

Local Government Administration and Challenges of Sustainable National Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Local government was created in Nigeria to play major role and to contribute to the growth and development of the rural dwellers as well as being the instrument for fostering development and implementing rural development at the grassroots level. This explains the expediency of the major local government reforms of 1976. It has however been observed that, actual performance and functioning of local government to achieve the very essence of its creation which is the effective delivery of socio-economic services to the people remains a myth. In the light of this, the study seeks to investigate the challenges confronting the local government in carrying out its constitutional functions as a level of government as well as proffer possible solutions that can help local government act as an engine for sustainable national development. The paper adopts the conceptual approach mainly through the use of secondary data. The theoretical framework adopted in this paper is David Easton system theory. Using the qualitative approach as the method of analysis, the paper found amongst others that usurpation or encroachment into the operations of local government by the state governments, the nature and configuration of the Nigerian state as well as the character of the Nigeria Elites, systemic corruption and wrong conception of rural development serve as some of the major clog in the development engineering of local government administration. The study concludes that local government administration in Nigeria will continue to remain an appendage of the state and federal governments, except some drastic measures are taken to reverse the trend. The paper amongst others, therefore suggest, a review of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in terms of the political and fiscal autonomy of local governments and non-interference in its statutory responsibilities from state and federal governments. It also recommends a total overhauling of the structure of the Nigerian state as was widely canvassed at the 2014 National Conference held in Abuja.

Keywords: *Local Government, Administration, Challenges, Rural Development, Sustainable National Development.*

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Background to the Study

The nexus between local government administration and achievement of sustainable development has gained ascendancy in world development agenda. This has led government of various countries to shift emphasis to development strategies, programmes and projects that recognize the inputs and participation of the citizens at the grassroots. In other words, development strategies are now being designed to involve community participation. Nigeria as one of the developing countries in the quest for rapid development needs also to adopt the strategies that will enhance development and bring happiness to its citizens. This explains the expediency of some reforms in local government functions and operations in Nigeria especially, the major reforms of 1976 (Anyebe, 2015).

Local government in Nigeria was therefore created to play major role and to contribute to the growth and development of the people as well as being an instrument for fostering development and implementing development at the grassroots level. It is in recognition of the conceived roles that Nigeria has between independence and now created 774 local government areas in the country with the sole aim of bringing development to the grassroots. As vital as this third tier of government created essentially to complement the efforts of the states and federal governments in fostering development in rural areas, studies have shown that there have been observable impediments and obstacles infringing on the performance and functions of local government in Nigeria (Olley, 2011, Ikeanyibe, Chukwu and Ibietan, 2018 and Abdulwahab, 2017). These problems have been identified amongst others to include dependency, corruption, inadequate funding, the constitution (legal framework), undue interference from the state government, poor leadership, lack of autonomy, unqualified and uneducated personnels.

It is following from this paradoxical reality that this paper seeks to establish the sustainability of the anticipated development in the rural communities. In other words, the study raises the issue of whether the present level of development in the rural communities are acceptable and can be pass on the future generation. It also raises the question whether the structure of the Nigerian state as is presently constituted; a society that breeds and promotes inequality, uneven development, inequitable control and distribution of resources, systemic corruption, and wide gap between the metropolis (centre) and the periphery (rural communities) can replicate sustainable development in the rural areas in particular and the nation in general.

To achieve the main objective of this paper, we attempt concept clarification of local government, sustainable development as well as expository of the theoretical framework adopted in analyzing our position. The paper examines critically the role of local government in bringing about sustainable development as well as the challenges inhibiting its actual performance. The paper concludes with some recommendation that will help in enhancing development in the country that will be of benefit to the present generation without jeopardizing that of the future generation.

Definition of Concepts

Local Government Administration

Local Government as a concept of study and as institution or process of governance has divergent views in its conceptualization as there are many authors. Ibodje (1999) acknowledging this puts it that local government can hardly be given a one-formal type of definition; as it is also not easy to define it in exact verbal terms by all writers or authors.

Nnaa and Abeki (2017) however contend that the definitional problem should not give room to faulty reasoning that there are no consensus opinion from the myriads of definitions by authors. To them, the plethora of definitions only portray semantic or ideological differences thus, it is being referred to as government at the grass-root localized administration, the lowest tier of government.

