

## THE CHALLENGES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUTONOMY IN NIGERIA

**Dr. Linus Ugwu Odo**

Department of Public Administration  
IBB University, Lapai, Niger State

### **Abstract**

The quest for local government autonomy in Nigeria has been a recurring issue, which pre-date the country's political independence. The struggle has thrown up various reforms including the 1976 landmark reforms of the local government system in the country aimed at democratizing the local government administration. Despite the reform measures, the states have continued to maintain strong grip of control over local governments including arbitrary dissolution of elected local government councils by state fiat for varying political reasons. This unhealthy development has provoked the concern of this paper to examine the challenges of local government autonomy in the country and the implications for improved performance of local governments at the grassroots. The paper noted that state governments have exploited certain loopholes in the constitutional provisions regarding inter-governmental relations to undermine the autonomy of local governments. Thus, the paper recommended a review of the constitution to address the contradictions that gave room for the abuses by the state governments. This is to guarantee meaningful autonomy for the local governments in the conduct of their affairs through which they could be strengthened to respond effectively to the demands of effective and efficient services delivery at the local level. The thrust of the paper is that autonomy of the councils will ensure the local governments provide people-oriented programmes, which will enable the people at the grassroots to feel the impact of governance.

**Keywords:** *Local Government, Autonomy, Political Independence, Reforms and Governance*

### **Background to the Study**

The political necessity to extend the power and presence of government throughout a political system is the primary justification for the establishment of local government. In Nigeria, this compulsive need has inevitably led the government to accept the principle of power sharing and distribution in the country's federal structure. Thus, local government in Nigeria evolved in order to bring into effect the extension and distribution of power within the Nigerian federation. In other words, the basis of local government is inextricably woven around the principles of decentralization. According to Dalhatu (2006), this is an arrangement by which the management of public affairs of a country is shared by the centre and the lower levels of government in a manner that the local government is given reasonable scope to raise funds and use its resources to provide a range of socio-economic services and establish programmes and projects that enhance the wellbeing of those resident within its area of authority.

Decentralization involves the transfer of authority on a geographical basis or devolution. Most countries today, avoid centralization because it inhibits the active political participation of the citizens in the running

of their own affairs. Centralization of government may strengthen its power and grip over the people but could also weaken its ability to use that power and possibly erode the basis of its legitimacy. It becomes imperative therefore, for an appropriate mechanism for dispersal and at the same time conservation of political power. This underscores the need for decentralization and by extension the justification for the existence of local government. Gboyega (1987) argued that the existence or need for local government can be justified on the basis of its being essential to democratic governance or administrative purposes such as responsiveness, accountability and control. Ola (1984) cited in Adeyemo (2005) amplified this position into different schools of thought with emphasis on the functional responsibilities of local government. These schools are democratic participatory school; the efficient service delivery school; and the developmental school.

The democratic participatory school holds that local government functions to bring about democracy and to afford the citizenry opportunities for political participation as well as to educate and socialize them politically. The efficient service delivery school of thought, on the other hand, stresses that what is important and central to the local government is not the bringing about of democracy perse but rather its ability and capability to provide efficient and effective basic services to the people at the grassroots. The developmental school of thought lays emphasis on how local government in a developing country can be an effective agent of a better life, an improved means of living socially and economically, and as a means to better share of the national wealth.

Local governments symbolize catalyst of socio-economic and political development in every country of the world. They provide the foundation upon which other structures of governance (state and federal) are created. Local governments are closet than other levels of government to the vast majority of people who inhabit the rural areas. They are thus, in a better position than the state and federal governments to appreciate the real problems of the people and serve as the most effective agents for mobilizing the people for collective energy and resources towards engineering positive social, economic and political development of the country. It is the realization of the importance of local government as a catalyst of development and engine of progress that the paper advocates the autonomy of this tier of government in the conduct of their internal affairs in order to enhance the performance of their traditional role as vehicles of socio-economic and political development at the grassroots.

The history of Nigerian local government system has been characterized by yearnings for democratization and autonomy to enable the local governments assume their socio-economic and political functions of transforming their local communities. This thinking accelerated the demands for the right to participate in local politics. Before the adoption of a uniform local government system in Nigeria following the 1976 Local Government Reforms, issues and problems of local governments were entirely left to the whims and caprices of the regional and later state governments. The regional or state governments, without exception, modified and manipulated local government systems and institutions as they considered expedient. These situations whittle down the power and autonomy of the local government authorities.

