

Local Government as an Agent of Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

The role of local government as an agent of development cannot be overemphasized. For the local people who the local government institutions serve directly as well as for the nation at large, local government can catalyze development a great deal. However, the development role of the local government has been stifled by Nigerian political leaders of the democratic fourth republic. The governors and houses of assembly, for instance, have failed to allow local governments operate as an independent tier of government as envisioned by the country's constitution. This paper is an attempt to highlight the enormous potentials of the Nigerian local government to catalyze development within the context of the united nation's sustainable development goals agenda, if properly structured and operated. The study is built around the democratic – participatory theory of local government. The information gathered from documentary sources are analyzed descriptively to suggest that a reform of the Nigerian local government system as well as amendment of aspects of the constitution relating to local government are necessary to revitalize the Nigerian local government system.

Keywords: Constitutional amendment, Development, Local government reform, Nigerian local government system, Political participation, Rural development.

Introduction

Local government is the closest tier of government to the people, vested with certain administrative and executive powers to control the resources and affairs of the people within its domain. Constitutionally, local government represents the third tier of governmental organization in Nigeria. Frequently, the term 'grassroots' is employed as this has the advantage of graphically describing the location of this governmental arrangement. Accordingly, local government should be the focus of government's effort at promoting development. It becomes obvious, therefore, that to effectively develop, the people must be adequately mobilized to ensure a purposeful combination of the people's effort with that of government to improve their socio-economic condition and encourage political participation.

The local government institution is deeply rooted in the law as it derives its existence and powers from the constitution. Section 7(1) of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) states that "a system of local government by a democratically elected local government council is under this constitution guaranteed". Local government is then

defined as a political authority which is purposefully created by law or constitution for local communities by which they manage their local public affairs within the law/constitution (Ogunna, 2007). Okoli (2005) defines local government as a unit of government established by act of law to administer the functions of government and see to the welfare and interests of the local dwellers under the local government system.

Ezeani (2006) posits that local government is generally seen as a veritable agent of development and grassroots participation in the democratic process. Laski (1982) also opined that we cannot realize the full benefit of democratic government unless we begin by the admission that the problems are not the central problems and that the results of problems not central in their incidence require decisions at the place and by persons where and by whom the incidence is most deeply felt. Hence, the problems of rural dwellers differ and are to be tackled on the basis of their peculiarities.

Accordingly, the colonial administration, in 1916, enacted the Native Authority Ordinance to establish the first formal Nigerian local government system. Since then, much effort had gone into the reform and restructuring of the Nigerian local government system to position it properly for the purpose of making the local people in both rural and urban local governments feel the impact of the development activities of the government in such areas as social services delivery as well as amenities and infrastructure. This reform effort culminated in the enactment of the 1976 Local Government Reform on the basis of which the modern Nigerian local government system is established.

Looking back, one tends to believe that the local government institution in Nigeria was more significant and relevant to the lives and development experience of local people during the era of military dictatorship than the current democratic era. This ironical situation is what this paper set out to interrogate.

Conceptual Clarifications

Local government: According to Akpan (1982), the essence of local government is the breaking down of a country into smaller units or localities for the purpose of administration in which the inhabitants play a direct and full part through their elected representatives who exercise power and undertake functions under the general authority of the national government. It is defined as government by popularly elected bodies charged with administrative and executive duties in matters concerning the inhabitants of a particular district or place (Appadorai, 1975).

Local government can also be defined as that tier of government, closest to the people, which is vested with certain powers to exercise control over the affairs of people in its domain (Lawal, 2000). A local government is a government at the grassroots level of administration meant for meeting peculiar grassroots need of the people (Agagu, 1997). From the definitions above, it is obvious that the local government institution is a legal entity, being established by the constitution. It is also a function of decentralization, a subordinate level of government that statutorily provide certain limited range of services while mobilizing local material and human resources for the improvement of living conditions of the local population.. Local government, therefore, is an administrative agency through which control and authority relates to the people at the grassroots.

