

Local Government Administration and Grassroots Development in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Local governments in Nigeria are created to perform specific constitutional functions expected to bring development to the local areas and relatively improve the living condition of grassroots people. In a bid to accomplish this purpose for which local governments are created, they have encountered numerous problems difficult to surmount. The study is basically aimed at realizing complete political and financial autonomy of local government so as to position them (local governments) to carry out their constitutional responsibilities as well as accomplish the purpose for which they are created. The study adopts the qualitative means of data collection, where data are sourced from journals, textbooks, newspapers and the internet. This study has among other things discovered that local government affairs or activities are interfered by State governments. Consequently, it is of necessity that the revenue base of local government be broadened to accommodate the financial needs of the councils. Also, legislations should be made to address the arbitrary interference with local government administration by State governments.

Keywords: *Local Government, Grassroots Development, Administration.*

INTRODUCTION

Local government as a third tier of government is created to perform specific constitutional responsibilities in order to bring relative development to the local communities (Orewa, 1991). Local governments in Nigeria have been confronted with numerous challenges in an effort to perform the statutory functions they are empowered to carryout. Considering the many problems facing local governments, ranging from inadequate resources, undue interference by State governments with the affairs and activities of local governments, issue of state and local governments' joint accounts, limited autonomy, inherent problems of lack of political education and competent staff, corruption, a revenue base not commensurate with the responsibilities of local governments, to the low level of productivity of the councils in the country (Solomon, 1998), one is compelled to ask if local governments are truly "a tool for

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development in the country? The study examines the local government system in Nigeria, the various reforms, up to the 2003 reforms in the fourth republic, and the purpose for local government creation in Nigeria. It also discusses the constraints of local governments which are the major factors impeding productive performance at the local governments. It made an in-depth analysis of local governments as a tool for grassroots development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The systems approach is adopted as the theoretical framework of this study. This approach finally got into use in political science in the wake of the behavioural revolution in the 1950s as found in the works of Gabriel Almond, David Easton, and Morten Kaplan (Nnekabari, 2004). The central proposition of the systems approach is that all social phenomena, including the political process are interrelated. Consequently, it is not possible to fully understand any part of society in isolation from the other parts of the same society, which affects its operation (Alapiki, 2004). The theory is applied here to analyze local government as a part of Nigeria's federal system, with distinct boundary, contributing interdependently with other parts of the system to ensure the sustenance and success of the whole. As highlighted above the failure of the local government system could as well lead to the failure of the entire Nigerian system, hence the need to put in place a workable local government system that can engender national development.

The concept of development is replete with definitions by scholar of different orientations. For us to have a better understanding of local governments as a tool for development, it is proper and necessary for us to briefly look at the meaning of "development" in the context of this work. This work has already given clarification on the meaning of "local governments" in relation to the practice of local government in Nigeria. Development as a process is related to improving the living conditions of the people. According to Gboyega (2003), "it implies the material well-being of all citizens, not the most powerful and rich alone, in a sustainable way such that today's consumption does not imperil the future, it also demands that poverty and inequality of access to the good things of life be removed or drastically reduced. Allen (2006) argues that:

“any structural change that does not impact the living conditions of the mass of the citizens positively in spite of rise in per-capita income is questionable and lacking in human context of development”.

Development is usually taken to involve not only economic growth, but also some notion of equitable distribution, provision of health care, education, housing and other

essential services all with a view to improving the individual and collective quality of life (Naomi, 1995). When people at the remote part of the society enjoy such development as stated above, it constitutes what is referred to as grass root development.

