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THE ROLE AND CHALLENGES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: AN INSIGHT

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Abstract

This paper examined the Role and Challenges of Local Government in Community Development in Nigeria. Local government since its creation in Nigeria has been and is still involved in the process of community development which ultimately translates to national development. Though there is glaring evidence of serious inadequacies in basic social services and amenities to the rural community, emphasis in this regard has been placed on mobilization for sustainable community development. Research and studies have shown that local government plays a variety of roles to meet-up with the challenges of both community and national development and they includes the provision of basic social amenities, mass mobilization, accelerating force for greater economic growth and development, and ensuring social and economic justice. Though the aforementioned roles appear simple and crucial, the paper unravelled some challenges which include: official corruption, the Nigerian factor, poor revenue generation, political instability, social injustice and economic inequality and lastly, general poverty among the vast majority of the populace. In the light of the above, some practical solutions to the challenges were equally advanced and they include: accountability, diversification of revenue generation, attitudinal change through value re-orientation and effective utilization of grass roots institutions.

Keywords: Challenges, Community, Development, Governance, Nigeria

Introduction

The *raison d'être* for the establishment of local government world over is to bring the pulse and the activities of the government nearer to the people (Ozor, 2002). However, it will be well-nigh difficult, if not impossible, for the mere presence of such government to make a difference except if and only if it engages itself with the process of community development. The dual concepts of local government and community development just like every other concept in the social sciences have no universal definition. But for the purpose of this study, local government shall be defined as a third tier government with adequate statutory power designed to transmit the pulse and activities of other arms of government to the people at the grassroots and at the same time, transmit the quest and aspiration of the rural people to those other arms of government. The Guidelines for Local Government Reforms in Nigeria of 1976 defined it as "Government at local level exercised through a representative council established by law to exercise specific powers and function within defined areas". Community development, on the other hand, shall be defined both as a process and as a movement. The Cambridge University Conference on African Administration of 1946, defined the concept as a movement to promote better living for the whole community with the active participation and if possible, on the initiative of the community, but if this initiative is not forthcoming by the use of technique for arousing and stimulating it in order to secure its active and enthusiastic response to the movement.... It includes the whole range of development activities in the districts, whether these are undertaken by the Government or unofficial bodies [World Bank 1975].

As a process, it is seen as "a process of education by which people of all ages and all interests in the community learn to share their thought, their ideals, their aspirations, their joy and their sorrows in a large measure to mold and shape their communal destiny for themselves". It is a process of self discovery by which the people of a community learn to identify and solve their communal problems (Richard Boston n.d). The essential elements of community development include the following:

- a. The people should be active participants and thus, have significant control over the developmental process, b. attention must be on the quest and aspirations of the people.
- b. The concept of self-help is equally of a great essence to the community development process. C. The community must be viewed as a total entity and not as sub-units.

Community Development: A Historical Review.

Over the years, many concepts had been employed to describe the concept, community development. Akukwe (1996) noted that community development had been associated with such names like social education, mass education, functional education and rural constructive work. Sanders (1970) in the same vein expressed the same by noting that community development had been described as a fusion of community organization and economic development.

In the traditional African milieu, there have been the processes of community reconstruction activities through communal labour and self-help efforts. In the Eastern Nigeria, it is referred to as "Olu obodo" implying community work. Aside from these informal traditional community development practices, the formal institutionalization foundation of the process was securely laid in the outcome of the social disturbances and upheavals in the British West Indies (Oji PN 2004).

Thus, a Royal commission was put in place to investigate and check the phenomenon. Akukwe (1991) noted that during the early 40's a new colonial and welfare Act was enacted by the British government on the administration of the colonies. After the Second World War, both the political and social agitation of the colonies heightened and thus resulting in the British government in 1947 to organize an African conference on the administration of the colonies following the advice of Creech Jones, who then was the secretary of state for the colonies. Akukwe (1996) further noted that it was the outcome of the conference that made the British Government in (1948) to become more interested in the African State under its imperial authority.

At the Cambridge conference of thirty British territories, the concept came into proper usage; the conference defined the concept community development as a movement designed to promote better living for the whole community with active participation and on the initiative of the community (Colonial Office, 1955:14).

