

## Transforming the Local Government for National Development

Emma E.O. Chukwuemeka<sup>1\*</sup>, Martina Okoye<sup>2</sup>, Maximus Ikenna Eneh<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Public Administration, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka Nigeria, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>Department of Office Technology and Management, Federal Polytechnic Oko, Nigeria

<sup>3</sup>Department of Public Administration, Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Enugu, Nigeria

\*Corresponding author: John Michael York, Pharm.D., M.B.A. Orfalea College of Business, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, USA. Tel: +18052382485; Email: joyork@calpoly.edu

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### Abstract

In developed countries of the world like the United States of America and Britain, there is strong support for the principle of local self-government. Many developed and particularly African countries give the same strong support to the principle of local self-government. Under the new local government arrangement in Nigeria borne out of 1976 local government reform and 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, many issues were addressed to spur the local government towards rural development. The paper adopted content analysis methodology. Development and underdevelopment indicators were addressed. Some theoretical paradigms were also discussed. A number of recommendations were proffered. They include using top flight public servants to run the local government as chief executives to reduce running cost. Such career officers made not want to dent their records and therefore would strive to perform well. Also, it was recommended that the Internally Generated Revenue (IGR) of the local government should be properly harnessed and channeled into meaningful developmental projects and rural transformation.

**Keywords:** Corruption; Local government; Reform

### Introduction

Local Government is recognized by the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as the third tier of government within the purview of the tripartite federal arrangement which Nigeria operates. The state and federal government occupy the higher echelon and play the roles of funding and supervising the activities of the local government areas. However, the constitution and its makers should be applauded in this regard for according this important level of government its due responsibilities.

Thus, local government has been classified as a public sector organization and a tier of government with assigned functions and responsibilities, administrative structure and financial management both for maintaining itself and rendering its statutory functions to its citizens. One of the most underlying imperatives for the creation of local government is for effective and efficient administration of its localities. Nigeria is one among few countries in the developing

world to have significantly decentralized both resources and responsibilities for the delivery of basic amenities and services such as health, education etc. to locally elected government [1].

### Local Government Administration – A Conceptual Framework

Okpata [2] succinctly opines that the term local government administration in Nigeria has attracted serious attention both nationally and internationally since the great local government reform of 1976. Local government is the closest tier of government to the people of Nigeria, yet the resident population in it is denied the benefits of its existence. The failure of local government in the area of service delivery over the years has made the citizens to lose faith and trust in local government administration as an institution in Nigeria. From historical perspective, modern local government administration in Nigeria can be traced to the British system of local government. But, it should be stated however, that local administration did not start with the advent of British

Administration in Nigeria, because some forms of system of local government administration pre-dated the British rule. Local government administration is one of man's oldest institutions. The earliest form of local government administration existed in the form of clan and village meetings. In fact, democracy itself originated and developed along the lines of local governance initiative in the ancient Greek City States. It should be noted however, that in other parts of the world, local governance was developed along the people's culture and expectations and the system was tied to the norms and practices of the people. However, four points of historical reference can be identified in the development of local government administration in Nigeria. They are:

- Colonial rule;
- Local government reforms in the East (1951) and West (1952) respectively;
- The military coup of 1966; and
- The 1976 local government reform (Gboyega as cited by Nwali and Nwede [3]).

Local government administration in Nigeria has undergone many changes of which the 1976 Reforms and the Constitutions of 1979 and 1999 can be said to be most prominent. Before 1976, local government administration in Nigeria had passed through many changing environments and this has in no small measure influenced its development. Furthermore, before 1976, there was no uniform system of local government administration in Nigeria. Although, there were spirited attempts made to carry out some reforms in the local government system. These attempts were unco-ordinated and haphazard. The 1976 reforms introduced a uniform system of local government administration throughout the country. The reform was a major departure from the previous practice of local government administration in Nigeria. The philosophical basis of the reform lies in the conviction that a strong local authority with clearly defined functional responsibilities in a power-sharing relationship with the states is an institutional safeguard against tyranny. Following the 1976 reforms, local government became recognized as a tier of government entitled to a share of national revenue consequent upon its constitutionally allocated functions [4].