Historical Background of Local Government System in Nigeria

Local Government System in Nigeria has gone through various stages and reforms in order to meet the needs of the people, and conform to environmental factors. Local government is a third tier of government in Nigeria which was created and introduced to our political system to perform basic statutory functions (Ibodje, 2007). According to Ibodje (2007), "local government is the third tier level of government created for the purpose of efficient and effective administration of the localities." While the Federal Republic of Nigeria guidelines for local government reforms (1976) defines local councils as government exercised through representative councils established by law to exercise specific powers within defined areas (Solomon, 1998). The definition of local government given by the Federal Republic of Nigeria on the 1976 reform is more up-to-date and acceptable. The central idea is that, local governments are created by law to perform some specific functions of government at the local level, which mainly creates a platform for grassroots participation in the affairs of government.

The origin of local governments in Nigeria can be traced to the indirect rule system introduced by Lord Lugard; first, in Northern Nigeria and later in the South in 1916 (Erebo and Christian, 2011). Though nominal success was recorded in the South-West, this system was a complete failure in the South-East (Jacob, 2013). Historical accounts indicate that the system was a complete failure in South-East due to the Cephalous socio-political nature of the people (Okoli, 2005). This system recorded significant success in the North through the Emirs who wield absolute power within their domains, but this success was not replicated in the South, especially in the South-East where warrant Chiefs were introduced to perform tax collection and law maintenance functions (Erebo and Christian, 2011). The local government structure from 1914-1940's, which was described as colonial native authorities depended more on the indigenous rulers and their traditions in order to administer the local administration, this was so because the objective was to gain local support for economic and political gains of the colonial government (Erebo and Christian, 2011). However, this system of indirect rule was a failure in Eastern Nigeria because there was no centralized system of government in the East and the system of taxation imposed by the Warrant Chiefs was alien to the people (Okoli, 2005). As King (1988) rightly states, "through indirect rule system, political relationship was established between the local authorities and colonial government." This was apparently done to garner local support for political and economic advancement of the colonial government.



The 1950 to 1960 local government structure was an improvement on the local government structure of 1914-1940's. It also made provision for the functions, responsibilities and powers to be allocated between the tiers. As was captured by Okoli (2005) county councils were responsible for collection of taxes, provision of roads, bridges and many other functions, they also had power to propose and implement their budgets and recruit senior staff. District Councils were responsible for environmental sanitation within the districts, construction and maintenance of markets and dispensary. As a result of the democratic content in this new system in the East, it was later adopted by the Western and Northern part of the country with, subsequent modifications (Jacob, 2013). This system of local government was not without its defects, one of which was its rigidity in operation unlike the British System.

After the 1950/1960 reforms, no major changes were made "after independence" until 1967, when the then Military Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon, created twelve (12) States in the country with a centralized and limited autonomy to local governments. Local government institutions were thus from all intent and purposes governed by predominant instrumental and penetrative objectives. However, notable and far reaching changes were made in the local government reforms of 1976 (Njoku, 2009). In reaction to the 1976 reforms, Adamalokun and Rowland (1979) state thus; "what distinguishes the 1976 local government reforms from all previous exercises in the country is the formal and unequivocal recognition of local governments as constituting a separate level of government.

The 1976 reforms elicited nationwide acceptance with more autonomy for local governments in Nigeria (Solomon, 1998). These reforms, no doubt set the standard for all other subsequent reforms. Some of the key objectives of the Guidelines for Local Government Reforms (1976) are highlighted hereunder:

- (1) To bring about even and rapid development at local levels throughout the country.
- (2) To appropriate, serious development activities responsive to local wishes and initiative by developing or delegating them to local representative bodies.
- (3) To facilitate the exercise of local self-government close to the local levels of the society, and to encourage initiative and leadership potentials.
- (4) To mobilize human and natural resources through the involvement of members of the public in their local development and to provide two way communication between the local communities and the government.

No doubt these reforms of 1976 brought some positive changes, and were a beacon of hope for the development of local government system in the country; however, some scholars have also argued that, the changes brought about by the reforms though, beautifully captured and well-intended were more in theory and lacking in content.

