

Local Government Autonomy: A Panacea for Rural Development in Nigeria

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This paper examined local government autonomy as a panacea for rural development in Nigeria with a view to making a strong case for government's action on the burdening issue towards the economic growth and development of Nigeria. The paper adopted a theoretical approach by critically reviewing the concepts of local government, autonomy, decentralization, as well as inter-governmental relationships and state local government joint autonomy vis-à-vis their interconnectedness in the variables of interest. Local government autonomy has been seen to be the magic wand for rural development. But, the Joint/State/Local government allocation arrangement in our polity has remained the bane of the local government administration. This paper makes a strong case for the institutions of legal framework that will fast-track the signing into law and taking effect, of the local government autonomy in Nigeria without delay. Hence, suggestions are made for the increase of local government allocation from 20.60% to 30.00% establishment of community elders committee to monitor local government among other.

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Background to the Study

The local government system is the third tier of government as enshrined in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Apart from the Federal government, 36 States of the federation, and revenue capital autonomy the next level of government is the local governments. It is on record that Nigeria today has a total of 1774 local government areas. These local governments were created with the aim of bringing governance close to the people; but successive governments have treated and continue to treat the local governments as appendages to the states governments. This situation is worrisome and has made the local governments look like ghost enclaves since no meaningful development is seen within the environments.

The federal, state and local governments are supposed to be ruled by officials elected in election which are conducted by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC); while the Federal and States elections are conducted by INEC, local government elections are held by states-created Independent Electoral Commissions. The governors of many states sometimes, do not even bother about elections, instead appoint caretaker/acting chairman to over-see the affairs of local governments where they dish out mere handouts' in form of allocation for the running of the local governments. These actions greatly affect operations in the local government in Nigeria.

The reason for the 3- tiers of government, as enshrined in the constitution of Nigeria, is because Nigeria practices a decentralized form of government whereby power is devolved from the centre to governments at the states and local governments for effective governance and enhanced national development. National development entails having functional infrastructures which contribute positively to the socio-economic development of the people living in a nation where it is very difficult for a central government to run a whole country especially if the country covers a very large expanse of land, like Nigeria, it becomes surprising that state governments under the state governors in Nigeria, would arrogate the powers of local government administration to themselves and the federal government watches without doing anything tangible to correct the anomaly.

Devolving power to governments governing over smaller areas helps the people in that area to feel the impact of the government more easily as compared to a situation where there is only a central government in existence. The local government areas in Nigeria are governed by the local government chairman and the wards, which are part of the local governments are presided over by councilors. The local governments in Nigeria have not been very effective due to the fact that they are very much dependent on the state government. This dependence on the states continue renovated and culminates in whittling down activities of the local government system thus rendering them ineffective, shadows of government and ghost environments. Thus, the major challenge bedeviling the operations of local government areas in Nigeria remains local government Autonomy – a system of governance that can make them truly autonomous.

The local government, by law, are expected to receive from the nation's revenue a share amounting to 20.60% monthly as allocations accruing to them directly from Federal Allocation. This means that the 774 local government areas in Nigeria have a share amounting to 20.60 of the nation's revenue; while states receive 26.72% and the Federal Government, 52.68%. It is no surprising therefore, that due to the fact that the states have joint account with the local governments, the money due to these local governments do not get to them; when they get at all, it comes very late and piece-meal, since the states have full control over the allocation. It has been alleged that the State Governments in Nigeria delay payments of local governments, they do not remit the complete 20.60% due to the local governments, thus the need to grant local government area full autonomy as well as increase its finding to help in enhancing grassroot participation in the economic development of Nigeria.

Concept of Local Government

Local government is the public administration of towns, cities, countries and districts. Municipalities have municipal ordinances, which are laws, rules or regulations made and enforced by a city government. The ordinances are usually enacted by the city council and become part of that city's municipal code.

