allocations, staff deployment, infrastructure prioritisation, and procurement decisions often require negotiated settlements rather than ideal solutions.

Evidence suggests that compromise contributes positively to administrative stability because it reduces prolonged disputes and enables organisations to continue functioning despite competing interests. Unlike confrontation, compromise encourages mutual concessions that preserve working relationships while preventing conflict escalation.

Within Nigerian local governments, compromise may occur during negotiations between political office holders and career administrators over project implementation priorities or between labour unions and management during discussions concerning employee welfare. Although neither party obtains all desired outcomes, the resulting agreements often prevent service interruptions and maintain institutional stability.

The principal limitation of compromise lies in its tendency to address immediate organisational needs rather than underlying structural problems. Repeated compromise may conceal deeper governance challenges relating to resource allocation, political interference, or administrative accountability. Consequently, compromise should be viewed as an important short-term conflict management strategy rather than a permanent substitute for institutional reform.

4.3 Competition and Administrative Authority

The competing style reflects organisational behaviour driven primarily by authority, power, and institutional control. Public administration inevitably requires situations where managers make decisive decisions despite opposition. Regulatory enforcement, financial accountability, anti-corruption measures, disciplinary procedures, and emergency responses often require assertive leadership.

Several organisational studies recognise that competition contributes positively to institutional effectiveness when rapid decision-making is essential. Delayed administrative action may create greater organisational damage than decisive leadership. Consequently, public managers cannot rely exclusively on collaborative approaches under every circumstance.

Within Nigerian local government administration, competing behaviour frequently emerges during implementation of statutory financial regulations, disciplinary procedures involving misconduct, enforcement of environmental sanitation laws, and responses to public emergencies. Administrative leaders often face pressure to balance political expectations with legal responsibilities, creating situations where authoritative decisions become unavoidable.

Problems arise when competition becomes the dominant organisational culture. Excessive reliance on authority discourages employee participation, reduces communication, weakens trust, and increases organisational resistance. Employees excluded from important decisions frequently demonstrate lower commitment during implementation. Community stakeholders may also perceive authoritative governance as lacking transparency and accountability.

Research increasingly suggests that effective public managers combine decisive leadership with opportunities for subsequent consultation. Competition therefore becomes most effective when used selectively rather than routinely.

4.4 Avoidance and Organisational Inefficiency

Avoidance remains one of the most debated conflict management strategies within organisational behaviour literature. Traditional management perspectives often classify avoidance as ineffective because it postpones rather than resolves conflict. Contemporary scholarship presents a more nuanced position by recognising that temporary avoidance may allow emotions to subside or permit additional information to become available before negotiations begin.

Within local government administration, avoidance commonly manifests through delayed decision-making, postponed disciplinary proceedings, unresolved employee grievances, deferred procurement decisions, and reluctance to address politically sensitive issues.

The literature indicates that persistent avoidance has serious implications for organisational performance. Unresolved disagreements gradually accumulate, creating distrust among employees and reducing cooperation between departments. Administrative delays become more frequent because managers devote increasing attention to managing interpersonal tensions instead of organisational objectives.

For citizens, these internal organisational problems become visible through poor service delivery. Delayed infrastructure projects, inconsistent waste collection, inadequate maintenance of public facilities, prolonged salary disputes, and reduced responsiveness to community complaints often reflect underlying organisational conflicts that have remained unresolved.

Several studies on African public administration similarly suggest that avoidance contributes to bureaucratic inertia. Organisations characterised by conflict avoidance frequently demonstrate lower innovation, weaker accountability, and slower implementation of development programmes.

4.5 Accommodation and Relationship Preservation

Accommodation receives comparatively less attention within public administration research despite its importance in maintaining organisational relationships. The strategy prioritises harmony over individual interests, making it particularly relevant within public organisations where long-term cooperation among stakeholders remains essential.

Accommodation contributes positively by reducing interpersonal hostility, preserving institutional relationships, and facilitating continued collaboration. Local government administrators often employ accommodation when negotiating with traditional institutions, community leaders, labour unions, or political office holders whose continued cooperation is essential for successful policy implementation.

However, excessive accommodation presents significant organisational risks. Administrators who consistently avoid defending legitimate institutional interests may unintentionally encourage perceptions of unfairness, reduce accountability, and weaken administrative authority. Employees whose concerns receive little attention may also experience declining motivation and organisational commitment.