The United Nations Division of Public Administration cited in Nnaa and Abeki (2017) defines local government as a political sub-division of a nation (or in a federal system or state) which is constituted by law and has substantial control over local affairs, including the powers to impose taxes or to exact labour for prescribed purpose.

Corroborating the United Nation definition, the National Guidelines for Reform of Local Government (1976) defines local government as Government at (the) local level exercised through representative councils established by law to exercise specific powers within defined areas. These powers should give the councils substantial control over local affairs as well as the staff and institutional and financial powers 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 active participation of the people and their traditional institutions that local initiatives and responses to local needs and conditions are maximized.

In a simpler context, Ibietan (2012) conceives local government in the communal sense to mean people's political instrument to participate in resource allocation, distribution, and power acquisition. Similarly, Prof. Eme Awa cited in Ibodje (1999) conceives local government as a political authority for the purpose of dispersing or decentralizing political power.

According to Orewa (1991) and Orewa and Adewumi (1992) local government is a system of local communities and towns which are organized to maintain law and order, provide some limited range of social services and cooperation of the inhabitants in a joint endeavour towards the improvement of their conditions of living.

From the above definitions, we can broadly say that local government inspite of being a political and administrative unit established by law with functional responsibility, involves the participation in decision-making by the elected representatives of the people for the purpose of bringing development to them at the grassroots. In this vein and for the purpose of this work, local government can be viewed as machinery for sustainable national development engineering at the local level of the state.

Sustainable Development

The concept of sustainable development as a subject of scholarly enquiry is said to be of recent origin. The concept was first used in 1980 by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in the World conservation strategy. It is to be noted however, that at the time in reference the emphasis was on the sustainability of physical environment. An attempt at a universal definition has suffered set back. Hamel (2004) posits that sustainable development applies quite differently to the “developed” North, which is struggling with the unwanted consequences of overdevelopment or misdevelopment, and to “developing” Africa, which is struggling with the unwanted effects of slow or non-development. He therefore concluded that knowledge-sustained development is not on course on a global scale. The problem of search for a catholic conceptualization of sustainable development began to attract less attention when a broader definition was given by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). The commission conceives it as meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of the future generation. Corroborating WCED's definition, Jhingan (2008) asserts that sustainable development means that development should keep going; being development that embraces the present and the future.

Ascher and Healy (1990) argued that sustainable development stresses not the need to limit development, but the need to develop in order to be able to conserve. Sustainable Development is therefore conceived by them as the helpers of development and the guardian of the interests of future generations. Relating it to Africa, Hamel (2004) opines that the essence of sustainable development in Africa commands a dramatic reduction in poverty and hunger, and improved development prospects for future generations; and that considerable progress on these fronts is necessary to achieve meaningful sustainable development.

From the above definitions, it can be concluded that sustainable development is that which addresses the needs and aspirations of the people in the present without jeopardizing their future and that of the generation after them. In other words, it is development on a continuous basis. This study is therefore of the opinion that the needs and aspiration of the people could only be met or achieved on sustainable basis through effective policy engineering (good governance). In this view, the role of good governance (whether at the federal or local level) and sustainable development cannot be overemphasized. Sustainable development therefore calls for good governance-people-oriented policies. This will create sustainable improvement and growth in social, economic, political, technological, and cultural life of the people at the grassroot devoid of incessant crises.

Theoretical Framework

To prevent this work from falling prey to the charge of irrelevancy, we adopt as its theoretical framework, the general system theory.

The System Theory

The system theory is often associated with David Easton who popularized it. Easton (1965) cited in Olley (2011) sees political system as a set of interrelated and reciprocally regulated patterns of actions and orientation, pattern that cluster together in equilibrium and that have

certain needs of maintenance and survival. According to Easton, administration occurs within the framework of an organization, and in this context the political system. This approach treats political system and its entire process as an example of a system. In this sense, the political system is seen as consisting of interdependent parts forming a whole with the objective of fulfilling some definable functions.

From the system perspective, the political system is seen in its entire whole with its different parts interacting and depending on each other to achieve the objectives for which the system is established. The system theory seeks to establish that every system, including the political system has sub-system which makes up the entire system – the subsystems are assigned functions and provided with enabling empowerment including resources, appropriate authority etc to enable them discharge their responsibilities optimally. And where this is the case, there is said to be stability in the political system and vice versa.