A local government is a form of public administration which in a majority of contexts, exists as the lowest tier of administration within a given state. Local governments, generally act within powers delegated to them by legislation or directives of the higher level of government. A local government will typically only have control over their specific geographical region, and cannot pass or enforce laws that will affect a wider area. Local government can also be given authority to determine and execute measures within a restricted area inside and smaller than a whole state. (www.businessdictionary.com definition) local government is one of the means to achieve the ends of decentralization. It is thus linked to the broad concept and practice of decentralization. The concept is also based on devolution of legal authority on territory basis. It may also include exercise of administrative functions (Ali, 2016). The sharing of responsibilities and authority for local government are broadly stipulated in the constitutions of a given country.

The local government are below the state governments. They are generally elected councils that perform wide range of functions. The degree of authority enjoyed by the local government depends on the country's heritage, administrative and political development. Generally, it can be said that in developed economies, local governments enjoy a lot of autonomy. The local government also enjoy powers of taxation in specific fields.

Decentralization

Fesler, Conyers and Rondinelli, view decentralization as a complex issue, both as a concept and in practice. They look at decentralization from four perspectives: Decentralization as a doctrine, as a political process in a given political setting; as an administrative problem; and finally, as an administrative process involving forced

choices and changes in the function area based on administration, and between the regulatory (law and order) and development functions of appointed and elected officials.

Conyers, notes that discussion on decentralization can easily become confused because of analytical problems surrounding the concept of decentralization. He accepts the definition of decentralization by Rundinelli as the transfer of “authority to plan, make decisions and manage public functions” from the national level to any individual, organization, or agency at the sub-national level. It is at the same time pointed out by Conyers that the definition limits attention to “territorial” as opposed to “functional” decentralization. It excludes the questions of transfer of authority from central to peripheral organizations at the national level for example from a government department to a parastatal agency.

On the question of the relationship between centralization and decentralization, conyers, Rondinelli, Faltas, and others appear to echo the views of Fesler in affirming that both “centralization” and “decentralization should be regarded as processes of change, rather than as fixed poles. It is further argued that it is not possible to envisage a totally decentralized system of government, and finally that centralization and decentralization can take place simultaneously (www.academic.com).

Local Government Autonomy

Autonomy of local government can be in distinct parts: Financial and muristrative and political. Local government autonomy can also be defined as “the freedom of the local government to recruit and manage its own staff, raise and manage its own finances, make by-laws and policies, and discharge it's functions as provided by law without interference from the higher governments” (Ogunna, 1996) in Okafor (2011). This includes political, financial and administrative autonomy. Financial autonomy of local government is the “freedom to impose local taxation; generate revenue within its assigned sources, allocate its financial and material resources, determine and authorize its annual budgets without external interference. However, it should be noted that local government is not absolute, the third tier of government returns functional and fiscal relations with the higher tiers of government and the relationship must function within the relevant law.

Inter-Government Relations

Local Government in Nigeria is established by law product of decentralization. Nigeria as a Federal staff has three tiers of government (Federal, State and Local Government) with inter-government relations in political, financial, judicial and administrative area which are mainly established by the constitution. Each tier is expected to operate within its area of jurisdiction, and any action to the contrary is null and void to the extent of its inconsistency with the law.

This is targeted at guaranteeing the autonomy of each tier. Inter-government relation's may be defined as “the complex pattern of interactions, co-operation and inter-dependence between two or more levels of government. (Oguma, 1996) in Agu (2011),

Ademolekwu (2002) adds that inter-governmental relations “is the term commonly used to describe the interactions between the different levels of government within the state”. It can also be looked at as “important interactions occurring between governmental institutions of all types and in all spheres” (Anderson, 1960).

The State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA). The constitution of Nigeria, stipulates that the SJLGA is a special account maintained by each state government into which shall be paid allocations to the local government councils of the state from the Federation Account from the Government of the state” (Section 162(6), 1999 constitution of Nigeria). The account is meant to be a mechanism that implement the notion of 'fiscal federalism' at the local government level in Nigeria. Section 162 of the constitution provides for how public revenue shall be collected and distributed among the three tiers of government in the country.