With the 1976 Local Government Reforms, there has been improvement in the degree of autonomy granted to the local governments in principle. The government guarantees the statutory nature of local government by embodying it in the 1979 constitution wherein Section 7(1) of the constitution states that: The system of democratically elected local government councils is under this constitution guaranteed (FGN, 1979). According to Adeyemo (2005), despite the inclusion of this provision in the constitution, successive administrations in the country have undermined the so-called autonomy of the local

governments. This paper is thus, an interrogation of the challenges of practicing an enduring autonomy in the Nigerian local government system vis-à-vis concerted efforts since the 1976 Local Government Reforms to concretize some degrees of autonomy in the local government administration.

The paper is divided into four parts. Part one is a theoretical consideration of the two key concepts in the paper – local government and local government autonomy. Part two discusses the inherent contradictions in the stated intentions of the 1976 local government reforms and constitutional provisions, which posed challenges for local government autonomy in the country. Part three contains some observations and broad recommendations on the way forward towards evolving an autonomous result-oriented local government system in Nigeria. Part four and last, is the conclusion, which states the position taken by the paper, bordering essentially on the need to thrash out all obstacles to local government autonomy in order to enhance the performance of local governments in effective and efficient services delivery at the grassroots level.

### **Local Government**

There exist some degrees of consensus among scholars on the meaning of local government, though few definitions differ based on different socio-cultural and political environments of scholars. According to Okunade (1985), local government is essentially a form of devolution as opposed to deconcentration, both being types of decentralization. Local government as a form of devolution involves the legal conferring of powers to discharge specified or residual functions upon formally constituted authorities. The United Nations Office (UNO) for Public Administration cited in Okunade (1985), defined local government as:  
... a political sub-division of a nation (or in a federal system a state), which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local affairs including the power to impose taxes or to exert labour for prescribed purposes. The governing body of such an entity is elected or otherwise locally selected.

Robson (1949) defines local government as a territorial non-sovereign community possessing the legal rights and the necessary organization to regulate its own affairs. Awa (1981) sees local government as a political authority setup by a nation or state as a subordinate authority for the purpose of dispersing or decentralizing political power. Wraith (1984) defines local government as the act of decentralizing power, which may take the form of deconcentration or devolution. Deconcentration involves delegation of authority to field units of the same department and devolution on the other hand refers to a transfer of authority to local government units or statutory bodies e.g. Commission, Board, etc. From this perspective, Wraith (1984) stressed that local government is a lesser power in the national polity. It is an administrative agency through which control and authority relate to the people at the grassroots level or periphery.

According to Emezi (1984), local government is a system of local administration under local communities that are organized to maintain law and order, provide some limited range of social amenities, and encourage co-operation and participation of inhabitants towards the improvement of their conditions of living. Local governments provide their communities with formal organizational framework, which enables them to conduct their affairs effectively for the general good. In essence, the conceptual view of local government is basically a function of space and time. For instance, during the colonial period, native administration was primarily established for the maintenance of law and order. With the emergence of independence, the emphasis shifted from enforcement of law and order to provision of social services.

Thus, the Guidelines for the 1976 Local Government Reforms defined local government as:  
Government at local level exercised through representative councils established by law to exercise specific

powers within defined areas. These powers should give the council substantial control over local affairs as well as the staff and institutional and financial power to initiate and direct the provision of services and to determine and implement projects so as to complement the activities of the state and federal governments in their areas, and to ensure through devolution of functions to these councils and through the active participation of the people and their traditional institutions, that local initiatives and responses to local needs and conditions are maximized (FGN, 1976).

Arising from these conceptual views, the 1976 Local Government Reforms stated the primary objectives of local government as follows:

- (a) To make appropriate services and development activities responsive to local wishes and initiatives by devolving or delegating them to local representative body;
- (b) To facilitate the exercise of democratic self-government close to the grassroots level of our society, and to encourage initiatives and leadership potentials;
- (c) To mobilize human and material resources through the involvement of members of the public in their local development; and
- (d) To provide a two-way channel of communication between local communities and government (both state and federal) (FGN, 1976).