Input and output analysis of a political system is very important. A political system is said to obtain its inputs (demands, supports, liberty or autonomy, cooperation, criticisms, resources, information etc) from the environment. These inputs are what the sub-system employed to discharge their responsibilities so that the political system can send out its outputs into the environment and obtain further inputs for its operations.

Local government is regarded as a sub-system to the general system. It is fed with adequate inputs, so that they can contribute appropriately to the entire system. Otherwise, it will fail in its responsibilities to contribute to the system. The local governments in Nigeria constitute the sub-system which contributes to the state in particular and the federation in general. Local governments can only perform their functions by receiving inputs and supports, and converting them into outputs. The inputs come in form of demands on the system to provide some basic infrastructure like good road network, pipe-bore water, health facilities, electricity etc. that can bring about development. Supports on the other hand, involve the people's participation in decision-making process, financial support in form of tax and payment of rates as well as grant from State government and the federal government.

Local Government and Sustainable National Development

To have a deep insight of the challenges of local government in engineering sustainable development, the study examines the roles or rationale for the establishment and recognition of local government as the third tier of government in Nigeria. According to Nnaa and Abeki (2017), Olley (2011) Ibietan (2012) Ezeani (2006) as well as Ademolekun (1983), the roles of local governments in fostering sustainable development in Nigeria have been identified to amongst others include the following:

- i) Integrating the rural populace into the decision-making process of the state through the participation of the local citizens (rural people) in the management of their local affairs.
- ii) **Efficient service delivery:** Local governments are to ensure that the basic needs of local citizens are met through the provision of portable water, health care services, good road network, shelter, food security, electricity, and other socio-economic variables.

- iii) **Instrument for rural development:** One of the cardinal responsibilities of local government is to foster even and rapid socio-economic development of the communities in their domain. This is to be achieved through community-based efforts and the financial contribution from the state and federal governments by given them statutory allocation.
- iv) **It is a training ground for higher politics:** As Mackenzie (1961) cited in Nnaa & Abeki (2017) puts it, legislators at the national level would perform better if they had previous experience at the local government level. This means that local government provides means of training in public administration and can equip one for effective performance at the national level.
- v) **It serves as channel of communication:** Local government serves as two-way communication channel between the central and the grassroots and vice versa. The two-way channel helps to mobilize the people for national tasks and keeps the centre abreast of the development in the rural areas.

In a nutshell, local government is to provide a framework within which local resources, both human and materials are effectively mobilized to bring about rural development and efficient service delivery through the participation of the local citizens. From the above constitutional responsibilities, the local government is most suited for the development of the rural communities which are very remote from both the state and federal governments (Oyedele Osezua, Abdulkareem and Ishola, 2017).

It is in line with this reasoning that the federal government has introduced some rural development programmes. Some of the programmes and projects initiated by government according to Ibenegbu (2017) include; Rural Water Supply schemes, Rivers Basin Development Authority, Agricultural Development Programmes, rural Banking System-Peoples Bank, Rural Electrification Scheme, Adult Education Scheme, Low cost Housing Scheme, Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), Primary Health Care Programmes, Mass Mobilization for Social and Economic reconstruction (MAMSER), National Directorate of Employment (NDE), The Directorate of Foods, Roads, and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), The National Accelerated Food Production Programme, National Orientation Programme, and Green Revolution to mention but a few. However, in spite of these efforts by the federal government, local governments are yet to effectively perform their role that will result to sustainable national development and this inform the basis of this research.

Challenges of Local Government Administration in Fostering Sustainable National Development in Nigeria

The motive of this work is to critically assess the challenges confronting the local government in bringing about sustainable development. In the narrative above, the paper outlines some of the areas which local governments are said to have achieved some feats in rural development. It was however, observed that the efforts have not impacted on the local citizens as it were supposed to be. According to Agbola (2016), Nnaa and Abeki (2017), Acheaoh (2018) amongst other scholars, the existence of local government administration can not dismiss the fact that development in the rural areas in Nigeria has continued to remain a mirage.

In analyzing the challenges facing local government in Nigeria the study classified the problems as identified by scholars and practitioners into two broad categories; conventional and fundamental structural problems.