The provisions of the 1976 reform document were incorporated into the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Section 7(1) of the constitution provides that:

*The government of every state shall ensure their existence under a law which provides for the establishment, structure, composition, finance and functions of such councils.*

This showed that local authorities were creatures of the state and their relevance, strength and degree of autonomy were subject to the state governments' control. The power of the state government over local authorities has been wrongly applied to

undermine elected and participatory governance and responsibility at the grassroots and this has made operation of the constitution questionable. The situation of local government administration under the 1999 Constitution is also very confusing and complex. Although, the 1999 constitution also guarantees the existence of a democratically elected local government system, it however, like the 1979 constitution gives the states the responsibility to handle issues of organization and structure. Constitutionally and currently, there are seven hundred and seventy-four (774) Local Government Council Areas in Nigeria and they are operating a uniform system of local government administration. More so, with the emergence of independence, emphasis shifted from law enforcement to the provision of social services.

### **Development: A Conceptual Framework**

In an attempt to define national development, it becomes imperative for us to examine first and foremost, the concept of development. Development refers to man's progressive qualitative and continued improvement of human labour. It is first and foremost a phenomenon associated with changes in man's creative energies. Development does not lie on products of the efforts of people to apply their creative energy to the transformation of local physical, biological and social cultural developments. The issue of development or under development in Nigeria has been explained by three basic schools of thought: - *The modernization theory, dependency and Marxian model* [5].

#### **Modernization theory**

The theory is championed by liberal scholars. They argue that underdevelopment is a natural stage. They attribute underdevelopment especially in Nigeria to lack of *skilled manpower, high incidence of corruption, politicization of ethnicity, absence of adequate institutional structures, non-availability of modern technology, inability of the third world countries to explore its national resources, absence of effective leadership.*

In the opinion of the school, the only way to overcome this is for third world countries to adopt open door policy, which will enable western technology and values to be transferred to Nigeria. In the final analysis, development will come through diffusion of capitalism and value. The mode of thinking has influenced Nigeria development strategies since independence.

This theory has been widely criticized by many. The argument is after several years of pursuing an open door policy, the Nigeria society for instance is yet to attain a meaningful development. Therefore, the school failed to provide answer to Nigeria economic predicament and under development.

#### **Dependency School**

This school is led by dependency scholars, which is a critic of liberal theory. The theory argues that Nigeria underdevelopment can

only be attributed to her continuous interaction with international capitalism. The interaction, which is, based on unequal relationship has distorted Nigeria development and at the same time stagnated the development of its productive force. This relationship only helps the center to develop and the periphery to under develop.

It is the view of this school that even after independence, this relationship has continued to exist. This is exploitative because the periphery constitutes into the production of the raw materials and consumes manufactured products. This type of relationship has been maintained and encouraged by the ruling class who are the agents of international capital. The school therefore recommends that for Nigeria to develop, it should delink from the world capitalist system, since her interaction with international capitalism is causing her underdevelopment.

This theory has been criticized because (i) it lays much emphasis on external forces and ignores internal problems. (ii) It ignores class formation and class struggle, which is very vital in understanding underdevelopment. (iii) It ignores relations of production (who owns the means of production) (iv) The policy recommendations is vague – after delink, what next?

However, despite the above defence, the theory helps us to identify the particular pattern of development experienced by Nigeria, which has continued to reproduce underdevelopment today.

### **Marxian theory**

The school agrees specifically with dependency theory by saying that Nigeria's underdevelopment is as a result of her incorporation into the world capitalist system. It argues that although external factors are important, other factors such as relations of production and class formation help in understanding Nigeria underdevelopment. It recommends that for Nigeria to develop, there must be a fundamental structural transformation of the society. Nigeria should not delink, but transform that relation of production. Therefore, Nigeria can only develop by adopting socialist party as a mode of production.