Development: The word development has several synonyms including advancement, progress, improvement, growth, modification, change for the better, etc. It would mean increase in the quantity of goods and services available to people and thereby the quality of their lives, or social and material advancement which enables people to gain greater control of their environment. However, Abah (2007) identified the relevant dimensions of development as follows: the utilitarian or consumatory dimension which connotes increase in the quantity of useable items available to people in a society; the behavioural or relational dimension which defines the nature of the relationship among people in a society and among societies; and the institutional or structural dimension which defines the institutional and legal framework that circumscribes people's behaviours and streamlines their relationships while they individually and collectively seek to gain greater access to material things of value in the society. The implication is that for a people to be considered as developed, they must have increased access to material things of value that will improve their standard of living. Those would include more money as well as better education, housing, nutrition, medical care infrastructure, and other good things of life that will add value to their lives. However, as people seek greater access to these items which other people in the same environment also need, the manner of their relationship (civility) with their fellow human beings matters and this is essentially defined by the form of government and legal system within which they operate.

Sustainable development: The concept of sustainable development was defined by the Brundtland Report titled 'Our Common Future' (WCED, 1987) as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." The fundamental objective of the concept outlined in the document is to provide basic human needs to all (home, food, water, clothing, etc.) with a tendency to improve living standards as well as to achieve the aspiration of a better life.... The theory respects current state of humanity such as negative consequences of continuous environmental destruction and pollution, and poverty and hunger in the Third World countries (Tomislav, 2018).

Rural development: According to the United Nations (1977), rural development is a process of socio-economic change involving the transformation of agrarian society in order to reach a common set of development goals based on the capacities and needs of the people. It is a broad-based reorganization and mobilization of the rural masses so as to enhance their capacity to cope effectively with the daily tasks of their lives and with changes consequent upon this. It is the improvement of the living standards of the low-income population living in the rural areas on a self-sustaining basis through the transformation of the socio-spatial structures of their productive activities. The implication is that there must be a programme of activities directed at increasing the efficiency of the rural population such that rural energy is released; output, quality of life and productivity are enhanced; education and sanitation are promoted while unwanted and unwarranted change must be reduced or eliminated.

The object of rural development is to promote the social, cultural, educational and economic well-being of the rural population and to promote sustained and orderly development of the resources in the rural area for the benefit of the rural people. It also includes increase in and diversification of job opportunities and improvement of incomes

in the rural area as well as mobilization of the rural population for self-help and self-sustaining programme of development. Whether in the process of providing quality primary healthcare services, education, agricultural extension services, security or whatever that will improve the quality of lives of the rural people, the government, particularly the local government would be at the forefront of these pursuits.

Political participation: According to Uhlener (2015), political participation refers to voluntary activities undertaken by the mass public to influence public policy, either directly or by affecting the selection of persons who make policies. Examples of these activities include voting in elections, helping a political campaign, donating money to a candidate or cause, contacting officials, petitioning, protesting and working with other people on issues. Substantial cross-national data show that wealthier and better educated people participate at higher rates than the less advantaged, although this relationship is weaker in countries where strong parties or other political organisations provide alternative resources. People also often transfer to political activity skills which they acquire in other organization.

Theoretical Framework

This study is built around the democratic-participatory theory of local government. The theory is championed by Anglo-American scholars such as Keith Lucas (1954) and William Mackenzie (1961), and further developed by Robert Dahl (1971). To these proponents, the essence of local government is to expand democracy and to afford the citizens the opportunity for active political participation. The theory assumes that the local government institution exists basically for the purpose of bringing about democracy and self-government based on fair play, tolerance and mutual respect for the rights and interests of one another. It also makes for effective political socialization of the citizens and encourages local initiative and leadership. Local governments also serve as a training ground for higher roles in national politics and inculcates the habits of democracy such as participation, mobilization, accountability and responsiveness to the preferences of the people as well as self-governability. It is believed that true democracy will bring about good governance and enthronement of due process, the absence of which will lead to negative outcomes like corruption, lack of accountability and responsiveness to the interests of the governed.