The Goals And Objectives Of Community Development

The goals of community development should be to improve people's productivity and enable them to participate in their social, political and economic life into the future. This would give them more confidence in managing their own affairs and help to protect their environment. Indeed it is morally binding on the local government managers to do everything possible to achieve the goals. (Odiong 2003).

Every community is made up of both the individual as well as the house hold which shares the collective "we" feeling and thus, works cooperatively to attain self-fulfillment in the area of growth and development in all ramifications. As a corollary, it is a place where ideally comprehensive services of both socio-economic political and human development can be provided by the people especially with the aid of either government or unofficial bodies. Because we find peace, joy, love, happiness etc in the community where we live, it therefore follows that all and sundry should participate in order to advance their social organization

In the light of the above, the principal objective of community development is for human, material and infrastructural development through effective mobilization of both human and material resources and by the active involvement of the rural populace.

Out of the four principal objectives of the 1976 local government reform, in Nigeria, two were devoted to achieving the objectives of community development viz:

"To make appropriate services and initiatives by devolving or delegating them to the local representative bodies;

"To mobilize human and material resources through the involvement of members of the community in their local development"

In line with the above, Olowu outlined the possible contributions of local government to the development process to include; political integration and nation building;

Training in citizenship and political leadership; promotion of accountable governance; and provision of social and economic development. This study however, contends that the role of local government in the community development process stands in the triadic function of

a. As agent of mass mobilization, b As accelerating force for massive economic growth and development and; c. Agent of socio-economic equity.

These triadic functions are not only of a great essence but also a sine-qua-non for sustainable community and national development. It is therefore safe to anchor every other function in the above trinity role of local government in both community and national development.

As Agent Of Mass Mobilization

The strength of free people resides in the local Community. Local institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they put it within the peoples reach; they teach people to appreciate its peaceful enjoyment and accustom to make use of it. Without local institutions, a nation may give itself a free government but it has not the spirit of liberty. Passing Passion, momentary interest or chance circumstances may give it external shape of independence, but the despotic tendencies which have been driven to the interior of the body social will sooner or latter break Out on the surface.' [Alex De Tocqville]

One of the central objectives of the 1976 local government reform in Nigeria was to mobilize human and material resources through the involvement of members of the public in their local development. Mobilization connotes an assembling or putting into action or operation. It means equipping the citizens for the onerous task of community development. The Dasuki report defined the term as,,, "to increase their level of awareness or cognition and their perceptual abilities as well as render them more effective citizens who can apply their energies positively to help promote the development of their community and to participate in a general sense in the socio- political activities of those communities"

Local government as a grass root government is designed to transmit the pulse of other arms of government to the vast majority of the rural populace, and to equally mobilize them for effective national development.

Being the government nearest to the rural people, it's the best institution for generating, motivating and encouraging mobilizations for self help as well as including the much needed wider participation of the people especially in decision making. If a man is basically motivated by self-interest, local self government provides the opportunity for schooling such a propensity and tempering it with the interest of others in the community, which result in reciprocal relationship of recurrent well-being. Such under- standing of mutual self-interest leads the citizen to expand areas of cooperating with his neighbors, especially in the running of the community service (Olowu1988)

Edward Saoume (1979) noted that "the so called third world is a rural world where any meaningful discussion of rural development really means not only talking of over-all national development" but also because "it is the rural arrears that the problem of inequitable distribution of resources or a marked lack of financial strength and of grinding poverty in which the wretched members of the society stagnated and stare one in the face with brutal clarity". Aldous Huxley also noted that "the masses are utterly contemptible" they are incapable of abstract thinking and uninterested in any fact outside the circle of their immediate experience. Their behavior is determined, not by knowledge and reason, but by feelings and unconscious drives...

It is in the light of the above that Deutch (1964) painted a picture of mobilization as large numbers of people moving away from a life of local isolation, the traditionalism, and political conservativizm and moving into a different life or broader and deeper involvement in the vast complexities of modern life, including potential and actual involvement in mass politics.

The implication of the above is that effective mobilization and participation of the people in the development process of their area, as Ozor, noted would involve:

- a. Arousing or sensitizing the development spirit latent in the community leaders and followers towards participating in policy making, supervision and evaluation;
- b. Communal involvement in appropriate macro-economic and social policy formation;
- c. Inter-sectoral and inter-agency collaboration, co-operation and support for government at all levels in community development projects;

- d. Comprehensive apparatus and system of communication, community enlightenment, education and information management;
- e. long term vision of people-oriented development planning and;
- f. Appropriate safe guards for community asset custody, economic utilization of resources in puts and public accountability.”