Ibodje (2000) aptly observes that; "the 1976 system ran into problems, especially during the second republic which also witnessed its demise". As Egurube (1991) states that "the reform was more symbolic than real, and that the changes it introduced were more cosmetic than a decentralist logic. While not going into this argument, the impact of the reforms was felt across the country, which set a standard for future reforms, and governments to emulate and improve upon. The high hopes for local government advancement was dashed in the second republic as no meaningful contribution was made to improve on the reforms of 1976 which was the outcome of the effort of a military junta, considered undemocratic (Solomon, 1998). Though the 1979 constitution made provision for democratic elections, the various state government did not adhere to this provision. As a result of these inadequacies, and in an attempt to revamp the system, the 1984 local government review committee headed by Alhaji Ibrahim Dasuki came into being (Tony, 2011).

The Dasuki committee was saddled with the responsibility among other things to look into the problems of local government administration and recommend solutions. The Committee attributed to some of the problems of local governments to operational factors, owing to behaviour and attitudes of persons charged with the management of local governments. Though the committee made a proposal for the decentralization of the services provided by local governments, the recommendations of the Dasuki Committee could not make any headway as the then head of states Muhammadu Buhari was overthrown in a palace coup by General Babangida in 1985 (Solomon, 1998). The Babangida administration made significant landmark reforms as was highlighted by Obikeze and Obi (2004). Some of the significant changes that the Babangida reform brought are:

- (1) The State Ministries of Local Government were abolished and State Governments were directed to terminate their joint services with local governments.
- (2) For enormous task of grassroots development, the federal government reviewed the grants allocated to local governments from 10% to 15% in 1989 to 20% in 1992.
- (3) Taking into cognisance the discrepancies in the size of local government areas in the country as well as logistic and ethnic barriers involved and in order to accelerate rural development efforts and forestall the controversy over the number of local government areas, the federal government increased the number of local governments in the country to 453 in 1988 and to 500 in 1991.
- (4) The remitting to states of annual local government grants was stopped. Local governments started getting their grants directly from the federal government. This helped a great deal in ending the financial strangulation which many local

governments suffered from the state government; though the staff of local governments welcomed the reforms but were not prepared.

The third tier of government in the beginning of the fourth republic up to 2003 was a subject of litigation on issues bordering on tenure of local governments and dates of local government elections. The local governments under the aegis of Association of Local Government of Nigeria (ALGON), through the National Assembly secured a one year extension by the governors who relied on section 7(1) of the 1999 constitution which states that:

“The system of local government by democratically elected local government councils is under the constitution guaranteed; and accordingly, the government of every state shall, subject to section 8 of the constitution, ensure their existence under a law which provides for the establishment, structure, composition, finance and functions of such councils”.

However, in delivering judgment on the 28th of March, 2002, the Supreme Court nullified the extension and declared the provisions of the electoral act inconsistent with the provisions of the 1999 constitution. Immediately, Olusegun Obasanjo emerged as president at the 2003 presidential poles, he set up a technical committee on local government reforms on June 18th, 2003 (Njoku, 2009). The President said the review was necessitated by three disturbing trends among others, which had been identified with the recent inception of democratic dispensation in the country (Obikeze and Obi, 2004). Obikeze and Obi (2004) capture these three disturbing trends as:

- (1) The non-performance or gross under-performance of the local governments.
- (2) The high cost of governance and the new prohibitive cost of electioneering to individual political contestants in Nigeria and
- (3) Atomization and continual fragmentation of local government councils including impractical divisions of towns and cities into unworkable mini-local governments.

A technical committee was eventually set up and terms of reference given them, some of which are to;

- (a) Examine the problem of inefficiency and high cost of governance, with a view to reducing cost and wastage at the three tiers of government
- (b) Look at the performance of local government in the last four years, and consider among other options the re-introduction of a modified version of the pre-1976 local government system. This committee also had as its terms of reference to examine the high cost of election campaigns in the country and consider also other areas that are of importance to the structure of local governments in Nigeria.