Local government also provides a two-way channel of communication between the central government and people at the grassroots and thereby makes the policies and programmes of the central government meaningful to the local communities. According to Mill (1975), one of the major protagonists of this theory, there are certain concerns or interests which only a section of the community has in common and it is convenient as well as advisable that only those who share this community of interests should administer them. Also, to Bryman (1986) and Gary (1996), many people are involved in the decision-making process as the local government opens up discussions, for other participants to voice opinion, suggestions and concerns. Most importantly, it keeps everyone in the loop, it gives every citizen a sense of belonging, increases morale and it can help one learn more about his/her community. Hence, Lucas (1954) opined that the pedagogic value of local government is that participation in the local government teaches the participant the art of

weighing and choosing between competing claims and justifying the choice as a just one, while Mackenzie (1961) regards local government as a training ground for national politicians as much as first-hand knowledge which makes administration concrete and relevant to a locality can be more easily and, perhaps, cheaply made available to local and central authorities.

Finally, according to Ezeani (2004), the proponents of this theory also argue that the local government is superior to other levels of government since it is only at the level of the municipality that the individual can really participate in his own government. Hence, the local government institution serves as a political educator and a means of civilizing men through the medium of self-government. It is also a training ground for democracy and an essential element for establishing a stable and harmonious national state - a breeder of better societies. It is within the context of these theoretical postulations that we examined the role of the Nigerian local government in development.

The Role of the Nigerian Local Government in Development

The essence of local government is to make the provision of governmental and development services and activities responsive to local wishes and initiatives. Local government is therefore expected to promote the democratic ideals of a society and co-ordinate development programmes of the central government at the local level. The roles of the local government are in some ways similar to those of the central government. The central government exists to ensure the security of lives and property of citizens, to provide for development services as well as to ensure the participation of the citizens in the government of their society.

The local government also performs such roles though with some varying degrees of intensity. No wonder then the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria from 1979 provided a long list of functions for local governments, including the following: (a) The consideration and making of recommendations to the state commission on economic planning or any similar body on the economic development of the state particularly in so far as the area of the council and of the state are affected. (b) Raising of internally generated revenue through the collection of rates, taxes, licenses and fees as well as the establishment and control of markets, motor parks, shops and kiosks. (c) Provision and maintenance of public conveniences, sewage and refuse disposal. (d) Establishment and maintenance of cemeteries, burial grounds and homes for the destitute or infirm. (e) Establishment maintenance and regulation of slaughter houses and slaughter slabs. (f) Registration of births, deaths and marriages. (g) Construction and maintenance of roads, drains, etc. (h) Provision and maintenance of primary, adult and vocational education. (i) Development of agricultural and natural resources other than mineral resources. (j) Provision and maintenance of health services.

There is no doubt that these functions lie at the core of people-centered development which form the bases of the United Nation's sustainable development goals. The constitution and other laws also provide for the adequate funding of local governments so

they can effectively perform these functions assigned to them. Now, let us consider these functions individually to appreciate their significance in promoting development in the local area as well as at the national level.

If local governments actually make recommendations to the state economic planning commission, then the development needs of every local government in the state would be captured at the state level, and the resources of the state government in addition to those of the local governments would go a long way to enhance the status of each local government and the state at large in the development agenda. Effective mobilization of financial resources by way of raising internally generated revenue would also minimize the problem of funding which is often cited as a major problem of local governments in the pursuit of their development objectives. Unemployment and, therefore, poverty would also be minimized if the local governments engage the local people in their revenue departments.

Provision and maintenance public conveniences, sewage and refuse disposal will significantly improve sanitation and, thereby the health of the local people. This will improve the people's well-being and reduce disease and debility. Medical cost is also reduced through the reduction in the demand for medical services. It will also lengthen people's working lives consequent upon increased life expectancy and it can help them overcome debility that would ordinarily reduce their productivity. Good health will also enable an absent child return to school and/or improve his or her understanding or retention of lessons. It can also enable an adult absorb new information such as is received in agricultural extension services. Establishment, maintenance and regulation of slaughter houses and slaughter slabs will have similar effect on sanitation, health and well-being. The same goes for the provision of primary health care services by local governments, which in addition to the above benefits will also minimize the rate of infant and maternal mortality in the local council areas.

Establishment and maintenance of homes for the destitute and infirm would address the most basic needs of this weakest and most vulnerable segment of the population. As is often said, a chain is as strong as its weakest link; the measure of development of any society consists in the condition of the weakest and most vulnerable members of that society.