Local Government Autonomy as a Precursor to Rural Development

It is no longer news that the states joint allocation arrangement in Nigeria has strangulated the operations of the local government system. It is no wonder that the local governments in Nigeria has contained to remain a ghost of themselves without showing any signs of deployment of resources as enshrined in the constitution of the Federal government of Nigeria.

Financial autonomy, therefore, will grant the local governments in Nigeria powers to generate and allocate resources to areas of need without interference from any sources. Financial autonomy, will give the local governments power to execute projects like construction/grading/maintenance of federal roads in the rural communities, repairs of bridges as well as provision of transfer services, improved seedlings and agricultural enlightenment services to farmers. Financial autonomy of the local governments will equally assist them in deploying resources generated in taxes, rates, fines, and other charges into the provision of pipe borne water, rural electrification, provision of scholarships and financial assistance to indigent rural community members.

It is no gain saying the fact that financial autonomy will empower the local governments to build markets, create and recreate opportunities to increase the revenue base toward provision of required services for the rural communities. “Autonomy connotes authority and power”, local government authorities would be challenged to complete with states in the provision of basic infrastructure and enabling environment to personal businesses, wealth creation and poverty eradication in the communities.

Autonomy, means “not under the control of another”. The control is a matter of degree political autonomy, which is the property of having one's decisions respected, honoured, and held within a political context; empowers local governments to make decisions that would enhance and enrich the cultural base of the communities under these. Issues of internal communal conflicts could be resolved by the local government councils without recourses to the states or federal governments. Chieftaincy matters as well as community development unions issues can be handled with powers vested in the local councils.

Through local government political and administrative autonomy, decisions on job creation and employment of qualified members into the local government system within the cadness of level 01-07, can be taken without waiting for waivers from the states or federal authority. By so doing, qualified youths are employed and engaged into gainful employment, skill acquisition programmes, thereby reducing the unemployment rate; increasing productivity as well as reducing the crime rate in the society.

Local government autonomy will contribute immensely in changing the face of local government areas in Nigeria as a whole. If we imagine when the 774 local government councils in Nigeria receive direct allocation from the federal government to the tune of 20.60% of the total revenue generated monthly, one cannot, but see the gargantuan leap in the overall economic, social and rural government autonomy is therefore, the sure spring-board to rural development in Nigeria.

Conclusions

Nigeria's constitution provides an arrangement for a three tier of government – Federal, States, and Local Government. The states/local government joint allocation arrangement has been seen to pose a clog in the wheel of progress of local government administration in Nigeria. This arrangement offers window for manipulations of funds to the local governments by the state.

The actions of the states have created political tensions and heated debates for autonomy of local governments in Nigeria. The tensions generated by the delay in granting autonomy to local government is yet to be doused as local governments continue to wallow in under-development, decay and poverty.

The concepts of local government, autonomy of local government decentralization, inter-governmental relationship between various governments, and States Joint Local Government Allocations have been expoused in this paper. Local government autonomy was x-rayed in line with the financial political and administrative dimension, and narrowing the variables as precursor's for rural development in Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. The federal government of Nigeria, should as a matter of urgency approve the revised constitution of the federal government of Nigeria in consideration of the granting of autonomous status to local governments.
2. The Joint States/Local governments allocation system should be promptly abrogated to allow local governments direct access to their share of federal allocation.
3. The federal government should set up a confidential committee to investigate states of the federation on the use of local governments' funds for the past 10 years with a view to forestalling misappropriations.
4. The federal government should adjust the allocation of Local Government from 20.60% - 20-00% revenue to local governments in order to improve their share of revenue and encourage increased rural development.

5. Government of the federal republic of Nigeria should grant the local government system more powers to encourage rural employment in agriculture and wealth creation.
6. The constitution of the federal government should increase the powers of ward councilors to serve as a check on the local government chairman.
7. The local governments in Nigeria should have a compulsory yearly audited accounts to be presented to the joint committee of selected citizens from each local government area in the country.

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