

# PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION IN NIGERIA DURING THE 21ST CENTURY

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## Abstract

Local government administration is seen as an agent of effective development, given the fact that, it is the nearest form of government to the citizenry. In Nigeria, the system of local government has not gone through significant change since 1999. As usual, the constitutional provisions regarding the existence of local government remained subject of willful interpretation by the other tiers of government. Also, while certain legal interpretations were sought on “modus operandi;” the survival of the local government system was still subject to power game between the federal and state governments. This study however examines the major achievements and shortcomings of local government administration in Nigeria since the beginning of 21st century. It is however divided into six sections. Section one introduces the paper. This is followed by the conceptual and theoretical frameworks. The third section describes the models of local government administration in Nigeria. While section four examines the contributions of local government administration to the socio-cultural, economic and political development in Nigeria during the 21st century, section five also examines the major contemporary problems of local government administration in Nigeria, and the last section concludes and proffers solution to the problems of local government system in Nigeria.

Keywords: Local Government, Local Administration, National Development, Local Economy, Local Politics

## Introduction

National development cannot be effectively consolidated anywhere in the world if grassroots development is neglected. Similarly, for good governance to thrive much energy, time and resources must be invested in local government system. That is why most states of the world including those with centralized political systems establish sub-national units of government to address local issues, which cannot be handled effectively by the central government, particularly the promotion of local development, local administration, local economy and local politics. These sub-national units of government are usually separated from the national government. These units are referred to as local governments in Nigeria. Therefore, according to Oni (2000), local government

either as a political or administrative instrument constitutes the most critical level of government at which the momentum to sustain national development can be created.

Local government is different from local administration in terms of the constitution of those who run the affairs of this level of government. Ideally local governments are supposed to be managed by elected representatives of the people. Generally, government activities when conducted from a central point and far away from the people tend to become impersonal and against this impersonality or abstract view, there is a perpetual rebellion. Localities are not simply areas and sites but groups of people living together as neighbours. They feel that they differ from the abstract average of humanity legislated for by the government

and claim discretion to apply its uniform rules in a way more closely fitting their real needs and their own ideas of themselves. Also, important are the facts of the amount and the variety of work to be done, it is impossible for a single authority to undertake directly their performance. The central government does not have the requisite knowledge of all the diverse problems which are local in character. In Nigeria, there are three distinct levels of government. These are the federal, thirty-six states and seven hundred and seventy-four local governments. Each of these tiers of government has its spheres of functions and responsibilities. For instance, the federal government has exclusive constitutional responsibilities such as issuance of currency, foreign affairs, exploitation of mineral deposits, immigration and emigration, defence, etc, under the exclusive legislative list, while the state governments have control over the concurrent legislative list which they share with the federal government, like education, health, agriculture, industries, etc. But the residual legislative lists or responsibilities are particularly reserved for the state which are in most cases delegated to the local governments in Nigeria. Nigeria just like any other developing nation is working aggressively to develop economically, politically, socially, culturally, technically and scientifically. This quest can only be feasible if all tiers of government make a radical positive change towards development.

In this 21st century, local government system has contributed immensely to the economic well being socio-cultural and political development in Nigeria. And also, the existence of local government in some cases has led to the emergence of hardship for the citizenry and insecurity for the unity of Nigeria which this paper actually analyzed.

#### Conceptual and theoretical framework

Local government is ordinarily understood as the administration of locality, a

village, a town, a city or any other area smaller than the state by a body representing the local inhabitants, possessing a fairly large amount of autonomy, raising at least a part of its revenue through local taxation and spending its income on services which are regarded as local and therefore as distinct from state and central services.

According to 1976 guidelines for local government reform, local government is 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 powers to initiate and direct the provision of services and to determine activities of the state and federal governments in their areas and to ensure through devolution of functions to the councils and through active participation of the people and traditional institutions that local initiative and response to local needs and conditions are maximized.

The United Nations office for Public Administration also refers to local government as a political subdivision of a nation or in a federal system, state, which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local affairs, including the powers to impose taxes or to exact labour for prescribed purposes. The governing body of such an entity is elected or otherwise locally selected.