Construction and maintenance of roads, drains and culverts would open up the hitherto non-accessible communities and this would in addition to easing up the difficulties encountered by the local people in evacuating their agricultural and other produce, improve their general capacity to earn income. Improved access through road construction would also enhance rural-urban linkages which would in turn reduce rural-urban migration while enhancing the equalization of economic opportunities among the urban and rural dwellers.

Amidst the growing lamentation of the monumental increase in the number of out of school children in Nigeria, local governments would easily come to the rescue if they were effective in the provision and maintenance of primary, adult and vocational education. Education has a huge potential to improve a person's advancement and potential to earn income in gainful employment whether it be in the modern sector or in agriculture or artisanal employment. Education enhances labour efficiency, factor mobility,

specialization in occupation and trade, supply of entrepreneurship and imparts modernity which enhances the incentive for economic change. The economic quality of a population will undoubtedly be high when there is broad knowledge of what natural resources are available, alternative production techniques that are possible, the necessary skills and existing market conditions and opportunities. These will input the human abilities and motivations that are favourable to economic achievements.

The development of agriculture and natural resources can be viewed within the context of what local governments do, and even the central government often does, in the provision of improved crop seedlings, fertilizers, agricultural extension services and irrigation facilities as well as financing to farmers to enhance their productivity in the farm, particularly in rural communities where farming is the major occupation. These facilities definitely diminish the rate of unemployment and poverty in the rural areas.

In addition to these development roles of the local government for the individual and the local community, the local government institution also plays some development roles for the nation itself.

It promotes democracy and political participation by mobilizing citizens through political enlightenment and political action. It is also a very useful tool for constituency delineation for the conduct of national elections. It also helps immensely in maintenance of law and order, and peace in the community through the operation of the various security committees and police committees as well as neighbourhood watch and vigilante services.

Local governments also work with other community groups and individual citizens to harness community energies and input the same into the development efforts of government. The function of registration of births, deaths and marriages also help to generate vital data and statistics that are very useful for the central and unit governments' development planning activities.

Finally, local governments promote national consciousness and national integration by breaking down primordial loyalties and transferring such loyalties to the central government. Local government thus becomes a tool for nation building and national integration. It creates among the people awareness of political life beyond the locality and serves to break down dysfunctional parochialism that tends to interfere with the development of national consciousness. This is as the same policies of the central government are carried down to the grassroots and implemented with local appeals so as to enlist the support of the localities for the central government. It also serves to disperse and localize political tensions, thereby neutralizing their impacts on the nation.

Impediments to the Development Role of Local Governments

Given the development role of local governments outlined above, there is no doubt that local governments have the potential to make people-centered development permeate all the nooks and crannies of urban and rural Nigeria alike. However, this potential has not been realised due to certain impediments, identified and discussed as follows:

Personnel: The most important personnel problem of local governments is that they are unable to attract highly skilled personnel, perhaps because of the low level of this tier

of government and the concomitant low level of prestige it attracts. The appropriately skilled persons may also be averse to working in local governments located in rural areas. Furthermore, the recruitment and placement of the local government staff are often politicized and not based on merit or need. According to Ezeani (2004), most chairmen, caretaker committee members and sole administrators recruit and place their relations, friends and political sympathisers or party members without due regard to the rules and regulations or in keeping with manpower requirements.

Another personnel problem is that of training and development of the staff. In this regard, the federal military government in 1979 established the Public Administration and Local Government unit in three major universities in Nigeria, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife and University of Nigeria Nsukka to provide the necessary staff training. But, according to Onah (1995), these university programmes are only able to provide training in areas of finance and general administration. Consequently, the dearth of qualified professionals such as engineers, architects, accountants doctors, nurses agricultural extension workers, etc continue to militate against the effective performance of the local governments.

Corruption: corruption is a recurrent issue whenever and wherever problems of local governments are discussed. This is so much so that at some point, members of the national assembly were advancing the argument that local governments are useless and should be scrapped. The problem of corruption is mostly found in the area of revenue declaration by collectors, award of contracts, over-invoicing, and bribery for services and outright embezzlement of local government funds by chairmen and councilors. The problem has become an aspect of culture in all local governments among both the political leadership as well as the civil servants. Frivolous claims for travels and trainings not undertaken, claims for purchases not made and contracts not executed are often made by chairmen and councilors. In fact, most of the time, they only utilize money meant for payment of staff and other recurrent expenditure and go ahead to share the rest. Sometimes staff are even owed salaries for months and years while allocations from the federation account are received as and when due. Moreover, much of the internally generated revenue are also mostly siphoned away by revenue agents and the remainder shared by the chairmen and treasurers. This is why Idama (2013) contended that the major challenge of local government councils in Nigeria is corruption and wondered why the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission has not beamed its searchlight on the local government councils.