The literature therefore suggests that accommodation should complement rather than replace other conflict management strategies. Effective public managers demonstrate behavioural flexibility by accommodating less critical issues while adopting more collaborative approaches for complex organisational problems.

4.8 Research Gap

Although conflict management has received considerable scholarly attention, several important gaps remain.

Most studies examine organisational conflict from human resource management or organisational psychology perspectives without connecting conflict management styles directly to public service delivery. Research focusing specifically on local government administration also tends to emphasise fiscal decentralisation, governance reforms, accountability, or political interference while giving comparatively limited attention to conflict management as an organisational determinant of institutional performance.

Few studies have systematically applied the Thomas-Kilmann framework to analyse conflict management within Nigerian local governments. Existing research often identifies conflict as a governance challenge but provides limited explanation of how different conflict-handling styles influence administrative efficiency, project implementation, citizen satisfaction, and organisational effectiveness.

This study addresses these gaps by integrating organisational conflict theory with public administration literature and examining service delivery through the behavioural lens provided by the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Model. In doing so, it extends the application of the model beyond interpersonal workplace relationships to the broader governance context of Nigerian local government administration.

5. Discussion on findings

The evidence synthesised in this study demonstrates that conflict management constitutes an important organisational determinant of service delivery within Nigerian local governments. While previous studies have largely attributed poor local government performance to structural challenges such as inadequate fiscal autonomy, political interference, corruption, and weak institutional capacity, the reviewed literature indicates that managerial responses to organisational conflict significantly influence how these structural constraints affect administrative performance. This observation broadens the understanding of local government effectiveness by highlighting conflict management as a behavioural and organisational factor that shapes institutional outcomes.

The analysis further shows that the consequences of conflict depend less on the existence of disagreement than on the approaches adopted to manage it. Conflict is an inevitable feature of public administration because government institutions bring together individuals and groups with different responsibilities, interests, professional backgrounds, and political affiliations. Local governments occupy a particularly complex position because they operate at the interface between elected officials, career civil servants, labour unions, traditional institutions, civil society organisations, and citizens. Interactions among these stakeholders naturally generate competing expectations concerning policy priorities, resource allocation, project implementation, personnel management, and accountability. Under such conditions, eliminating conflict is neither realistic nor desirable. The critical issue is whether organisational leaders possess the capacity to transform disagreement into constructive administrative engagement.

Applying the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Model provides valuable insight into these organisational dynamics. The findings suggest that conflict management styles characterised by high levels of cooperation produce more favourable service delivery outcomes than styles that depend primarily on authority or conflict avoidance. Collaborative conflict management emerged as the most consistently associated with improved organisational performance because it promotes communication, shared decision-making, trust, and collective ownership of organisational objectives. These characteristics strengthen coordination among departments and encourage greater commitment to implementing public programmes. Within Nigerian local governments, where service delivery frequently requires cooperation across administrative units and engagement with external stakeholders, collaboration appears particularly relevant for improving institutional effectiveness.

The review also indicates that compromise represents an important mechanism for maintaining administrative continuity. Local governments often operate under severe financial and political constraints that make ideal solutions difficult to achieve. Negotiated settlements therefore enable organisations to continue functioning despite competing interests. Compromise was found to reduce organisational disruptions by encouraging mutual concessions and preventing prolonged disputes that could delay public projects or interrupt essential services. Although compromise may not address the underlying causes of organisational conflict, it contributes to operational stability and creates opportunities for more comprehensive institutional reforms.

By contrast, avoidance was consistently associated with adverse organisational outcomes. Delaying conflict resolution may appear to preserve organisational harmony in the short term, yet unresolved disputes frequently intensify over time and undermine institutional performance. Administrative indecision, delayed implementation of development projects, prolonged employee grievances, and weak communication reduce organisational efficiency and ultimately affect citizens through poor service delivery. These findings reinforce the argument that unresolved organisational tensions should not be regarded as neutral administrative conditions. Instead, they represent latent risks capable of weakening governance performance if ignored.

The competing conflict management style presents a more nuanced picture. The literature recognises that public administrators occasionally require decisive action to ensure compliance with statutory regulations, financial accountability, and organisational discipline. Situations involving misconduct, public emergencies, or legal obligations may necessitate authoritative decision-making. The review therefore does not suggest that competition is inherently ineffective. Rather, it indicates that excessive reliance on hierarchical authority reduces employee participation, weakens trust, and limits opportunities for collaborative problem-solving. Organisations characterised by persistent authoritarian leadership may experience lower organisational commitment and reduced willingness among employees to contribute innovative solutions. Effective public administration therefore requires balancing decisive leadership with participatory governance.