The Mallam Liman Ciroma committee of 2003 submitted its report, which contained some lofty and feasible recommendations, with the submission that the federal, state and local government have failed in meeting the aspirations of the people some of which provides for the retention of the 774 constitutionally recognized local government councils and the abolishing of joint state and local government accounts among others (Solomon, 1998). It is pertinent to note that the report of this committee generated heated debate in the public domain. They felt that the president lacked the powers to set up the committee constitutionally. Obikeze and Obi (2004) aptly observe that "the local government being a constitutional creation, they reasoned should not be toyed with".

Determinations of Local Government Creation

Local government is a third tier of government in Nigeria created to perform some specific, constitutionally guaranteed functions in order to accomplish the goals for their creation (FGN, 1976). The classification of these functions and responsibilities which are contained in the concurrent and residual lists, as is the case in Nigeria, clearly defines these functions and responsibilities of local governments as contained in Section 7(1) of the fourth schedule of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999. Local governments in Nigeria are created to meet the developmental needs of grassroots' people and not as mere appendages to their various state governments.

As posited by Okoli (2005) the desirable principles that informed the 1976 reforms included among other things, the need to focus local government on development at grass root level. Value consideration aimed at making the idea and practice of local government purposeful and meaningful to the large majority of our population living in the rural areas (Ibodje, 2007). Another aim was the need to bring about fundamental, statutory and beneficial changes in the lives of citizens of Nigeria, particularly the rural population. It was obvious the intent and objectives of the reforms were tangled at bringing even and sustainable development at the local levels throughout the country. The 1976 reforms also have as one of its objectives, to appropriate development activities sensitive to local wishes and introduce by developing or delegating them to local representative bodies, and to facilitate the practice of democratic self-government at the local level (Solomon, 1998). It is discernable from this study that, the functions, responsibilities of local governments in Nigeria as a third tier of government and the purpose for their creation is geared towards bringing about human capital and infrastructural all-round development of the rural areas.



Local Government as a Strategic Tool for Development

Local governments are strategically positioned for the developmental options of every free society. After a critical evaluation of the various reforms of local government system in the country we came to the inevitable conclusion that the present structure of local government was intended to bring government closer to the rural people and mobilize human and material resources for grassroot development.

According to Omoruyi (2008), the present local government structure in the country was informed by the desire to stabilize government at the grassroots level or bring government nearer to the door-step of the people. It was hoped that such will help in harnessing the resources at that level for rapid and sustainable development, by ensuring grassroots participation in the development process". The reforms from 1976 to 2003 have structured local governments and made beautiful and sustainable provisions that will not only bring government nearer to grassroots people but also to bring about improved condition of life for rural people.

The local government reforms of 1976 made provisions for federal and state governments to fund local government administration (Solomon, 1998). This, the then military administration believed would provide the needed funds for local governments and engender grassroots development (Ibodje, 2000). The Babangida administration reforms of 1988 made all local governments in the country autonomous, abolishing the states ministries of local government and the joint accounting system, therefore, placing local governments on the path of sustainable grassroots development (Solomon, 1998). In order to aggregate this feat, subsequent administrations in the country have embarked on local government creation exercises, for instance, the number of local governments in the country was increased from 301-449 in 1988.

No doubt, to a significant extent, the potentials of local governments have remained untapped, they (local governments) have played a pivotal role in grassroots development, as they are created for this purpose. To further achieve the required purpose for which, local governments were created and follow the part of development, the Babangida administration in 1991, separated the legislative arm from the executive arm of local government, thereby introducing the presidential system at the grassroots level. Olusegun Obasanjo in a bid to ensure better performance of local governments and better position them for grassroots governance, set up a committee to review local governments in the country (Solomon, 1998). This committee's terms of reference and recommendations were geared towards positioning local governments for the needed grassroots development. However, the recommendations of this committee did not go far as the constitution of the committee attracted criticisms and many see the President as lacking the powers under the constitution to set up the committee (Njoku, 2009). In

spite of concerted efforts by the various administrations in the country, to position local governments for higher performance and bring development to rural people, local governments have been adjudged to perform below what is expected of them. However, local governments have brought some relief to grassroots people and also engendered some degree of development at the local level, as they have ensured the security of lives and property at the grassroots. They have also ensured the provision of social amenities, such as health centres, markets, minor roads and so on. While local governments create employment and generate revenue, it is also pertinent to note that in the developmental drive of local governments, while there are functions performed by local governments statutorily provided for in the residual list, there are many other functions concurrently performed by both States and local governments. (Ibodje, 2000) posited various reasons for the creation of local governments as:

- (1) ***Bringing government nearer to the people:*** This is necessary for mass participation of the masses in the activities of government, thus local governments provide the government that is nearer to the people.
- (2) ***Local government as a vehicle for articulation and promotion of local interests:*** Local government best understands the problems and interest of local people than the federal and state governments because they (the people) participate in the activities of local governance and so are part of the system.
- (3) ***Provision of political education:*** Local governments provide a platform for political education. Local governments create an enabling environment for grassroots people to be abreast with political and social activities in the country and serve as a grooming ground for grassroots politicians.

Njoku (2009) in stressing rural development as a reason for the creation of local governments states that "of the three tiers of government, federal, state and local, local governments provides the greatest scope for grassroots development... because it touches the lives of the people most intimately". Stating further, Adebegi emphasizes that "not only do local governments touch the lives of the people most intimately; it is also at that level that the practice of democracy has the greatest possibilities (NBF News, 2011), as they offer tremendous opportunities for popular participation in governance".

Constraints of Local Government in Nigeria

Local governments in Nigeria have undergone series of reforms and restructuring in order to meet the ends for which it was created, yet these concerted efforts by various

administrations in the country to put in place a desired, workable and development oriented local government system has recorded nominal success. Corruption also constitutes a major problem to the local government system in Nigeria. The internally generated revenue of local governments councils and what local governments gets from the federation account, are enough to bring some meaningful development to the rural people if these funds are to be meticulously used. It was also observed that lack of sufficient political education of the rural people to participate in the activities of the councils and check the excesses of local government administrators has contributed immensely to the decay in the local government system.

Council Chairmen and managers of local government councils see it as an opportunity to enrich themselves and appease their godfathers. While local governments are allowed independent sources of revenue, these sources are often inadequate (Alu, 2006). This situation is further worsened by the state-local government joint accounts system, where state governments tamper with local governments' funds with impunity. In a bid to give complete autonomy to local governments in Nigeria, the Babangida administration after a critical evaluation of the Dasuki reform committee report came up with a package of policy reform, one of which, according to Obikeze and Obi (2004) is that "state ministries of local governments were abolished and state governments were directed to terminate their joint services with local governments (Solomon, 1998). Thus, it was believed that this would end the friction in the states".

Environmental factors also contribute to and determine the success and failure of local governments. This could be divided into rural and urban environments which determine to a large extent, the performance of local governments in terms of revenue generation potentials. The urban local governments have multiple sources of revenue generation, like domestic and industrial property/companies, which are often not readily available for rural local governments.

It is a truism that the effectiveness and efficiency of any organization depends to a large extent on its caliber of staff, but local governments in Nigeria have been characterized with the problem of incapable hands/personnel that do not have the technical knowhow to tackle major developmental challenges of local governments, owing partly to nepotism, favouritism. As postulated by Okoli (2005), "as much as possible, recruitment into the local governments should be based on merit and not favouritism".