Loss of autonomy: The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria establishes local government as a separate tier of government with some degree of autonomy. However, according to Ezeani (2004), the heavy dependence of local governments on statutory allocations from the federal government whittles down their autonomy. He went further to say that successive governments (both state and federal) have interfered in the actual functioning of local governments. For instance, between 1984 and 1987, local government councils were abolished and the administration of the affairs of the local governments were placed entirely on the sole administrator. Again in 1994, the elected local government councils were disbanded by the military government of General Abacha and replaced with caretaker committees. This practice has not stopped with the return to democratic rule

since 1999. As a matter of fact, the situation is even worse in some states like Anambra and Imo where there had never been elections into local government councils since 1999. In states where elections had been held at some point during this period, those were no elections at all, as state governors only use the state electoral commission to legitimize their appointment and imposition of their candidates as chairmen and councilors. Sometimes, as was the case in Ebonyi state after the 2019 general election, the tenure of elected chairmen and councilors was unilaterally terminated by the governor without regard to due process. Adewumi (2009) noted with dismay this oppressive relationship between states and local government councils in Nigeria, observing that the relationship is that of master/servant.

Idama (2013) and Tonwe (2009) believe that the problems of local governments can be situated in the structural defects of the Nigerian federal system which permits the federal and state governments to interfere in the operation of local governments. State governments have overbearing influence on the local government, for which the constitution is to be blamed for permitting the joint account between the state and the local governments. The state government often refuse to remit fully to the local governments their statutory allocations from the federation account and also refuse to remit to the local governments 10 percent of the total revenue of the state even though that is also provided for in the constitution (Ola and Taiwo, 2007). Most often, local government chairmen and councilors are ill-prepared to challenge these occurrences as a function of loyalty to the governor who may have facilitated their election or appointment (Idama, 2013).

Finance: The combined effect of all the problems previously discussed are heavily felt in the inadequate financing of local governments. According to Akpan (1965), the success of a local authority is often measured in terms of its ability to provide services to the public. These services cost money which the local governments do not have sufficiently. Part of the financial problem of local government stems from the fact that most of them are located in rural areas and as a result of rural poverty, they are unable to generate enough internal revenue. This would have been the reason why the framers of our constitution, in their wisdom, guaranteed the statutory allocation of revenue from the federation account to the local governments.

However, as stated earlier, these statutory monthly allocations hardly get to the local governments in full as state governors, through the joint account committee, merely give handouts to the local governments. Moreover, any internally generated revenue is often frittered away as a consequence of corruption in the system. Hence, local governments lack the funds to perform the development roles they ought to be performing in the Nigerian society.

Conclusion

Having identified the impediments to the achievement of the development roles of the local government in Nigeria, it is pertinent to point out that the potentials of the local government to catalyse people-centered development for the individuals and communities within its locality will remain potentials, unrealized, if certain reforms are not undertaken to revitalize the Nigerian local government system.

The needed reforms revolve around the issue of autonomy and corruption. There is therefore the need for the National Assembly to undertake far-reaching constitutional amendments with regard to local government autonomy. The institution of state/local government joint account should be expunged from the constitution as well as the control function of the office of the deputy governor or local government services commission as the case may be.

Monthly allocations to local governments from the federation account should be made to go directly to the local governments while the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) should beam their searchlights on all 774 local governments in the country to ensure judicious utilization of such funds, to eschew corruption at all levels of the system including the political and administrative leadership as well as the revenue and audit departments.

To attract and retain adequately skilled personnel, the recruitment and reward systems of the local governments should be strengthened, and closely monitored by the ICPC. The federal government should also endeavor to provide rural electrification and access/feeder roads to all 774 local government headquarters to give them urban/quasi-urban face-lift as this will also help to attract better skilled professionals to the system when the status of the local government headquarters are so enhanced.

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