The 1976 Local Government Reforms sought to make local government in Nigeria the bedrock of national politics. In this wise, H. V. Akpan in Adeyemo (2005) sees local government as the breaking down of a country into smaller units or localities for the purpose of administration in which the inhabitants of the different units or localities concerned play a direct and full part through their elected representatives, who exercise power or undertake functions under the general authority of the national government. This presupposes that local government exists in such a place where elections take place as and when due to enable the people have a direct or indirect participation in matters that concern them. It also commutes decentralization of power or authority. Thus, local government has some defining characteristics, which include operating in a restricted area within a nation or state; elected or non-elected representatives; and a measure of autonomy, including the power of taxation. This means that local government is a system of local authority created by law having a defined territory, and a reasonable degree of autonomy for carrying out its functions. It is the closest level of government to the people at the local level.

### **Local Government Autonomy**

The conceptual interpretation of the term “local government autonomy” is perceived as local self-government or grassroots democracy (Adeyemo, 2005). Grassroots democracy is primarily aimed at giving the vast majority of the people the fullest opportunity to participate in determining their own destiny. Nwabueze (1983) noted that autonomy under a federal system means that each government enjoys a separate existence and independence from the control of the other governments. In other words, it is an autonomy, which requires not just the legal and physical existence of an apparatus of government like a legislative assembly, the executive, the judiciary, etc but each tier of government must exist not as an appendage of another. Every level of government, federal, state and local government, must exist as an autonomous entity in the sense of being able to exercise its own will in the conduct of its affairs free from direction of another level of government. Nwabueze (1983) asserted that autonomy would only be meaningful in a situation where each level of government is not constitutionally bound to accept dictates or directives from another. He stressed that the autonomy of local government under a federal system means that:

Each government enjoys a separate existence and independence from the control of the other governments. It is an autonomy, which requires not just the legal and physical existence of an apparatus of government like a legislative assembly, governor or court, but that each government must exist not as an appendage of another government but as autonomous entity in the sense of being able to exercise its own will in the conduct of local affairs.

This means that autonomy would only be meaningful if and where each level of government is not bound by the constitution to accept dictates or directives from another. According to the Centre for Democratic Studies, Abuja in Adeyemo (2005), local government autonomy refers to the relative discretion, which local governments enjoy in regulating their own affairs. That is, the extent to which local governments is free from the control of state and federal governments in the management of local affairs.

Davey (1991) argued that local government autonomy is primarily concerned with the question of responsibilities, resources and discretion conferred on the local authorities. It is thus, presumed that local government must possess the power to take decisions over its internal affairs independent of external control within the limits of power laid down by the law. Similarly, local governments must garner sufficient resources particularly of finance to meet their responsibilities. However, it is obvious that there cannot be absolute autonomy or absolute local self-government within a sovereign state. If local governments were completely autonomous, they would be sovereign states. Thus, local government autonomy in the context of the Nigerian state simply means the relative independence of local government from control by both the state and federal governments.

Odoh (1991) defines autonomy in the context of local government administration as the ability and capacity of local governments to act towards defined goals. Indeed, local government autonomy refers to the relative discretion, which local governments enjoy in regulating their own affairs. The goal-value of local self-government is to give the majority of the people the opportunity to participate in the political process in which they determine their own development. However, there cannot be absolute local government autonomy due to the interdependence of the three tiers of government. Thus, local government autonomy connotes relative independence of local government from state and federal governments control over matters of grassroots governance. Though, local government is said to be non-sovereign that does not preclude autonomy in its sphere of authority. The issue of autonomy is therefore, fundamental to the efficiency and effectiveness of the local government in its service delivery functions at the grassroots.

### **Local Government Autonomy in Historical Perspective**

The struggle for local government autonomy in Nigeria has been a perennial problem, way back to the colonial period. In the 1950s for example, various reforms such as the Northern Nigeria local government law; the Western and Eastern Nigeria local government laws of 1954 respectively, predicated at democratizing local government administration were initiated by the regional governments. However, despite these attempts, the regions had overwhelming control over local governments. This had remained the pattern up to 1976 when the nation-wide local government reforms was introduced. Thus, in the forward to the Federal Government Guidelines for the 1976 Local Government Reforms, it was remarked that the state governments had continued to encroach upon what would have been the exclusive preserve of local governments. The 1976 Local Government Reforms bestowed on the local governments the power of grassroots governance and local governments were formally recognized as the third tier of government in

Nigeria. This was subsequently embodied in the 1979 constitution. Despite this statutory provision, successive administrations in the country have continued to undermine the autonomy of the local governments.

