

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION IN NIGERIA: A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT:

For any responsive and dependable political system, the development of the rural areas must be its major concern. Development will be insignificant in such a political system if the government does not positively affect the life of the people of the grassroots or if development eludes the grassroots dwellers. Therefore, the problem of governance, particularly at the local level, has been in a doldrums in the political history of Nigeria. These problems have been documented and they include corruption and mismanagement, lack of adequate manpower, lack of autonomy, inadequate planning, inadequate revenue, poor implementation of policies, lack of participation by the people and intergovernmental conflict. What this paper will try to do is to focus on these challenges and determine the factors responsible for them and suggest some relevant way forward in order to ameliorate the difficulties. This paper, therefore, concludes strongly that since the problems of local government in Nigeria are copious, adequate and practical solutions are needed. These include: the expansion of democratic space, the entrenchment of democratic culture and the promotion of good governance, transparency and accountability. Without these solutions, rural development of the grassroots will be a mirage.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of the creation of local government anywhere in the world reveals the need to aid development at the grassroots. The establishment of such areas is geared to play vital social, political and economic roles for the overall development of the country. The realization of this important fact coupled with the desire to bring the government nearer to the people (most especially people in the rural areas) has prompted the Federal Government of Nigeria to introduce a number of significant reform measures to local government administration, particularly since 1976. The local government reforms of that year made some fundamental changes in the structure, functions and finances of local government cum useful points of reference for successive governments for subsequent reform programmes that have been introduced in Nigeria. The 1976 reforms clearly defined the power and functions of local government and made them the third tier of government with enhanced prestige and responsibilities. The purpose of the reforms was to bring about the development of the rural areas.

However, the increased responsibilities of local governments in recent times seem not to be adequately matched by their financial resources. This has been manifested in the inability of most—if not all of them—to perform satisfactorily in their new tasks such as the establishment and payment of primary schools, teaching and non-teaching staff, provision of primary health care, and building of roads. It is now 36 years since its promulgation. As important as this tier of government has been, there seem to be some hurdles that have tamed its performance and functions in recent times. These problems involve the undue interference of federal and state governments (which is political in nature), bribery and corruption, and ill-trained and unqualified personnel to mention a few.

THE CONCEPT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Conceptualizing local government, like others in the social sciences, is not easy; it is difficult to have a universally acceptable definition for this concept in developing and developed countries of the world. Consequently, Ovwasa (1995) has opined that the meaning attached to local government varies from country to country and, more frequently, it has become the purpose for which local government is created. However, the concept of local government involves a philosophical commitment to democratic participation in the governing process at the grassroots level. This implies legal and administrative decentralization of authority, power and personnel by a higher level of government to a community with a will of its own, performing specific functions as within the wider national framework. A local government is, at the grassroots level of administration, meant for meeting the peculiar needs of the people (Agagu, 1997:18). Appadorai (1975:287) sees local government as government by the popularly elected bodies charged with administrative and executive duties in matters concerning the inhabitants of a particular district or place.

Local or grassroots government may be defined as having been established by law to perform specific functions within defined areas. A complex nation like Nigeria, with its many ethnic groups within a divergent and diverse culture, requires a high degree of decentralization, which they accomplish by creating local government authorities. Looking at the existence and relevance of local government, Ayo (2005) believes that local government is a territorial non-sovereign community possessing the right level of necessary organization to regulate its own affairs. Local government can be viewed as a legal personality with sufficient but limited powers of control over its staff, finances and funds (Amao, 2002).

Arising from our observation above, many definitions of local government have been suggested by different authors. As Ovwasa

(2004) analyzed elsewhere, local government has been defined as a subdivision of a nation (unitary country) and state (federal system) which has substantial authority to extract labour and impose tax over its jurisdiction. The council of such local government is constituted by law, and membership is either elected or selected. Ovwaso summarized the definitions of local government with the following observations:

- i. Local government is created by law
- ii. It has a representative government
- iii. It is a lower level of government and it has a legal personality with the power to impose taxes in its areas of jurisdiction or competence, but with limited autonomy.

Local governments, at least in principle, deal with grassroots politics, i.e. keeping law and order, basic sanitation, constructing and maintaining local roads, supplying water, administering local schools, providing skill training and employment for residents, et cetera. However, community development is the process or effort of building communities on a local level with emphasis on building the economy, forging and strengthening social ties, and developing the non-profit sector. These are aimed at improving the quality of life of the people in the community. Are local government administrators in Nigeria performing their functions? If not, what are the obstacles? Before we delve into the problems of local government, let us attempt to look at its evolution in order to foster our understanding of the salient issues being raised in this paper.