Accommodation likewise demonstrates both strengths and limitations. Preserving harmonious relationships is important within public institutions where long-term cooperation among political office holders, administrators, labour unions, and community stakeholders remains essential. Accommodation can reduce interpersonal tension and maintain constructive working relationships. However, repeated accommodation without addressing substantive organisational concerns may create perceptions of inequity and discourage accountability. Public managers must therefore distinguish between situations where preserving relationships justifies accommodation and situations where organisational integrity requires more assertive engagement.

A notable contribution of this review lies in demonstrating that conflict management influences service delivery through several interconnected organisational mechanisms rather than through direct administrative action alone. Conflict management affects communication quality, employee motivation, organisational trust, stakeholder participation, decision-making efficiency, and interdepartmental coordination. Improvements in these organisational processes subsequently enhance project implementation, administrative responsiveness, and citizen satisfaction. Poor conflict management follows the opposite trajectory by reducing cooperation, increasing delays, weakening institutional confidence, and diminishing the quality of public services. This process perspective extends existing discussions of local government performance beyond traditional explanations centred exclusively on financial or political variables.

The findings also suggest that institutional reforms alone may be insufficient to improve service delivery if behavioural and organisational dimensions of governance receive limited attention. Recent debates concerning local government autonomy in Nigeria have primarily focused on constitutional reforms, fiscal decentralisation, and financial independence. While these reforms remain important, improved institutional

autonomy does not automatically produce better governance outcomes. Administrative effectiveness depends equally on the capacity of organisational leaders to manage conflict constructively, foster collaboration, and maintain productive relationships among diverse stakeholders. Financial resources and institutional authority produce meaningful improvements only when organisational environments support cooperation and effective implementation.

This observation has broader implications for contemporary public administration theory. Traditional bureaucratic models often emphasise formal organisational structures, hierarchical authority, and procedural compliance as determinants of administrative effectiveness. Emerging governance perspectives increasingly recognise that organisational relationships, leadership behaviour, and collaborative governance significantly influence institutional performance. The findings of this study support this shift by demonstrating that behavioural approaches to conflict management complement structural reforms in strengthening public sector effectiveness. Rather than viewing conflict management as merely a human resource function, it should be recognised as a strategic governance capability that contributes directly to organisational performance and public value creation.

The application of the Thomas-Kilmann model to Nigerian local government administration also extends the theoretical relevance of the framework. Although the model has been widely applied in organisational psychology, business management, education, and healthcare, its application within African public administration remains comparatively limited. This study demonstrates that the framework provides a useful analytical lens for understanding how managerial behaviour influences governance outcomes in decentralised public institutions. By connecting individual conflict management styles with organisational effectiveness and service delivery, the study expands the application of the Thomas-Kilmann model beyond interpersonal workplace relationships to the broader institutional environment of democratic local governance.

From a practical perspective, the findings underscore the need to strengthen conflict management capacity within Nigerian local governments. Leadership development programmes should move beyond conventional administrative training to include negotiation, mediation, collaborative leadership, emotional intelligence, stakeholder engagement, and communication skills. Such competencies are increasingly important because contemporary public administration requires managers capable of coordinating diverse interests while maintaining institutional accountability. Building these competencies would contribute not only to improved workplace relationships but also to more efficient implementation of development programmes and enhanced citizen confidence in local government institutions.

Finally, the review highlights several directions for future research. Empirical studies should investigate how specific conflict management styles influence measurable indicators of service delivery such as project completion rates, employee productivity, citizen satisfaction, budget implementation, and organisational responsiveness. Comparative studies involving different geopolitical zones or local government categories would also provide valuable insight into contextual variations in conflict management practices. Mixed-method and longitudinal research designs could further clarify the causal relationships between conflict management behaviours and governance outcomes, thereby strengthening the evidence base available to policymakers and practitioners.

6. Recommendations

The findings of this study demonstrate that improving service delivery in Nigerian local governments requires more than institutional restructuring or increased financial allocations. Organisational effectiveness also depends on the ability of political leaders, administrators, and other stakeholders to manage conflict constructively. The following recommendations are therefore proposed.