State governments and politicians, who may have played a major role in the emergence of a candidate in local government elections, can hold onto such local government and sap them. On the other hand, State governments have interfered with local governments at will because of lack of explicit constitutional provision for local government autonomy (Solomon, 1998).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Local governments in Nigeria have been beset by political, ethnic, and socio-economic factors, some of which are artificial and centripetal in nature. One major hindrance to local government performance as discernable from the findings of this study is lack of financial autonomy. The joint accounting system operated by States and local governments is a major impediment to local government performance in Nigeria. For local government to achieve the goal for which they were created, they must be granted full political and financial autonomy so that they can be well positioned to pilot the wheel of progress. In submitting his argument for the improvement of local government finances Okoli (2005) posits that "the existing laws on internal revenue of local government should be reviewed upwards to be in tune with the current economic reality." As a matter of urgent necessity, the problem of State governments meddling arbitrarily with the running of local governments in Nigeria should be addressed to ensure the operational freedom of the councils. This can be achieved through legislations by the National Assembly aimed at restraining the state governments from interfering with the running of local governments, as provided in Section 7(1) of the 1999 constitution which guarantees the separate existence of local governments as a third tier of government.

There is the need to expand the revenue base of local governments if they are to effectively and efficiently perform their constitutional responsibilities. The 1976 reforms provided for the sources of local government revenue as; (i) statutory allocation from States and Federal Government (ii) loans (iii) general rates (iv) property rate (v) market and Motor Park charges (vi) profits from commercial ventures (viii) revenue from licenses. Alu (2006) further explains that, "the internal sources of revenue were later expanded by the federal military government decree under the administration of General Abdulsalami Abubakar in 1998 to include:

- (a) Shops and kiosk rates
- (b) Tenant rates
- (c) On and Off liquor licenses
- (d) Slaughter slab fees
- (e) Marriage, death and birth registration fees
- (f) Naming of streets registration fees including streets in the state capital
- (g) Right of occupancy fees on lands in the rural areas, excluding those collected by the Federal and State governments, among others
- (h) Market taxes and levies, excluding and market where State finance is involved
- (i) Motor park levies
- (j) Domestic animal license fees

- (k) Bicycle, truck, canse, wheel barrow and cart fees other than mechanically propelled trucks
- (l) Cattle tax payable by cattle farmers only
- (m) Merriment and road closure levies
- (n) Radio and television fees
- (o) Vehicle radio license fees (to be imposed by the local government of the state on which the car is registered)
- (p) Wrong parking charges
- (q) Public convenience, sewage and refuse disposal fees
- (r) Religious places establishment permit fees
- (s) Signboard and advertisement permit fees

In spite of the numerous sources of local government revenue as highlighted above, the responsibilities of local governments far more exceeds the revenue accruable to local governments in practice hence there is a need to broaden its revenue sources to include items, which are now apparently absent in the residual list. To guarantee productivity, efficiency and effectiveness in local government system in Nigeria, the councils must be devoid of maladministration and corrupt practices. To realize this, grassroot people must be provided with the necessary political education and training to actively participate in the activities of grassroot governance and with the responsibility to hold the leadership accountable where necessary for the misappropriation of local government funds.

The local government system, as a third tier of government is essential to compliment the developmental needs of the people in Nigeria. In spite of the many challenges of the local government system in Nigeria, local governments have been able to bring some succour to rural people and reduce the burden on the central government. As observed in the study, that the underperformance of local government in Nigeria is mainly traceable to the state governments and inherent maladministration. It is also part of the findings of this study that the underperformance of local governments in Nigeria is mainly traceable to the State Governments and inherent maladministration. Though, the statutory functions of local governments are numerous, they have been able to enable participation of rural people in politics, provide primary education, political education, construction of minor roads, employment generation, revenue generation, for her development among others. However, from a general perspective, local governments have performed below expectation, and this is attributed to the many impediments of local government. It is recommended in this work that, there is a need to amend relevant sections of the 1999 Constitution, to ensure local government in Nigeria operate as a truly third tier of government in a federal state with relative autonomy and minimal interference, as the state governments have abused the provisions

of the constitution, interfering unduly with the activities of the councils, running them as the local administration of the state governments, even altering election dates. While it is recommended that local government revenue base should be expanded a mechanism should be put in place including the political education and training of the rural population to check the corrupt tendencies of local government administrators.

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