### **Features of Development**

- Self-reliance i.e. self-generating growth a linkage between agriculture and industry must exist
- Independent control of the economy to include nationalization of finance houses and monitoring the movement of money.
- Equalization of economic opportunities i.e. the re-organisation of production relation in agriculture and industries and socialization of the means of production, which runs counter to privatization
- A developed country must have ability to solve internal problems

- A developed country must be able to supply the basic necessities of life to its citizens i.e. food, clothes, shelter and health care services. So in discussing development, we don't use the indices of Gross National Production (GNP), per capita income because this explains only the growth rate.

### **Underdevelopment**

By underdevelopment, we mean a situation in which the institution of a country in the periphery of international capital maintains a dependent relationship with one or several countries at the Centre of international economy. Underdevelopment does not mean absence of growth, but it is characterized by unequal distributions, slow growth, and the sub-ordination of internal economics and political institutions to the influence from the Centre. It therefore means the loss of real economy. It is characterized by a high incidence of poverty and a distorted economy. We argue that a state can either be developed or underdeveloped. The word 'developing' is deceptive.

### **Features of Underdevelopment**

- Corruption
- Politicization of ethnicity
- Political hegemony and shenanigan
- Non availability of modern technology
- Absence of effective leadership
- Cultural domination
- Lots of import substitution
- Marginalisation of the peasantry
- Pre-dominance of a comprador bourgeoisie over the national bourgeoisie capital
- Monopoly capitalism i.e. absence of competition because the industries are dominated by the MNCs leaving no room for new industries to spring.
- Mono-cultural economy - dependent on mineral or or one item for economic survival therefore making it susceptible to uncertainties in international economy. Any change seriously affects them.
- Enclave economy - suppliers of raw materials. The materials are unrefined and most of its labour forces are engaged here.
- Poverty of ideology - unidentified ideological interest. Underdeveloped country wallows in ideological confusion in the pursuit of development strategies.
- There is a divorce between resource and need i.e. most underdeveloped third world countries are very wealthy in terms of natural resources endowment but poorest in the type of good and services provided for their citizens.

- domination of commercial activities instead of production

### **Local Government and National Development: The Nexus**

Rural development and local government are synonymous. The two cannot be discussed in isolation. Thus the primary aim of creating the local government as the third tier government is primarily to foster rural development. Umehali [6] argues that about 85% of the population of Nigeria lives in the rural areas. Therefore, the transformation of the rural areas is a *sine qua non* for national development.

The 1955 Local Government Law empowered the Local government to take full responsibility for rural development within the area of authority. This provision in the law enabled the District Officers to champion rural development efforts in their districts. Government provided matching grants and technical aids to communities which embarked on self-help projects. Since then, rural development has become a shared responsibility between the people and the government [7].

The rural sector argues Ugwu [8] plays important role in the total economy of any nation. Therefore, a sound rural development policy will enhance a balanced national economic development. According to Onwe [9] rural development refers to not only providing jobs and increased incomes to rural living through increased and improved community services. In Nigeria, the main features of the rural areas are:

- Depression
- Degradation
- Poverty and deprivation.

In a typical Nigeria rural community, there is absence of basic infrastructure, where they exist at all, they are inadequate for any meaningful development.

In all emergent states, or nations, local government has been adopted as the main fundamental instrument for the acceleration and sustenance of rural development. Most rural developments efforts in Nigeria are aimed at achieving the following objectives:

- Reducing the level of rural poverty and rural unemployment
- Integration of rural dwellers into the nation's socio-political and economic process through enhanced political awareness and consciousness and the recognition of the rural resident first and foremost as an individual citizen, like his urban counterparts, to all good things of life.
- Improve incomes of rural people who are engaged in agriculture and rural non-farm activities such as agro-based industries, petty trading, rural transport etc.

- Enhancing equity in the distribution of wealth and personal incomes
- Increase in rural value-added products
- Improving the quality of life by provision of quality of portable water, electricity, and other basic amenities etc.