Bello-Imam (2007) conceives that local government is quite different from local administration. He therefore describes local government as a unit of administration with defined territory, powers and administrative authority with relative authority which administrative authority could be elected or appointed exclusively by the people. But he sees local administration as usually constituting local the administration of local communities by utilizing local agents appointed by and responsible to an external agent, which could be a state, regional or

provincial authority or national government.

Aborisade (2006) holds the opinion that the reasons for creating local governments are identical to that of the states in terms of agitation, want, need and ethnic pride and not necessarily based on the ability to generate fund for survival except perhaps Lagos and Kano states where local governments are viable because of the nature of their economy. He therefore accounts for the creation of local governments in Nigeria from 301 in 1976 to 449 in 1989 to 589 in 1991 and to 774 in 1996.

Rothchild (1994) highlights the three essential characteristics of local government as a set of local authorities or institutions with a separate autonomy and a legal status distinct from that of the central government. Also, as the power of the autonomous local institutions to raise their own revenue and spend it on the discharge of their functions as assigned to them by the laws and as the power of the local institutions to make decisions as responsible organs in their own right and not as an extension of the central administration.

Gboyega 1987 posits four epochs in the development of local government in Nigeria. The first epoch, according to him, spanned the inception of colonial rule up till the early 1950s when the Nature Authority System was rejected in both the Eastern and Western Regions. However, the local government reforms in the Eastern Region in 1951 and the Western Region in 1952 marked the beginning of another epoch in the history of local government in Nigeria. The military coup of 1966 terminated the second phase of local government system and marked the start of a new epoch in the history of local government. The fourth epoch of local government system in Nigeria according to him came with the 1976 local government reforms, which have survived and seem destined to mark a major landmark in the development of local government in Nigeria.

Bello-Imam (2007) goes further to

describe the features of local government reforms in Nigeria after 1976. He describes 1988 reform as sweeping reform which provided opportunity for the citizenry to participate more in local government administration. To him, 1988 reforms centred on the local government autonomy in Nigeria, when local governments have direct share of the federation account and no longer through the state. According to him, the 1991 reform was internal structure reform which extended presidentialism to the local government system in Nigeria. Dapun et al (2010) continues with the review of local government system in 1999 constitution which provided for a democratically elected local government council in section 7 of the constitution. The 2003 local government reform addressed the fundamental problems facing local government over the years which include high cost of electioneering campaign, non performance of the local government and funding of the local governments in Nigeria.

Okotoni (2006) classifies the sources of local government revenue in Nigeria into two; external and internal sources. The external funds mainly consist of statutory allocation from the federal and state governments. This source, according to him, forms the bulk of local government finance in Nigeria. The internal funds are generated through internally generated revenue which a local government generates through its own effort. These include taxes, rates, levies and fines collected locally. He therefore points that the 1999 constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria provides many opportunities for local governments to raise reasonable revenue that could make them to enjoy some measure of financial independence.

The theory that would therefore be most appropriate to better analyze the extent of problems and prospects of local government administration in Nigeria during this 21st century is efficiency services theory. This theory believes that local governments

are established to provide social services effectively and efficiently in accordance to the interests of the people. The point is that local government because of its closeness to an area can provide certain services more efficiently than the central government. Sharpe 1968 provides a very strong case for local government because it is the most efficient agent for providing those services that are essentially local. He suggested that the efficient performance of these services is so compelling that if local government did not exist something else would have to be created in its place. This, Sharpe argued would not be a decentralized branch of the national government because such central government departments can never achieve the needed level of coordination that a local government can forge. Thus, in this theory, the main functional responsibility of local government is to carry out effectively the real local duties allocated to it and that is the highest efficiency rate. This theory enables the critical analysis of local government administration in Nigeria in this 21st century in order to detect the major problems and prospects over the years.

#### Model of local government administration in Nigeria

There are four universal models of local government administration. These are the French model, the communist model, the American model and the Anglo-Salon model.