Paradoxically, military regimes have tried more to give local governments their rightful position through the revitalization and restructuring of the local government system in the country. For instance, the scrapping of the state ministries of local government throughout the country consequent upon the recommendation of the 1988 Dasuki Report on local government under Babangida Military government, led to the removal of the political control and bureaucratic red-tapism created by the ministries in the functional performance of local governments. Also, the election into the local government councils in December, 1987 was an attempt to restore democracy to the grassroots since the last election into the local councils in 1976 expired in December, 1979. Other efforts made by the Military towards local government autonomy were the approved scheme of service for local government employees in 1988; the direct disbursement of funds to local governments to forestall the hijacking of funds of local governments by state governments; as well as the increased statutory allocation to local governments from 10-15% in 1990; and from 15-20% in 1992(Otu, 2001).

These measures were to enhance financial autonomy and regular sources of revenue and by implication, the viability of local governments in Nigeria. To address the executive capacity of the local governments, three federal universities were designated for the training of middle and upper level manpower for the local governments. The three Universities were Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria; Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife; and University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The Federal Government made substantial amount of money as grants to these universities. This was to improve the performance of local government councils across the country through human capacity building for enhanced autonomy of the local governments.

### **Challenges of Local Government Autonomy**

The Nigerian constitution established local government autonomy by recognizing local government as the third tier of government separate and distinct from the state and federal governments under the nation's federal system. The implication of this is that the local community ought to enjoy local self-government, have liberty to make bye-laws to enable them perform specific functions; control their finances; and formulate policies that enhance grassroots development. However, in practice, the full realization of local government autonomy has over the years been unsuccessful whether under military or civilian administration.

One of the major defects of the pre-1976 local government system in Nigeria was the whittling down of their powers by the state governments that continued to encroach upon what would have normally been the exclusive preserve of local governments. Others were lack of adequate funds, in-appropriate institutions, inadequate staffing arrangement and excessive politicking, which together made the emergence of a virile local government impossible. There was also the problem of disconnect between the people and government at the local level. The 1976 Local Government Reforms was therefore, introduced to address these problems. Local government, it was argued, must have defined and precise functions designed to promote the development of local government areas; they must have assured finance to enable them plan their budget and carry out their functions; and they must have adequate staff. These were indications that the reforms sought to bring about the evolution of a local government system capable of internally evolving policies among alternatives without extraneous control in the interest of its citizens.

Lack of autonomy is a central problem of the Nigerian local government system. There is a need for a local government that is truly autonomous vis-à-vis state and federal governments. The state governments exploited the ambiguities in the provisions of the 1979 constitution and subsequent reviewed constitutions to suit their selfish desires. They neglected aspects of the 1976 local government reforms that they were displeased with and distorted those that were merely convenient. For example, throughout the Second Republic, 1979-1983, no election was held into the local government councils, only sole administrators and caretaker committees were appointed. This was at variance with the 1976 reforms and the 1979 constitution, which in section 7 provided for democratically elected local government councils.

The re-emergence of the military into the political scene in 1983 brought about a shift of local government control from the state to the federal government. There were deliberate and conscious efforts at a radical transformation of the status of local government with greater powers and resources been transferred to the local government through various reforms such as the 1988 reforms. However, the exit of the military and the enthronement of democratic government in 1999 brought to the fore again, the problem of the local government autonomy. The provisions regarding local government administration in the 1999 constitution created a lot of confusion. For instance, the 1999 constitution in Sections 7 and 8 recognized local government as a third tier of government and at the same time give the state government the power to lord it over the local government thus:

There shall be the system of local government by democratically elected councils, (which) is by this constitution guaranteed and accordingly, the government of every state shall, subject to section 8 of this constitution ... ensure their existence under a law, which provides for the establishment; structure; finance; and functions of such councils (FGN, 1999).