### **Repositioning the Local Government to Contribute in Purposeful Development**

The primary aim of local government reform is to reposition the local government system for development. By and large, the primary objective for creating local government is to foster development. The most popular of such reforms is the 1976 local government reform. The discernible features of the reform are *inter alia*:

- Uniformity of the local government system
- Autonomy of the local government
- The local government operated through chief executive
- The establishment of local government board
- Statutory allocation to be made by both federal and state governments
- Creation of more local government councils

Also in 1984 another reform was carried out to address the inadequacies inherent in the 1976 reform. The stress areas include:

- State ministries of local governments were abolished and state governments were directed to terminate their joint service with local government. It was believed that it would have ended the friction between the two tiers of government in the state.
- Creation of more local government areas to reduce discrepancy resulting from size of existing local governments.
- Review grant to local government from 10% to 15% in 1989 to 20% in 1992.
- Review of national scheme of service for local government's employees in 1988. This attracted professionals like engineers, legal officers, health officers, accountants etc. into the service.
- The power granted to local government chairman to appoint their secretaries made them real executives, while the creation of local government legislative assembly brought about separation of power.
- Local government gets their grants directly from federal government instead of through state government.

➤ The issue of local government autonomy was re-emphasized.

To complement the two major reforms, the 1999 constitution also addressed many important areas of the local government as third tier of government. Essentially the question of the activities of the local government service commission was strengthened. Also the state government was mandated to oversee the affairs of the local government. It includes conducting elections, determining the tenure of the elected executives. The state electoral commission therefore took over the duty of conducting local government elections from Independent Electoral Commission (INEC).

In spite of all these efforts the local government could not be said to have contributed in any way in championing meaningful development in Nigeria. Rather it is a center where group of politicians gather to share the national booty.

### **Repositioning the Local Government to Make It Virile - Policy Recommendations**

That the local government system in Nigeria is inactive is not in doubt. The inability of the local government to undertake rural development and development of the periphery has resulted in rural urban migration with its attendant social vices. Therefore, we have proposed a number of measures to be taken to make the local government more proactive and contribute in national development:

- The Politicization of the local government system should stop. Instead of elected chairmen, councilors and appointment of politicians as supervisory councilors, Directors or Permanent secretaries or officers of the same rank from the public service should be appointed to head the local government. It should be a tenured appointive position. The supervisory councilors and ward councilors should be appointed from the pool of impeccable and assiduous public officers. It should be a tenured office.
- The development projects and other financial activities of such officers should be audited by a special audit unit to be set by the State government.
- The caretaker committee system should be abolished; even if it would stay, those to be appointed should be career public officers and not politicians.
- The operators of the local government under this suggested regime should render monthly progress report of completed and on-going projects in their areas of jurisdiction. Anyone who has no remarkable development achievements should be sanctioned, removed or summarily dismissed from the service without benefits, especially when there is evidence of fund misappropriation and inability to render prudent account.
- The Executives under this regime should be placed on special

salary that is little above what they earn in the public service.

- The Local Government service commission should also be manned by appointed career public officers. They should give supervisory roles and work hand in hand with the audit unit and anti-graft agencies to check the excesses of the local government workers and appointed executives.
- A new law should be enacted to create a stiffer penalty for any state governor that meddles with local government funds.
- The internally generated revenue sources (IGR) of the local government should be properly harnessed. Field officers who are not politicians but career civil servants should be appointed to ensure an aggressive revenue drive to mop up all revenue accruing to the local government. When the people see visible developments around them they will be happy to cooperate with the local government revenue collectors when they embark on revenue drive.
- It is also the position of the paper that the local government be run by board of governors which should be headed by a Permanent Secretary or a high ranking officer drawn from the academia or public service. The members of the board should work on part-time basis. They would sit intermittently to take major decisions bordering on development, projects, staff welfare and other arcane issues. However, the Secretary should work on full time to oversee the general administration and project execution.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This paper has tried to look at the state of the local government in Nigeria and its inability to contribute to national development. It is very sad that after 41 years of the first major local government reform in Nigeria, the local government has not contributed meaningfully in rural development in spite the huge sums of money allocated to it in the name of statutory allocation. Therefore, the Government of Nigeria should as a matter of urgency reposition the local government to cause it to contribute in national development. The opinion of this paper if adopted will go a long way in assuaging the development quagmire in Nigeria.

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