EVOLUTION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS IN NIGERIA

The history of local government systems in Nigeria dates back to colonial days. The name, structure and composition have experienced different changes over the years. During the 1930s and 1940s, for

instance, local government was known as chief-*in-council* and chief-*and-council*, where traditional rulers were given pride of place in the scheme of things. In the 1950s, elections were introduced according to the British model in the western and eastern parts of the country with some measure of autonomy in personnel, financial and general administration (Nwabueze, 1982:20-21). It was on this premise that the rising tide of progress, growth and development experienced in the local governments in these areas was based. The pace of this development was more noticeable in the south than in the north.

During this period, heterogeneity was the hallmark of local government as there was no uniformity in the system and the level of development was also remarkably different. The introduction of the 1976 reforms by the military administration of General Obasanjo brought about uniformity in the administrative structure of the system. The reforms introduced a multi-purpose single-tier local government system (Ajayi, 2000:70). Efficient systems of native administration had existed in the various parts of Nigeria before the coming of the Europeans (Olatunbosun 1998). This was particularly the case in the northern and western parts of Nigeria, where the existing systems of traditional administration provided the colonial authorities with a much-needed workable basis for introducing the indirect rule system of governance, first in the Northern Protectorate and later in the Southern Protectorate.

Between 1900 and 1950, the Nigerian colonial authorities consisted mainly of traditional office holders whose main functions, according to Kareem (2005), were to maintain law and order and generally act as agents for the colonial government by providing certain basic services in their respective localities. With the pressure generated by the nationalist struggle for democratization and self-rule that emerged in the 1950s, more modern local government councils with elected members increased responsibilities and enhanced financial status. However, the local government councils suffered a

decline in status in the 1960s and early 1970s due to their inability to perform their functions up to expectation. Since 1976, however, a number of reforms have been introduced at the national level with the objective of transforming a local government into a separate tier, with clearly defined and enhanced responsibility, improved financial status and more development-oriented and viable structural rearrangements.

The beginning of the democratization of local government administration with the introduction of non-traditional elected or selected members can be traced back to the 1950s. The elected members constituted about seventy-five percent of the council membership. However, according to William (1994), the military government dissolved all the elected members in 1966 and their functions were taken over by councilors, some nominated by the respective military governors and some by traditional rulers. By 1975, the number of local government authorities in eight states (excluding the four states in the east and mid-west) was 113 and later increased to 301; in 1988 it rose to 442. Due to more agitation, it increased to 454 in 1989 and then 589 in 1991. Following the state creation in 1996, local government is presently 774 including the FCT. (Kareem 2005). No public institution in Nigeria has been so subjected to frequent reforms than local government. Almost all successive administrations in Nigeria introduce one administrative change or another. Apart from the celebrated 1976 reforms, state government officials have also introduced various manipulations. For instance, in Ekiti state, the tenure of elected local government officials was reduced to two years, while some three years. In the southwest, except for Lagos, a caretaker committee was introduced in 2003 immediately after the general elections. In a similar vein in June 2007, some state governments dissolved their local councils and appointed caretaker committees to steer the affairs of the council prior to the conduct of elections. In July 2011, the Kogi State government dissolved the elected local government chairmen and directed all the DLGs to take over the

affairs. In essence, it has become almost fashionable in Nigeria for an incumbent administration to introduce one change or another in the institution. So far the local government system in Nigeria has not been stable and thus its future remains bleak, uncertain and insecure.

What are the reasons for the creation of local government in Nigeria?

Many reasons, ranging from the political to the socio-economic, have been given for the creation of local government. . These reasons have been captured by section 7(2) of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) by the following words:

The person authorized by law to prescribe the area over which a local government council may exercise authority shall:

- (1) Define such an area as clearly as practicable
- (2) Ensure, to the extent to which it may be reasonably justifiable, that, in defining such areas, attention is paid to:
 - the common interest of the community in the area
 - the traditional association of the community, and
 - its administrative convenience.

In summary, the following are the purposes for the creation of local governments:

1. Grassroots participation in governance

One of the major reasons for the creation of local government in Nigeria is to bring governance closer to the people. Participation by the citizens-in-governance is one of the underlying precepts of democracy and the modern notion of government. This is done through

participation in the electoral processes and decision-making in the local communities. For this reason, local governments also serve as political incubators for budding politicians. They afford future leaders the opportunity to undergo political training (See section 7 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999).