The implication of these provisions is that local government cannot exercise the functions assigned to it in schedule 4(1) of the constitution unless the state House of Assembly had passed a law in that respect. Another area of contradiction is in respect of the tenure of the local government councils. While the constitution provided for four years tenure for federal and state political office holders, it was silent on the tenure of local government political office holders. Furthermore, the constitution in the concurrent legislative list gives the National Assembly the power to make laws with respect to the registration of voters and the procedures regulating elections into local government councils. The same constitution gave powers to state Houses of Assembly to make laws in respect of election into local government councils. This became source of friction between the states and federal government as witnessed between Lagos state and the Federal Government during the Second Republic.

Another dimension of the contradictory provisions of the 1999 constitution, which has impaired local government autonomy, was the provision that empowered the state governments to determine and create new local government areas. However, Section 8(6) of the same constitution vested on the National Assembly the power to ratify such newly created local government areas before they become legal entities. This provision brought about tussle for the control of local government administration between the state and federal governments. For example, in the Second Republic, states like Lagos, Niger, Oyo, Kogi amongst others, which created new local government areas in keeping with this constitutional provision were denied recognition by the federal government.

Indeed, Nwabueze (1983) and Ugwu (2003) in Asaju (2010) argued that the constitutional power to create local government, define its structure, composition and functions belong to the state governments,

However, while the 1976 Local Government Reforms recognized local government as a third tier of government after the federal and state governments, some provisions in the reform Guidelines and constitution are self-contradictory and ambiguous to guarantee the intended status of local government. For instance, the Guidelines in its paragraph 2 distinguished between local government and the state and federal governments by considering local government as a body created by and deriving its powers from state government. But in paragraph 7 of the same Guidelines the term third tier refers to:

A set of local governments with their own identity, powers and sources of revenue established under state legislation and functions for which they are responsible to the state (Government Guidelines, 1976).

This provision negated the whole idea of local government being an autonomous entity by reason of its recognition as third tier of government, since state government shall have an overriding influence over it. Also, section 7 of the constitution is self-contradictory as it talks of autonomous identity, powers, revenue and functions for local governments, while at the same time making them to be responsible to the state governments. Other provisions in the constitution militating against the emergence of a truly autonomous local government include the power of the state government to appoint chairmen of local government councils and to dissolve same at any time if after due enquiry, it was determined that the council was incapable of discharging its functions effectively. The creation of some state government institutions such as the Local Government Service Board or Commission and Ministry of Local Government in each state further provided basis for the erosion of local government autonomy. The activities of these institutions promoted certain political control over the operations of the local governments thereby whittling down their power and autonomy.

The much touted autonomy granted local government in their own affairs by the 1976 local government reforms and embodied in the 1979 constitution, lacked the legal power that would have conferred the force of law or legitimacy on the local government's individual initiatives, policies and programmes. Many of the state governments capitalized on these constitutional lapses and the sweeping powers conferred on them over local government to dictate the tune always on matters of local government administration. Local governments thus suffered from continued whittling down of their powers functionally and financially. According to Brigadier Tunde Idagbon in Otu (2001), there was excessive control by the state governments to such an extent that there were no more local governments but local administrations or more precisely, local arms of state administrations.

This development informed the setting up of the Dasuki Committee, which reaffirmed in its report the autonomous status of local governments but stressed that such autonomy must be backed with authority if local governments were to function effectively as the third tier of government. Indeed, for any local government to be effective, productive and efficient, and accountable for whatever her agencies are doing, it must be given full power and authority coupled with responsibilities. Although Sections 7 and 8 of the 1999 constitution recognized the existence of local governments, and the Fourth Schedule, their functions, no provisions were made for their structures, qualifications of members and tenure of the elected councils. The seventh schedule provides for oath of allegiance and oath of office of all public officers at the federal and state levels but silent on those of local government officials. Even the exercise of the functions listed in the Fourth Schedule is at the behest of the state governments and the state Houses of Assembly. These anomalies no doubt, constrain the local government from truly operating as an autonomous third level of government in the Nigerian federal system.

hence local government is no more than mere state agency or a creation of the state government. To them, it would be erroneous to consider local government as an independent third level of government, which implies that the issue of autonomy of local government becomes a myth rather than a reality.