6.1 Institutionalise Conflict Management Systems

Local governments should establish formal conflict management mechanisms that operate independently of routine administrative procedures. Such mechanisms may include mediation committees, conflict resolution units, grievance redress systems, and structured dialogue platforms involving political office holders, career administrators, labour representatives, and community stakeholders. Formalising these mechanisms would reduce reliance on informal interventions and ensure that disputes are addressed promptly before they disrupt administrative activities or public service delivery.

6.2 Strengthen Leadership Capacity in Conflict Management

Conflict management should become an integral component of leadership development within the local government service. Existing management training programmes should incorporate negotiation, mediation, collaborative decision-making, emotional intelligence, stakeholder engagement, communication, and consensus-building. Public administrators who possess these competencies are more likely to transform organisational disagreements into opportunities for institutional improvement rather than allowing conflicts to undermine organisational performance.

6.3 Promote Collaborative Governance

The evidence reviewed indicates that collaborative conflict management contributes more positively to service delivery than confrontational or avoidance-oriented approaches. Local governments should therefore strengthen participatory governance by encouraging regular consultations with community development associations, traditional institutions, civil society organisations, professional groups, youth organisations, women's associations, and labour unions during policy formulation, project planning, budgeting, and implementation. Inclusive decision-making enhances public trust, reduces resistance to government programmes, and improves ownership of development initiatives.

6.4 Develop Organisational Policies on Conflict Management

Many local governments rely heavily on the personal experiences of administrative leaders when responding to organisational conflicts. This often produces inconsistent decisions and varying administrative outcomes. Local government service commissions, in collaboration with relevant ministries, should develop standard conflict management policies and operational guidelines that define reporting procedures, mediation processes, dispute resolution timelines, and responsibilities of key administrative actors. Standardised procedures would improve fairness, transparency, and institutional accountability.

6.5 Improve Internal Communication and Coordination

Many organisational conflicts originate from poor communication, overlapping responsibilities, unclear reporting relationships, and inadequate information sharing. Local governments should establish structured communication channels that facilitate regular interaction among political office holders, departmental heads, technical personnel, and administrative staff. Periodic interdepartmental meetings, joint planning sessions, and digital communication platforms would strengthen coordination and minimise misunderstandings that frequently generate organisational conflict.

6.6 Reduce Political Interference in Administrative Processes

Political interference continues to influence personnel management, resource allocation, procurement decisions, and project implementation within many Nigerian local governments. Administrative decisions should be guided by established legal and institutional procedures rather than partisan interests. Strengthening the professional independence of career administrators while maintaining democratic accountability would reduce unnecessary organisational tensions and improve the efficiency of service delivery.

6.7 Integrate Conflict Management into Performance Evaluation

Conflict management should be recognised as a core managerial competency within the local government service. Performance appraisal systems for senior administrators and departmental heads should include measurable indicators relating to leadership, stakeholder engagement, dispute resolution, teamwork, and collaborative decision-making. Incorporating these competencies into performance evaluation would encourage proactive management of organisational relationships and reinforce a culture of cooperation.

6.8 Encourage Evidence-Based Policy and Continuous Learning

Local governments should collaborate with universities, research institutes, public administration training institutions, and professional associations to generate evidence on conflict management practices and service delivery performance. Routine organisational assessments, employee perception surveys, citizen feedback mechanisms, and periodic policy reviews would provide valuable information for improving administrative practices. Institutional learning should become an ongoing process rather than an occasional response to organisational crises.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between conflict management strategies and service delivery in the Nigerian local government system through the analytical perspective of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Model. Using a qualitative review of the literature, the study explored how different conflict management styles influence organisational effectiveness and the capacity of local governments to deliver essential public services.

It demonstrates that conflict is an inherent feature of public administration because local government institutions operate within environments characterised by diverse interests, political competition, administrative complexity, resource constraints, and continuous interaction among multiple stakeholders. The presence of conflict should therefore not be interpreted as evidence of institutional failure. Rather, the effectiveness of local government administration depends largely on how organisational leaders respond to disagreements and competing interests.

The analysis indicates that collaborative and compromise-oriented conflict management approaches are more consistently associated with positive organisational outcomes than avoidance or excessive reliance on competitive strategies. Collaborative approaches strengthen communication, interdepartmental coordination, stakeholder participation, organisational trust, and employee commitment, thereby creating conditions that support efficient project implementation and improved service delivery. Compromise contributes to administrative continuity by preventing prolonged disputes, particularly where competing interests require negotiated settlements. In contrast, persistent avoidance delays organisational decisions, weakens institutional relationships, and contributes to declining service quality, while excessive competition may undermine employee engagement and collaborative governance if authority is exercised without adequate consultation.