As a corollary of the above, the benefits of effective community participation in the development process have been aptly summarized by Ozor to include;

1. It helps to define for the local government, community needs and priorities much more accurately;
2. It reduces cost by mobilizing unused local, human and material resources;
3. It helps people to appreciate, understand and sympathized with government at all levels, on their polices and actions;
4. It contributes to political stability.

It therefore follows that local government, if it is truly local is better placed to at least, halt the deteriorating living standard of the rural areas of the country. This paper therefore argues that the local government is better placed than the other two higher tiers of government not only to stem the grim reality of the soaring tide of rural poverty, but also, be more able to evoke the spirit of local participation. This can be effectively achieved through the use of local institution and grass roots strategies and inline with this, the Dasuki reports mandated that: every traditional rulers should, as the father of the people, throw the full weight of his traditional authority to accelerate the task of mass mobilization of the people for active participation in community development programme within their area of jurisdiction

It is therefore safe to conclude that the local government through the use of grass roots institution, are more able to galvanize and mobilize the support of the local citizenry for effective participation in all programmes affecting them both now and latter. As Olowu noted, “by being given power and means to determine their own affairs..., they are better able to realize corporate self- determination under prevailing political arrangement and are likely to be in a better position to appreciate the difficulties of governing”. Maddick equally opined that “local authorities provide the opportunity for local people to participate in local decisions and local schemes within the general national policies and to act above all, as local centers of initiative and activity conducive to development”. And as Huxley equally opined, “the driving force which has brought tremendous revolutions on this earth has never been a body of scientific teaching which has gained power over the masses, but always devoted which has inspired them and a kind of hysteria which has urged them into action.

As Accelerator for Massive Economic Growth and Development

Growth point must emerge from local government areas and provide the much needed push to activates and energize productive activities in rural Nigeria and thus, reverse the phenomenon of rural-urban drift. [Gen Babangida, National Day Dddress, 1st Oct., 1988).

Economic growth and development should as a mater of fact, be among the priorities of every responsible third tier government in Nigeria. It is glaring that most local community in Nigeria lacks the much needed incentive to engage on any meaningful community development process. In the same vein, majority of their population not only dwells in abject penury but also, there is apparent low-per capital income which hinders economic growth. As a corollary, it will not permit them to generate enough resources for community development projects. The concept of social desirability implies that people would want to be perceived in the right direction, that is, to be seen to belong to the existing social order. Like wise, other rural areas in Nigeria would want

to be perceived with success in terms of community development, just like their counterpart in the advanced countries of the World and thus, enjoying the advantages of civilization.

Local government can therefore through effective mobilization, act as a catalyst for accelerating massive economic growth and development. Olowu in supporting the above view averred that

In the rural areas, effective local governments can assist the rural people in organizing themselves to mobilize and manage their resources effectively, reduce waste associated with rural development projects due to poor and inaccurate information, feed back as well as non performing or corrupt bureaucracies. In addition, in both urban and rural center, local governments can assist in creation or attraction of economic enterprises and employment in their respective communities.

Little wonder why Uphoff and Esman, quote in Olowu, argued that “local organization are necessary, if not a sufficient condition for accelerated development which emphasized improvement in the production and welfare of the majority of rural people”. Ozor equally noted as follow:

The grassroots should constitute the major basis of sustainable economic development program who wear the shoe, ought to know better where it pinches . No national economic development programme can succeed without the active co-operation of the local population who constitute the majority of the citizenry of this nation. For any economic, social or even physical development programme to be successful, it must not only be people-oriented but also people-centered, and that means it must be planned to meet the needs of the majority of the citizens who are at the grassroots

There is no doubt that it was on the realization of the strategic role of local government as a veritable tool for accelerating massive economic growth and development that led to the creation of such programmes like the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) designed to create and maintain rural roads for easy transportation of rural economic resources to the cities for their utilization; the establishment of Better life for Rural Women; the National Agricultural Development Authority (NALDA);both Community banks, and the Peoples banks were all established for the purpose. Local government is therefore better placed in the area of field administration to exploit both the initiative and aspiration of the ruralites in pursuance of a given developmental programme. General Ibrahim Babangida summed it up as follow:

In effect, given our commitment to accelerated development of rural areas, the local governments are not just there to pay salaries. They are there to ensure collective participation in governance, motivate physical and economic development, create the condition of employment opportunities, and provide social services which can improve the well-being of our people

As An Agent Of Social And Economic Justice In Community Development

Community development will be well-nigh difficult If not impossible in an environment characterized by abject penury and blatant economic and social inequality. The local government must therefore provide the equal enabling environment to enable the rural populace carry out their economic activities and thus, generate the sufficient resources to perform their civil responsibilities to the government. This ipso facto, and in line with John locks “social contract” theory, implies that if local government is aspiring to mobilize its citizens towards the attainment of a stated objective,{say the provision of infrastructure or social welfare packages}, it must

provide the enabling environment such as security and equality in the distribution of common wealth to the citizens and at the same time, respond favourably and effectively to their other needs. As Okoli and Onah noted, “the elements to spur development must be found within the society... that all genuine social development or transformation have been initiated from within the society. Even though in many cases the beginning of such transition lies in the cross fertilization of ideas and experiences emanating from different societies”.

Olowu, affirmed the above when he noted that “successful economic projects sponsored, initiated or supported by local government could lead to a reduction in social inequality by raising the living standards of the poor and there by enabling them to participate more effectively in decision making both at the local and central levels” there is no gainsaying the fact that part of the reason for the hitherto colossal failure of community development was due to economic and social injustice but that it is glaring that for the past three decades, the various government through public policy has failed to use the instrument of economic and social justice to adequately and functionally mobilize the entire citizenry towards a given developmental programme. As Maddick argued, “to achieve social change and general economic growth requires a spreading of efforts so that local communities and individuals can participate, to bring under ideal conditions, energy, enthusiasm and most important of all, local initiative to the working out of local development activities.” Okoli and Onah summed it up as follow “communities must remain in charge of and take responsibility for their own development but must be open to changes that can improve their condition”

Challenges To Effective Local Government Participation In Community Development

Several obstacles combine to hinder the effective participation of local government in community development. These factors include general poverty, inadequate financial resources’ the Nigeria factor, economic and social inequality.

General poverty; the generality of the rural populace in Nigeria lives below the poverty line and thus, lives in hunger and starvation. If the popular dictum that “a hungry man is an angry man” is true, then such a man will be impervious to all gospel of mobilization towards community development. A man who can not feed himself, or better still not feed well, may lack the capacity for rational thinking and can hardly perform his civic rights of paying tax as well as effectively participate in decision making e.t.c.

Inadequate financial resources; most of the local governments in the Nigeria are not financially buoyant to effectively participate in community development programme. The joint state-local government account has not helped matter as the latter is always at the caprice and whim of the former. There is glaring evidence of undue state interference in the financial resources of many local governments to the extent that the average local council finds it difficult to meet its recurrent expenditure not to talk more of executing capital projects.

The guideline for 1976 Local Government Reform noted that

the local government have, over the years, suffered from the continuous whittling down of their powers. The state governments have continued to encroach upon what would normally have been the exclusive preserves of local governments. Lack of adequate fund and appropriate institutions had continued to make local government ineffective and ineffectual.

The above condition makes it difficult not only to mobilize but for such mobilization strategies like, payment of grants in aides, donation of trophies as well as liberal cash prizes to the

advancing and participating community or even to create awareness and subsequently disseminate the information needed for community development programme.

Corruption and the Nigerian factor: “the average Nigerian is corrupt” [Achebe,C. The Trouble with Nigeria]. And “keeping an average Nigerian from being corrupt is like keeping a goat from eating yam.” [Weekly Star, 15 may 1983]. The above statements though crude, gave the true but astonishing reality of the Nigerian society. As a corollary of general poverty, corruption in some public organization is seen as a condition per-excellence and thus, the story of our public office is replete with that of corruption. The irregular payment of workers salary has made corruption to deputies the normal pay package. It is gradually becoming a norm if not an ideology of most local government officials and thus, not an open secret anymore. Local government in practice presently is nothing short of a venture where the triadic personality or in the words of Dialoke, “Triangular officers” of the Chairman who is the chief executive as well as the accounting officer of the local government, the Head of Personnel Management saddled with the responsibility of administration and the Treasurer who is in charge of the local government finance, all connive and divert the council’s allocation to their personal purrs. Infact, the monster has eaten deep into the fabrics of the nation at large that there are reported cases of examination malpractice among the primary and post primary school children, while wide spread cases of certificates forgery rocks the so-called National Assembly {our legislators}, and other public officers.