French model of local government is the most popular form of local government all over the world, especially during the colonial era. Hence, local government under this arrangement was more or less an integral part of state administrative system. The local government in the French model is meant to execute decisions emanating from the superior level of governance. Hence, the relationship among the levels of government is strictly speaking, hierarchical and the local governments are statutorily subordinate to the other levels of government. In the communist model, local government is seen as part of governmental arrangement of central planning for economic development of the

rural peasantry. The principle of local government in the communist world is based on democratic centralism in which power relates from the top to bottom and vice-versa. However, it is hierarchical and rigid in nature.

American model of local government exhibits different patterns which vary from east to west and from rural to urban areas of the country. Therefore, American local government is characterized by great variety and diversity. These are counties, townships, municipalities and special districts. All are designed to govern a limited number of people within its federal system of government.

The Anglo-saxon model of local government emphasizes local autonomy and idiosyncrasies, exercised through locally elected councils. It must be stressed that even in the Anglo-saxon model, the degree of autonomy of local governments varies from country to country, Nigerian local government system therefore is patterned inline with the Anglo-salon model where the councils are constituted through direct election within the jurisdictions of respective local governments.

#### The Contributions of Local Government Administration to The Socio-Cultural, Economic and Political Development of Nigeria in The 21st Century

Local governments have been playing significant roles and contributing to the socio-cultural well-being, economic and political development of Nigeria since the beginning of twenty-first century. These roles and contributions cover a very wide range of responsibilities and services which impact heavily on the livelihoods of individuals. They are for example key to determining where infrastructure should be located anywhere in Nigeria. They protect our environment and also provide services which are crucial to our quality of life such as primary education, primary healthcare, drinking water, recreational facilities, libraries, roads, agriculture etc.

Generally, local governments in Nigeria have been contributing to the

provision of infrastructural and other related services in Nigeria since the beginning of the twenty-first century in the area of transportation, water supply, electricity in terms of rural electrification, health, and education facilities and systems. Infrastructure, whether social or economic plays a significant role in the economy. It eases productive activities by alleviating costs and hence makes firms more competitive. Therefore, no economy can grow and develop without robust and efficient infrastructure. While some aspects of infrastructural development may lean more heavily on the federal government, local governments have been playing key roles in the provision and enhancement of certain infrastructural services.

In addition, local governments have been contributing to the development of transportation and communication in Nigeria since the inception of this century. Many roads in rural areas that come under the authority of local governments have been rehabilitated especially in Lagos, Oyo, Osun, Ondo and recently in Edo states.

For waste management and environmental sanitation, local governments provide services for garbage collection and waste water disposal. Inadequate sanitation is a major cause of disease in the developing countries especially Nigeria and improving sanitation is known to have a significant beneficial impact on health both in households and across communities. However, improved health impacts directly on human capital and its productivity. Here, local governments have been performing these responsibilities in both the provision of infrastructure such as refuse dumping van and providing the services of moving around the local communities to make sure that these wastes are effectively evacuated.

Primary health care has its foundation at the local government level and forms an integral part of the Nigerian social and

economic development since the beginning of this century. It is the first level contact of the individual and community in the national health system, thus bringing health care as close as possible to where people live and work and contributes the first element of a continuing healthcare process. The health care system begins at the local level where its widest reach is achieved in Nigeria. Furthermore, in this twenty first century, the primary healthcare system has been succeeding in addressing people's health needs through an integrated approach utilizing other sectors such as agriculture, education, housing, social and medical services. This integrated approach is encouraging active horizontal relationship between people and their local services as opposed to the traditional vertical relationships. A healthcare system that is highly rooted in a local government that is closer to the people is specifically more effective, as it intervenes in the community on different levels and in different ways. Ideally, entrusting primary health care to local governments in Nigeria by 1999 constitution has made healthcare services more effective and closer to the grassroots.