Local government autonomy has also to do with finance. The constitution empowers the state governments to scrutinize and approve local government budgets and expenditures through the state Houses of Assembly. Many state governments have exploited this constitutional provision to exercise arbitrary and undue control over local government finances through the establishment of the state- local government joint account, which has been a thorny issue in the state-local government relations. Through this arrangement, many state governments have starved the local governments of statutory grants thereby denying the local governments of funds to render essential services, which could impact on the lives of the people at the grassroots. Besides, apart from arbitrary deductions from local government allocations through the Joint Account, some state governments compelled local governments to embark on ridiculous projects that have no direct bearing on the local communities under the pretext of ensuring uniformity in development (Asaju, 2010).

It has been difficult to practice an enduring autonomy in the local government system. This is in spite of the various institutional structures put in place since the 1976 local government reforms to concretize autonomy in the local government administration such as human capacity building through the designation of some universities for local government manpower training; increase in the local government share of the federation account from 10 to 20%; abolition of state ministries of local government; etc. The obstacles are constitutional provisions, political instability, financial problems, etc. The continuous over-bearing role exercised by states over local government affairs poses serious threat to the autonomy of local governments. This can be seen within the realm of various contradictory rules, instructions, supervisory powers passed down to the local governments, some of which are outside the constitutional jurisdiction of the local governments (Odoh, 2010).

Political instability in Nigeria militates against the autonomy of local governments. This is because of the constant swinging of political pendulum oscillating between sole administratorship; caretaker committee system; and the elected councils. The sole administratorship and caretaker committee system often ceded the local government to state control thereby eroding its autonomy. Also the usurping of local government functions and revenue sources by the state governments constitute erosion of the autonomy of the local governments. For instance, it is not uncommon to see state authorities interfering in the collection of revenue and royalties from markets, motor parks, building plans and approvals, forest royalty and so on.

Odoh (1991) argued that internal revenue is the backbone of local government autonomy yet, most local governments are heavily dependent on the federal allocation to meet their statutory responsibilities. This tends to compromise their autonomy as "he who pays the piper dictates the tune". The autonomy of local governments is thus closely related to their financial viability. The present unhealthy financial conditions of the local government should be therefore, rescued. The federal and state governments should ensure that they do not infringe on the revenue yielding areas of local governments. The local governments need to increase their internally generated revenue base rather than relying on the federal allocation. The local governments should also re-order their priorities and block all avenues of wastage and leakages. It is appreciated that finance is the bedrock of any meaningful development, hence the compelling need for the local governments to strengthen their revenue base.

Also militating against meaningful autonomy of the local government is the class structure of the Nigerian society. Elaigwu (1980) noted that often, elites at the centre become so suspicious of local elites, as alternative political leaders, that devolution of power to grassroots level is de-emphasized. The elites in the central government will not permit any substantial devolution of power, which will make local governments to enjoy meaningful autonomy. The elites at the centre are in perpetual struggle to centralize authority at the centre. They would normally want to feel secured before permitting local governments to effectively operate. The dilemma between control and participation often gets resolved in favour of control and whatever minimal forms of participation are permitted, are geared towards “bringing government closer to the people” than “bringing the people closer to the government” (Elaigwu, 1980). The unwillingness of state government officials to devolve authority to the local government without stern control inhibits efforts in the direction of participatory democracy. It is hardly realized by many Nigerian leaders that democracy at the local government level is an important aspect of the development of democratic political culture, which underwrites national politics.

### **Recommendations**

Local government autonomy especially financial independence will go a long way in bringing development to the grassroots. This would in turn reduce the suffering and underdevelopment being experienced by the local populace, which forms the larger segment of the Nigerian society. The living conditions in most rural areas in Nigeria are barely tolerable by any standard. This has resulted in the increasing influx of the rural population into the cosmopolitan city centres thereby over-straining and out-stretching the available social services in the cities. The people at the grassroots must be involved in the national drive towards sustainable growth and development of the country. This is predicated on the degree of autonomy enjoyed by the local governments to play their statutory role as veritable agents of grassroots development.