Conventional Problems

These are problems associated with the day-to-day running of the affairs of local governments which are borne from within the administration. It can also be conceived as political administrative problems. These problems amongst others according to Olley (2011), Anyebe (2015) and Nnaa and Abeki (2017) include:

- a) Inadequate funding resulting from meagre sources of revenue available to local governments as well as the problem of Joint Account with the state; a fiscal obstacle to development engineering and effective service delivery.
- b) **Manpower or Personal Problem:** Qualified and skilled manpower have always been in short supply at the local government level and even when they are found in their specialized skills, the problem of inefficiency still characterize the system, The reason being that the social stigma of working in a remote area makes them to look outside to urban centres thus affecting their efficiency.
- c) **Dearth of Infrastructural Facilities:** The absence or lack of infrastructural facilities such as good road network, electricity, good drinking (pipe borne) water, and other service facilities in the rural areas serve as cog in the wheel of rural transformation.
- d) **Excessive Control and Undue Interference:** From the structure of local government in Nigeria, they are incapacitated by the federal and state governments. The state governments for instance, exert a number of controls over the local governments such that make them ineffective in the performance of their functions. Often times, approved funds are not released for the projects and programmes they are meant for. This implies that local governments in Nigeria lack financial autonomy.
- e) **Imposition of Development Programmes:** Often times programmes and projects that are embarked upon in the rural areas are superimposed on the local citizens devoid their participation through policy contribution. This means that the federal and/or state government often set community development priorities.
- f) **Lack of Relevant Rural Education:** Relevant rural education that address the peculiar needs and aspirations of the rural citizens is yet to receive due attention from the local government hence, you find reasonable number of unemployed graduate in the rural areas.
- g) **Political clientelism:** According to James Weignrood cited in Nnaa (2009) political clientelism is the way party politicians use public resources including job (employment), development programmes and special access to public services in exchange for electoral support. This type of clientel relationship according to Professor Claude Ake (1981) tends to thrive very strongly in the appointment of chairman and members of local government Caretaker Committee. In most cases the appointees may have abysmal knowledge of local government administration as well as being inexperienced. This return hinders efficient management of resources and the people's aspirations and expectations.

- h) **Corruption is Prevalent at the Grassroot Level:** Corruption in this context is viewed as private gains made by public officials and political actors from public resources meant for the execution of development programmes and projects. It is also seen in the area of personnel administration as recruitment and/or promotion that are based on preferences other than merit. This situation is common in Nigeria at the local government level. Most past and present local government administrators have turned local government councils as their private enterprises from where they pay loyalty to their political Godfathers. When resources meant for development at the rural areas are diverted for pecuniary motives by the council administrator, it results to underdevelopment and poverty among the rural citizens.
- Other factors identified as contributing to failure of local government in rural development amongst others include; Poor leadership, lack of fiscal and political autonomy, over populated workers who are mostly unqualified and uneducated, creation of too many local government areas, and lack of coordinated community development programme.
- i. **Fundamental Structural Problems:** According to Nnaa & Abeki (2017) fundamental structural problems are those associated with the nature, philosophies, Principles, and practices inherent in our system. This implies that the structure of the Nigerian state and its class configuration have over bearing influence on the performance of local governments in the country. Problems of local governments are therefore mere manifestation of the contradictions inherent in our system. The problems amongst others include;
- a) **The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria:** The constitution is the fundamental instrument where all tiers of government including local government derive their powers and functions or responsibilities. In the 1999 constitution (as amended), there is no clear distinction of the constitutional power and boundaries of both the state and federal governments as it affects the establishment and operation of the local government. The state and federal governments most often standing on this lapse encroach on some of the functions of the local government. This certainly must retard development in the rural areas.
- b) **Conception of development at the grassroots:** Development has been conceived or perceived by government as the distribution of output generated in the system and allocated to the federating units as a way of engineering development in the rural areas. This perception of development cannot independently bring about rural transformation. The pursuit of happiness of the local citizens through the process of participating in the decision process which is the essence of development is not given priority attention.
- c) **Conflict between objectives and policies:** A view at the objectives for the creation of local government since the colonial era till the present may well be seen as good enough to achieve rural development and transformation. However, the strategies or policy instruments adopted towards realizing the objectives have been basically inconsistent and contradicting. What is responsible for such inconsistencies it is noted, is the need to placate the local citizens in the rural areas, and at the same time satisfy the class interest of the political gladiators who sponsor the creation of these local

governments and see it as their enclaves. Thus while the reason for local government creation provides opportunity for the local people to be represented and consulted, the reverse is the case where representation are foisted on them from the metropole (centre). These representatives pay allegiance and are responsible and accountable to the powers that super-impose them on the people. This keeps them at arms length from the rural people resulting in political alienation and consequent underdevelopment.