Local governments in Nigeria have been developing initiative towards the development of local poverty alleviation programmes within their jurisdictions. Despite the central role economic growth play in human development, poverty reduction and the achievement of the millennium development goals, it is becoming widely understood amongst the developing communities that special efforts are made to ensure poorer sections of society are able to participate in economic growth. Consequently, poverty alleviation measures are of paramount importance, local governments given their grassroots location have been impacting positively on poverty alleviation or reduction in Nigeria. This is in line with the efficient services or efficiency services theory of local

government. The efficient services theorists believe that the local government occupies the best position for the efficient performances of certain functions. This is possible because of the people and the manageability of the population.

In Nigeria, education is administered by three branches of government. Provision of quality primary education is under the largely control of local governments, secondary schools fall to a great extent under the jurisdiction of the state governments and higher education is administered by both the federal and state governments. The universal basic education bill that was passed into law at the beginning of this century increased the responsibility of local governments in Nigeria. Local governments started creating social awareness on the efficacy of universal basic education (UBE) in order to ensure compliance. In most cases, the various local governments also backed this up with by-laws where necessary as well as formulating clear policies on the enrolment of pupils, funding, provision of facilities and quality assurance.

Since the beginning of this century, local governments have been contributing its quota to the security and business development support and investment promotion in Nigeria. Local governments work in improving these measures and significantly improve their competitive edge in attracting investments. Local governments also embraced the initiative of community policing. This entails community partnership in creating a safe and secure environment for all. Effective community policing has been having impact on the reducing neighbourhood crime helping to reduce fear of crime and enhancing the quality of life in the community. Since neither the police nor the criminal justice system can bear the responsibility of ensuring a safe and secure community alone, the public being coordinated by local government has a very active role to play in ensuring public

safety.

#### Contemporary Problems of Local Government Administration in Nigeria

Despite the justification for the establishment of local government and its inevitable contributions to the socio-cultural, economic and political development as well as its importance to the people at the grassroots level, this level of government seems not to have justified the reasons for which it was established. Therefore, local governments in Nigeria are facing multifaceted problems and challenges in this twenty-first century.

The major problems of local government in Nigeria came as a result of lack of autonomy and undue interference by higher political authorities. The Nigerian constitution of 1999 is rather ambiguous on the autonomy and powers of local governments in relationship to the state governments. Fourth Schedule Article 7 of the Constitution empowers the state government to enact legislation with regard to the establishment, structure, composition, finance and functions of democratically elected local government councils. Also, the same provision of the constitution assigns some roles to local government in the provision of critical basic services including primary education, health services and the development of agriculture. In practice, state governments exercise virtually unlimited jurisdiction in these same services. In many cases, the role of local governments in Nigeria is largely relegated to mere participation in the execution of functions. The contradiction regarding the status of local government is even more pronounced on revenue spending and fiscal matters. Section 162, 5 and 6 of the Nigerian constitution of 1999 provides for the channeling of local government share of the federation account to local government councils. It specifically states that "the amount standing to the credit of local government councils in the federation account shall be allocated to the states for the benefit of their

local government councils on such terms and in such a manner as may be prescribed by the National Assembly” and that “each state shall maintain a special account to be called State Joint Local Government Account into which shall be paid all allocations to the local government councils of the state from the government of the state “ Because of ample discretionary powers allowed the state government in control of local government, different states accord different levels of autonomy to local governments. Hence, in many cases, local governments function mostly as extensions or appendages of state governments. Therefore, there is high degree of external influence and interference in local government affairs by the higher levels of government, particularly the state governments. There have been instances where state governors unconstitutionally dissolve the entire elected council's officers without proper recourse and due process. This was a situation in Oyo state after 2007 general elections.

Another major contemporary problem of local government administration in Nigeria is continuous growth in the rate of corruption. Infact, corruption and abuse of office by local government administrators have assumed enormous proportion. This is perpetrated by both local government bureaucrats and the political office holders. These categories of local government administrators are neck-deep in inflation of contracts, outright embezzlement of council funds, taking kickback on contracts, and non-execution of contracts. There is a growing perception among local citizens that local governments are indeed citadels of sharing national cake. For example, it is now public knowledge that local government chairmen are not supposed to account for security vote. Therefore, there is eagerness among the poor rural dwellers to share from this free money that is supposed to be used by the local government chairmen to further pursue their protective function.