2. Administrative convenience

Local governments are created for administrative practicality and suitability. There are many functions that will be cumbersome for the State and Federal Governments to perform because of the distance separating them and the people. Such functions can be best and effectively performed by the local government, e.g. collection of rates, radio and television licenses, and the registration of births, deaths and marriages. Local government is also created to serve as the presence of the federal and state governments amongst the local people and as a channel through which policies are communicated and implemented.

3. To provoke development

Local governments are created to bring about meaningful development in the rural areas. As agents of rural development, they are to use the funds made available to them by both federal and state governments and their internally generated revenue to improve on the lives of the people within their areas of operation through the following economic development in line with section 7(3&4) of the Constitution:

a. Initiating and attracting developmental projects to the local government such as provision of access roads, water and rural electricity;

- b. Sustaining livelihoods through the provision of credit facilities for agriculture, arts, crafts and small scale business; and
- c. Encouraging the formations of cooperative societies and other economic groupings.

4. Preserve the heritage and common interest of the people

The creation of Local Government is intended to bring people of common heritage or ancestry together as a political unit to further their interest and increase their participation in government business. In Nigeria today, there are over 250 ethnic groups with diverse cultures and tongues. These ethnic groups are further divided into communities. These communities form the constituents of most Local Governments in Nigeria. By carving out Local Governments amongst people of the same community, government is preserving such long 'traditional association' and using same to foster the interest of the people concerned.

The Hurdles of Local Government in Nigeria

As we have rightly noted, the problems of local government in Nigeria have been documented. These include inadequate planning, poor implementation of policies, inadequate revenue, corruption and mismanagement, lack of adequate manpower, lack of autonomy, lack of participation by the people and intergovernmental conflict (Adamolekun, 1983; Orewa, 1991). The history of local government in Nigeria shows that there are problems of governance. Various efforts have been made by government to reform the system and increase participation of the people. Despite these justifications, the third tier of government appears not to have justified the reasons for which it was established; instead, it has been in the doldrums. Why has local government failed in its expectations? How can these problems be

addressed and solved? These concerns will be addressed in the remaining part of this paper.

Financial Constraints

As much as the local governments may have rich programmes for execution, the financial means of doing so is not present. Revenue is by far lower than what is required in many cases. The economic and financial profile of the local governments in Nigeria is very poor compared to the developmental projects they are expected to carry out, despite the increase in the total amount of funds made to them since the early 1990s. Here, the situation is connected to and exacerbated by a high rate of mismanagement and the embezzlement of these funds. The corrupt officials of these councils divert money meant for some projects to their personal purses.

Shortage of Skilled Workers/Personnel

Inadequacy of trained and skilled administrative, technical and professional personnel renders local governments in Nigeria, with the exception for some few in the southern states, ineffective and inefficient in the performance of their constitutional rights. Reasons opined for this include the low image of local government in the mind of the professionals; questionable, subjective and sentimental manners of recruitment cum low or no incentive; and the threats and fear of retrenchment to junior workers, which has derailed their psychological balance and affected their efficiency and output.

Lack of Autonomy

Unnecessary political interference from state and federal governments is another constraint plaguing local government authorities in Nigeria. There is a high level of external influence and intrusion in local affairs by other tiers of government, which is worrisome and needs urgent attention. The future of local government is not guaranteed in a situation whereby the state governor

unconstitutionally dissolves the elected council officer without any probe or investigations into false and bogus allegations. As a result, this level of government has a crisis of recognition and autonomy. The question here is: Is local government truly the third tier of government, or a ministry under its respective state government? In a true sense, local government in Nigeria lacks autonomous financial power. It is now considered as an extension of the state's ministry. The inherent nature of this problem has caused subservience, a situation where local government waits for the next directives from the state government before the former can think of, let alone embark on, developmental projects. Thus local government has been an object of control and directives. As a result, square pegs are put into round holes in appointments to posts, which are mainly based on political party patronage.