- d) **The imperialist foundation and mode of production:** The imperialist foundation and socio-economic policies inherited at independence and rooted in our national ideology in Post-independence Nigeria, is a contributory factor in the failure of local governments. The various approaches and anti-poverty programmes adopted by successive administration to engender development in the rural areas have failed. The reason for the failure being that any programme which seeks to alter distribution without altering the mode of production within which income and wealth are generated and distributed is doomed to failure. This denotes that the failure of local government in the rural areas is rooted in the class configuration and social forces that contend internally within the Nigeria's federal structure.

Conclusion

It is pertinent to note that every development strategy adopted by government has the potential of achieving the overall predetermined result (objectives). And following from the foregoing analysis of local government performances in this work, it shows that objectives and/or rationale for the creation of the third tier of government are well planned and programmed to bring about positive outcomes in the form of sustainable development. This work also confirmed that there are evidences by successive governments in Nigeria by the establishment of various development programmes (as outlined in this paper) designed to bring about sustainable development. However our investigation shows that the empirical reality on the development of the rural areas remains a paradox or myth. This means that local government as agent of rural development has made none or little transformatory impact on the rural citizens, rather it serves as conduit pipe through which the rural areas are further exploited and starved of any meaningful development. This assertion corroborates the view of Nnoli (1980) who sees self-help, a strategy for rural development as a form of exploitation. In same vein, Okoli (2000) contended that rural community development was a Colonial ideology hoisted on the rural citizens and upon independence; it has continued to be employed by successive Nigerian governments. This strategy Okoli further argue was predicated on the Colonial policy of economic exploitation of the rural areas which serve as an instrument used to sustain the self-interest of the rural class, while the rural citizens continue to suffer under poor, harsh and stagnated conditions. This explains why basic social services, public utilities and essential infrastructure are still being woefully inadequate in the rural communities. In line with the observations above, this paper offers some way forward on challenges of sustainable national development.

Recommendations

The truth remains that the issue of sustainable national development in Nigeria is immensely intertwined with the developments in the local government system. However, there are identified challenges discussed earlier in this work that impede its effective operations.

To overcome the challenges of sustainable national development, the paper suggests as follows;

- i) The government should strengthen the necessary institutional and legal framework that will empower local government chairman to periodically articulate, document, and transmit to higher (federal or state) government for implementation; the needs, concerns and input of Nigerian citizens towards sustainable national development.
- ii) Federal and State Government should embark on employment-generation programme aimed at reduction of poverty level in all the local government areas. Indeed, eradication of hunger from the local government areas should be a priority programme of the federal and state governments to Nigerian citizens in rural areas.
- iii) Local government should be given a reasonable degree of political and fiscal autonomy with restricted central government interference. Federal government should play down on excessive control and undue interference on local communities' programmes and projects.
- iv) Government should create enabling environment through the provision of better infrastructure; good road network, electricity, pipe-borne water, health care facilities, etc that will help the local governments to dispense its functions in a more effective and efficient manners.
- v) Government should build confidence in the rural citizens at the grassroot that local government is not a political enclave or estate of some ruling elites but a tier of government established or created to provide and deliver the basic necessities of life which when adequately provided constitutes a springboard for sustainable national development.

In addition to the above suggestions or way forward, this paper is of strong opinion that for local government to effectively and efficiently serves as driver of sustainable national development, government should as a matter of urgency and utmost importance embark` on the review of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as was widely canvassed at the 2014 National Conference held in Abuja.

It is also suggested that the flaws in the structure of the Nigerian state inherited from the imperialist foundation and rooted in our national ideology of post-independence Nigeria which manifest in the character of the Nigerian elites or ruling class should be addressed holistically. This is because the structure of the Nigerian State as is presently constituted breeds and promotes inequality, uneven development, inequitable control and distribution of resources, systemic corruption, wide gap between the metropole (centre) and the periphery (rural areas). This work therefore posits that Nigeria should redefines its system by addressing the identified flaws through restructuring that has been clamored by the vast majority of its citizens in the rural areas, re-orders its priorities, and pursue an indigenous and bottom-top development model based on the people's culture.

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