There is the growing problem of overstaffing and redundancy in the local government bureaucracies in Nigeria. Local politicians now see local government as a place they can easily put their children, cronies, relations and party members even when their services are not required. In Nigeria of today, many local governments carry a lot of redundant workers who receive huge salaries and wages. This development has indeed weakened the local governments in the pursuit of their tenets. This problem is further compounded by some state governments which have created unnecessary political offices and authorized payment of salaries to the wives of local government office holders. For example, the Osun state government between 2003 and 2010 approved the appointment of executive assistant for each of the thirty local governments in the state whose office from all appearance was unnecessary and also constitute waste of the council's funds. Also, Oyo state government between 2007 and 2011 approved the appointment of six special advisers each for thirty-three local government councils and compelled local governments to place them on monthly salaries. The action was totally a waster of public fund. Similarly, the Ekiti state government between 2007 and 2010 approved the appointment of development officer for every local government ward in the state thereby increasing the financial burden of the local governments.

Another major trend in the local government administration in Nigeria since the beginning of twenty-first century is lack of developmental and strategic planning. (Kolawole, 2003:105). Since most of the officials at the helms of affairs of local governments are incompetent, hardly can they perceive any need for developmental and strategic planning. Therefore, projects are haphazardly conceived and executed.

In addition, election into local government has become a matter of life and death. This is

because everybody wants to have a share of the national cake. It is also characterized by massive rigging, thuggery and other forms of anti-democratic behaviours. Thus, most of these in the offices hardly represent the interests of the people. This is of course contrary to the tenet of local government as symbol of democracy at the local level in Nigeria in this twenty-first century.

### Conclusion

Overall, the local government system has not lived out the intentions and aspirations underlying its creation. This is despite the huge inputs that level of government has received from the centre since the beginning of twenty-first century. This is shown in fiscal allocation from federation account which is between 20 and 23%. This is in addition of 10% internally generated revenue from the states, together with local government's own internal sources.

Presently, local governments in Nigeria have muted powers and leverage in the areas of revenue creation, spending autonomy and development functions. Therefore, reforms are needed to increase the fiscal and spending autonomy of local governments and minimize the interference and control of state governments. Even though the local government is commonly referred to as the third tier of government, it is doubtful whether it truly qualifies as third tier of government. This is because the local governments do not have the full compliments of a full three arm government, like federal and state governments. There is therefore need for constitutional reforms to provide unique guarantees for the autonomy and powers of the local government. Alongside, institutional reforms are important to clarify and align local governments roles and responsibilities in a manner that earns public confidence, intergovernmental credibility and unequivocal accountability.

There is a low level of public awareness and sensitization of the statutory

roles and potential of local governments in promoting social and economic well-being of the local people in Nigeria. It is therefore imperative to have public education enlightenment and advocacy on the possible and unexploited contributions of local governments to resolving development bottlenecks and providing an enabling environment for social and economic life.

There seems to be a problem of accountability at the local government level in Nigeria. To this, the structure of intergovernmental transfers can be fashioned to strengthen incentives for better allocation of public resources. One such measure is the provision of additional funds conditional on improvements in service delivery, ascertained after diligent service delivery assessments, such conditional transfer or grants are important tools for encouraging and mobilizing local authorities for better delivery of public services, more efficient public spending and good governance.

There is a need to develop a sustainable framework for coordination among three levels of government in Nigeria. Hence, deployment issues and interference by political parties as well as problems within local governments themselves where there are often no clear distinctions between councils and administrations need to be addressed.

Conclusively, it is safe to say that local government has come a long way in Nigeria. However, it is still observable that most of the local governments in the country are hardly effective and efficient. Indeed, there is still a loud cry for good governance at the local level during this century. Moreover, it appears that good governance at the local government level in Nigeria can only be guaranteed via attitudinal change on the part of local politicians and the local people and not necessarily through endless structural changes.



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