Laissez-Faire Attitude to Work and Wide-Range of Indiscipline

That the third tier of government has been tagged the home of indiscipline is well pronounced among the workers. Little or no commitment to duty has become the rule rather than an exception; this includes senior officers.. Some may travel over the weekend and not bother to return to work until Tuesday the following week, and the junior ones are very carefree in the habit of truancy regarding their jobs. Offices have been turned to marketplaces where officers hawk their goods freely. The rules that guide moral conduct and professional ethics seem to have been on sabbatical and at worst become a cobweb that is too weak to tame the monstrous activities of the workers. Indiscriminate lustful desires are noticeable among the workers. Relationships between super-ordinates and subordinates have been strained. Strict instructions handed down from the top echelon to the bottom are either not followed or treated with levity as a result of the immoral relationship between the boss and subordinates. Official duties are seen as an extension of private leisure. A laissez-faire attitude at work has arrested the efficiency of local government and has drastically affected its performance.

Lack of Continuity by Succeeding Governments

One of the problems facing local governments nationwide is the lack of continuity of government programmes and projects by succeeding governments. This disruption leads to economic and mental waste as well as the retrogression of development. Projects are done not according to or as demanded by the people but, regrettably, in tune with the selfish ends and aggrandizement of the political leadership in collaboration with the senior bureaucrats at the local government level of administration. Priorities are being misplaced.

Problems of Participation and Involvement

For over ten years, different terminologies have been used to justify people's participation at the grassroots level: "development from below," "bottom-up approach to development," "popular participation," "bringing government closer to the people," and other catchphrases have been used to argue for people's involvement in the affairs that directly affect them (Lawal, 2000:66). From all manner of convictions, we can observe that the involvement of people in the affairs and running of local government in Nigeria is nonfigurative and theoretical rather than active and practical. Local government prepares estimates for its revenues and expenditures without properly consulting the people's potential needs and problems. Different arguments have been put forward as to the responsibility for non-involvement of people in their own affairs. These include: loss of interest in the projects that do not benefit the chairmen and their cohorts; the belief by the officials that people are ignorant, illiterate and unenlightened; and the lack of political will by the leadership to run an open administration due to their selfish interests coupled with the poverty of socio-political philosophy for change.

Prospects and a Way Forward

In order to consolidate the gains made in local governance over the years and to reposition it for greater performance, there is a need to suggest a way forward and evaluate prospects. Unfortunately, local governments have demonstrated incompetence despite the basic rationale behind their creation: to meet the needs of the people at the grassroots. It is therefore desirable to suggest ways through which local governments can come out from this indolence and doldrum.

First, local government, as a third-tier government, should not be scrapped or changed to local administration; it should be strengthened and democratized instead. Officials of the local government should always be elected and not appointed.

Second, there is the need to put a mechanism in place to promote transparency and accountability at all levels of governance. Statutory allocation of local government councils should be reviewed upward and inward, for the improvement of Internally Generated Revenue (IGR) and for self-financial reliance. In addition, prompt release of allocations from federation accounts should be looked into to avoid delay in executing council developmental projects. Local councils are also advised to look for ways of attracting industries to their areas which will propel economic development, employment and increase their revenue base. In this regard, it will be crucial to strengthen institutions' horizontal accountability and anti-corruption bodies in order to build up the economic and revenue base of the councils. Civil society organizations, particularly at the local level, should be reoriented and empowered to hold elected officials accountable.

Third, there is a great need to reform the structure of government at all levels. This will require a comprehensive review of the 1999 Constitution. For example, Section 7 of the 1999 Constitution that places local government under state government has made the

former a mere appendage of the latter. Executive and legislative bodies should display the political will and commitment to reform the 1999 Constitution, which has been criticized by all strands of society. The reform of the Constitution will address other issues that are germane to good governance, such as party financing, campaign financing, and a proper electoral system.

Fourth, local government should have total autonomy. This will allow and guarantee its survival and provide it with remedies for the problems highlighted above. There are good prospects for Nigerian local government systems. These include: convenient grassroots governance; quick execution of projects without the bottlenecks often encountered in getting approval from the state; provision of essential services to the public by the local government councils; and awareness of the community's responsiveness and participation. By and large, there will be no bureaucracy with regards to the release of funds for social services.

Fifth, government should place a high premium on the participation of the people in all governance and development issues. Workers in local councils should be adequately motivated in order to prepare them for the task of service delivery. Workers occupy important positions in the production process in any organization. They are the ones that make things happen because they put life into raw materials and change its form to satisfy human needs.

Finally, the electorate should be educated and enlightened of the danger inherent in money politics. They should endeavour to vote for people of proven integrity rather than compromising their future and that of generations unborn. It is the belief of this paper that strict observance to these suggestions can lift local councils from their relegated position as tools of manipulation to the status of instruments of change and development at the grassroots level.

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