An important contribution of this study is the demonstration that conflict management constitutes an organisational capability that shapes governance outcomes through its influence on communication, leadership, organisational trust, coordination, and stakeholder engagement. These organisational processes determine how effectively available financial, human, and institutional resources are translated into public services. Consequently, improving service delivery requires attention not only to structural reforms such as fiscal decentralisation and institutional autonomy but also to the behavioural competencies that enable public administrators to manage conflict constructively.

The study also extends the application of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Model to the context of Nigerian local government administration. Although the model has been widely applied in organisational behaviour and management research, its integration into studies of public sector governance at the grassroots level has received comparatively limited attention. By linking conflict management styles with

service delivery outcomes, the study provides a conceptual framework that broadens understanding of organisational performance within decentralised governance systems.

The findings have practical implications for policymakers, local government administrators, training institutions, and public sector reform agencies. Strengthening conflict management capacity through leadership development, institutionalising mediation mechanisms, promoting collaborative governance, improving organisational communication, and reducing political interference would enhance administrative effectiveness and contribute to more responsive and citizen-centred local governance.

The study is not without limitations. As a literature-based analysis, its conclusions are derived from published evidence rather than primary empirical data collected from Nigerian local governments. Variations in institutional contexts, administrative practices, and governance structures may therefore influence the extent to which the findings apply across all local government areas. Future studies should complement this review with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method investigations that examine the relationship between conflict management styles and measurable service delivery outcomes across different geopolitical zones in Nigeria.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a comprehensive synthesis of current knowledge on conflict management and public service delivery within local government administration. It establishes that effective conflict management should be recognized as an integral component of public sector governance and an important determinant of organisational performance. Strengthening collaborative conflict management practices offers a practical pathway for improving administrative effectiveness, enhancing citizen satisfaction, and advancing sustainable grassroots development within the Nigerian local government system.

References

- Andersen, L. B. (2025). Public service motivation and public administration: Recent developments and future directions. *Public Administration*. Advance online publication.
- Ayoko, O. B., Callan, V. J., & Härtel, C. E. J. (2021). Workplace conflict, bullying, and counterproductive behaviors. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 32(4), 573-595.
- Brett, J. M., Weingart, L. R., & Olekalns, M. (2021). Managing conflict to improve effectiveness: A transactional perspective. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 8, 89-113.
- De Dreu, C. K. W., & Gelfand, M. J. (Eds.). (2022). *The psychology of conflict and conflict management in organizations* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Gelfand, M. J., Leslie, L. M., Keller, K., & De Dreu, C. K. W. (2024). Conflict management in organizations: New directions for research and practice. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*.
- Greer, L. L., & Jehn, K. A. (2020). The pivotal role of negative affect in understanding the effects of process conflict on group performance. *Small Group Research*, 51(4), 551-587.
- Kilmann, R. H., & Thomas, K. W. (1974). Four perspectives on conflict management: An attributional framework for organizing descriptive and normative theory. *Academy of Management Review*, 3(1), 59-68.
- Kim, J. H. (2026). Managing value conflicts through formal and informal institutions: A longitudinal case study in local government service reform. *Public Administration Review*. Advance online publication.
- Mossanen M, Johnston SS, Green J, & Joyner BD. A practical approach to conflict management for program directors. *J Grad Med Educ*. DOI: 10.4300/JGME-D-14-00175.1. PMID: 24949146; PMCID: PMC4054741.

O'Neill, T. A., Allen, N. J., & Hastings, S. E. (2022). Conflict management in teams: The role of emotional intelligence and communication. *Group & Organization Management*, 47(1), 3-35.

Sun, R., Peng, S., & Liao, Y. (2023). Avoiding, obliging, asserting, or integrating? A survey experiment on municipal managers' choice of conflict management strategies. *Public Management Review*, 25(3), 477-500.

Thomas, K. W. (1976). Conflict and conflict management. In M. D. Dunnette (Ed.), *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology* (pp. 889-935). Rand McNally.

Thomas, K. W., & Kilmann, R. H. (1974). Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument. Xicom.

AFRICAN JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION (AFJMA)

Volume 1, Issue 1, 2026, Peer-reviewed, Open access

www.afjma.org, support@afjma.org

Authors retain copyright. Articles are published under CC BY 4.0.