Local governments must be strengthened, autonomous and made accountable to the people rather than the stifling control the states have on them. There must be a symbiotic relationship between the state and local governments to promote mutual interdependence and engender development of the grassroots and by extension national development. Most often, local governments are deliberately rendered impotent in discharging their primary responsibilities and portrayed as inefficient, corrupt and unnecessary tier of government. They are made scapegoats for the lapses that are even more pronounced in other levels of government such as corruption, in-efficiency, and lack of visionary leadership. Concerted efforts should be made to reconcile participation of people in their own administration with the need for an efficient delivery of basic services at the grassroots level. With the autonomy of local government, its objective expectations and goal-values would be effectively realized. The centrality of local government as an agent of grassroots development implied that any future reforms of the system must focus on the enhancement of the service delivery capacity of the institution anchored on meaningful autonomy.

The contradictions in the constitution in relation to local government administration, discussed in the paper made it difficult to locate constitutionally the locus of power as it affects state- local government relations. The states have often exploited such constitutional ambiguity to usurp the powers and functions of local governments. This needs to be reversed through constitutional review to grant the local government's meaningful autonomy over their own affairs in order to enhance the service delivery capacity of the third tier of government in Nigeria. Local governments must be autonomous to increase in competence and resource base and accordingly, reduce congestion of responsibility in the central government. This will enable national agencies to concentrate on overall development measures. The local governments should be granted autonomy to enable them accelerate the pace of development at the local level. They are closest to the people at the grassroots and as such, possess intimate knowledge of people's needs, problems and potentials. There is thus, a close relationship between local government autonomy and socio-economic development at both local and national levels.

Lack of dependable revenue base remains a critical factor in the erosion of local government autonomy. Even though one of the criteria for creating local governments as provided in the 1976 reforms was the issue of viability, most local governments created since then have been largely dependent on the Federation Account to run their affairs. Besides, most of the state governments do not remit the statutory 10% of their internally generated revenue to the local governments as required. Instead, they have continued to hijack most of local governments' sources of revenue as listed in the Fourth schedule of the 1999 constitution (FGN, 1999). Local governments have thus come to depend almost exclusively on the federally allocated revenue for survival and meeting constitutional responsibilities such as staff salaries, which are often in arrears of many months.

The usurpation of local government functions and revenue sources by the state governments, which had continued to erode the autonomy of local government, must be stopped in order to ameliorate the unhealthy financial conditions of the local councils. The local governments should also intensify efforts at internally generated revenue to reduce their dependence on Federation Account while the state governments should be made to honour their statutory contribution of 10% of their internally generated revenue to the local councils. This would improve the ability of the local governments to meet the finances of their constitutional responsibilities and enhance their autonomy.

### **Conclusion**

The concern of this paper is in enhancing the service delivery capacity of local governments in Nigeria through meaningful autonomy and improved funding. In pursuance of this, the paper discussed the major challenges of local government autonomy in the country and argued that the extent to which the local governments have been able to cope with the challenges in practical terms determines their level of efficiency and effectiveness in services delivery at the grassroots. The view taken in the paper is that the singular most important factor responsible for the non-performance of local governments in Nigeria is lack of autonomy, which has whittled down their powers and subjects them to the whims and caprices of the state governments.

The local governments should be made truly autonomous so as to rightfully lay claim to the status of a third tier of government. For meaningful development at the grassroots level, the states must recognize local governments as partners in progress rather than a servant-master relationship. The two must partner in enhancing grassroots development through the provision of essential services to improve the standard and living conditions of the local populace. The problem of local governments in Nigeria as Oyeyipo (1985) rightly observed, lies in not giving them a chance to grow, to make their own mistakes, to correct such mistakes, and to become respectable, responsible and trusted institutions of governance at the local level.

The paper in the main argues that if Nigeria requires to evolve a virile and result-oriented local government system, the anomalies in the constitution as it affects local government autonomy should be rectified to give meaningful autonomy to the local governments on matters of finance, personnel, among others as any measure taken short-of thrashing out the issue of autonomy is to a large extent bound to lead no-where. However, this recommendation does not suggest sovereign government at the local level. The recommendation is that limitations on local government like any other level of government should be constitutional and only on grounds that are reasonably justified in a democratic dispensation. With autonomy assured, local governments could then play their statutory role of providing effective and efficient services to meet the basic needs of the people, which would enhance sustainable development at the local level; and by extension, serving as catalyst of social and economic development of the country.

## References

- Adamolekun, L. et al (eds.) (1979), "The New Local Government System in Nigeria, Ibadan" HEB
- Adamolekun, L. (ed.) (2005), *Public Administration in Africa: Main Issues and Selected Country Studies*, Ibadan, Spectrum Books Ltd.
- Adeyemo, D. O. (2005), "Local Government Autonomy in Nigeria: A Historical Perspectives" *Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol.xNo.II
- Alkassim, B. (2013), "IBB Canvasses for Local Government Autonomy" *Daily Trust Newspaper*, September 23, 2013.
- Asaju, K. (2010), "Local Government Autonomy in Nigeria: Politics and Challenges of the 1999 Constitution", *International Journal of Advanced Legal Studies and Governance* Vol. I No. I, April 2010.
- Awa, E. O. (1981), "The Theory of Local Government" *Quartly Journal of Administration*, Vol. xv Nos I&II October/January, 1981.
- Dalhatu, S. (2006), "Essays on Local Government Administration: Fostering Better service Delivery, Record Keeping, Accountability and Empowerment at the Local Government". Kano: Benchmark Publishers.
- Davey, K.J. (1991), "Local Autonomy and Independent Revenue" *Journal of Public Administration*, 49:45.
- Egonwan, J. A. (1984), "Principles and Practices of Local Government in Nigeria, Benin" SMO: Aka Publishers.
- Ekponko, C. P. (1999), "An Ideal Local Government in Action". Corporate Management Development Centre: Uyo
- Elaigwu, J. I. (1980) "Local Government and Political Development: The Challenges of Participation and Control in Grassroots Government in Nigeria". In Aliyu, A. Y. (ed.), *The Role of local Government in Social, Political and Economic Development in Nigeria, 1976-79*, Zaria: ABU Press.
- Emezi, C. (1984), "Local Government in Historical Perspectives" *Nigerian Journal of Public Administration and Local Government*, Vol. II No. II.
- Gboyega, A. (1987), "Political values and Local Government in Nigeria". Lagos: Malthouse Press Ltd.
- Jinadu, A. L. et al (eds.) (2003), "Governance and Politics at the Local Level, Proceedings of CASS Policy Dialogue". No 1 Port Harcourt, CASS.
- Nwabueze, B. O. (1983), "The Presidential Constitution of Nigeria" conference paper, ABU, Zaria, March, 1983. Odoh, A. (1991), *Autonomy as a Principle of Local Government Administration*, unpublished PhD Thesis, ABU, Zaria.
- Odoh, P. (2010), "Reflections on Local Government Autonomy in Nigeria: The Quest for Sustainable Grassroots Democracy and Development". Ijebu-Ode: JDPC Printers
- Olowononi, G. D. (1983), "The Evolution of the Finances of Local Government in Nigeria since Independence". Conference paper, ABU, Zaria: March, 1983.
- Otu, M. M. (2001), "Autonomy without Authority: Dilemma of Local Government Council in Nigeria". Kaduna: Issues Communications.
- Oyewo, T. (1987), "Nigerian Local Government Administrative Practice and Management". Ibadan: Jator Publishing Company.
- Oyeyipo, E.A.O. (1985), "Local Government Institutions: Problems and Practices". Conference Paper: ABU, Zaria.
- Robson, W.A. (1949), "Local Government" in *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, Vol. IX
- Salihu, H. A. et al (eds) (2006), "Democracy and Development in Nigeria". Ilorin: Concept Publishers Ltd.
- Takaya, B. J. (1980), "Failures of Local Government Reforms in Nigeria: In Search of Casual factors in Kumo, S. et al (eds.), *Local Government Reforms in Nigeria*". Zaria: ABU Press.
- Wraith, R. (1984), "Local Administration in West Africa". London: Leonage Allen and Unwin.
- Yahaya, A. D. (1980), "The Idea of Local Government in Nigeria: The Need for a re-definition" in Aliyu, A. Y. (ed), *Opcit. FGN (1999), The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*, Lagos, Federal Government Press. *Guidelines for the 1976 Local Government Reforms*, Kaduna: Government Printer.