4 Again, the concept of Nigerian factor which permits the continuous acceptance of anomalous administrative behavior such as taking short cuts or any means to achieve ones aim, bribery, mediocrity, inefficiency e.t .c the implication is that anything goes under this condition and nothing works well. The guiding philosophy here in the words of Machiavelli is that “the end justifies the means”. Therefore community development may remain a mirage to the hearts and minds of the people under the above condition.

5 Inadequate use of Grassroots Institutions. Local organizations are a necessary, if not a sufficient condition for accelerated development which emphasizes improvement in the productivity and welfare of the majority of the rural people [Literature on Western Development, quoted in Olowu: 27]

Before the advent of Colonialism with its attendant social change, various Nigerian communities have through self-help effort using such Grassroots Institutions as the Age grade, the Umu-Adas, the Town Unions, the Masquerade group [usually an enforcement agent], the Religious groups , etc, to developed themselves. Grassroots Institutions are in no doubt a great force to be reckoned with especially when harnessed well and channeled in the right direction in the realization of community development objectives. They possessed a quantum of both human, material and to an extent, financial resources which yearns to be tapped and in the right direction for optimum result. It therefore behooves on the practitioners to systematically integrates and utilize these grassroots institutions as away of attaining sustainable community development

Economic Inequality

Economic inequality entails, unequal distribution or access to the common wealth and thus leading to the emergence of “the have and the have not or the rich and poor. The above condition makes community development well-nigh difficult if not impossible. It is a common knowledge that-the gap between the rich and the poor affects their respective level of participation both in utterances and actions. There is usually low participation from the poor group due largely to their low financial strength and thus a constraint to effective community development.

Some Possibly Solutions to the Challenges

The challenges facing local government in community development process are many and have led to the advancement of many solutions by other experts in the field. Therefore, the under listed suggestions are not absolute and sacrosanct.

a. Steady improved economic growth and developments through the provision of rural infrastructure, other basic necessity of life and good governance to enable the rural masses cope with the problem of poverty and thus perform their civic obligation

b, Equitable distribution or re-distribution of common wealth through the instrument of distributive and regulatory public policy

c. Provision of sufficient fund by the other two higher tiers to the local government as well as the local government diversifying her revenue base through taxation, levies and rates.

d. Attitudinal change through value re-orientation of both the leaders and the led, especially with regards to government work, property and public life. The current perception of government work and property as no mans business must be discouraged at all cost and more drastic punishment should be given to the offenders. The current anti-graft agencies such as the EFCC, ICPC etc., are all moribund and like a toothless bulldog, they can only bark but not bite. There is therefore the need for an overhauling of the system in other to produce a functional and effective control mechanism.

e. Effective and efficient dissemination of information and the use of propaganda to sensitize and arouse the interest of the rural masses in community developments. Information is power and thus, vital in all human dealings. Without effective information and subsequent dissemination, the ruralites may not be aware of the benefits of community development. As Olowu noted, “there is no limit to the sacrifices that people are willing to make when they understand that they themselves would be the final beneficiaries. Hence community unions and cooperative associations have proved effective and successful again and again in raising the resources to finance important projects where many are centrally-dominated local governments have failed”[1988:21]

f. The use of grassroots institution :Effective use of grassroots institution is one of the most viable solutions to the challenges of sustainable community development. Such institutions like the town union, the age-grade, the women’s wing, the traditional rulers abroad unions, the philanthropic group etc. are all grassroots institution that when effectively mobilize, can create significant impact in the process of community development. The Dasuki report equally emphasized on the importance of grassroots institutions in community development. The local government should therefore, avail itself the opportunity by harnessing the forces of these institution and guiding them into a constructive positive channel for optimum result. The hitherto failure and un sustainability of community development projects and programmes in Nigeria is hardly unconnected with the top-down approach which makes the target recipients, including the grassroots institutions more of passive than active participant. It is therefore believed that the use of grassroots institutions will not only makes the people active participants and thus a feeling of partners in progress but equally enhances the sustainability of community development projects and programmes.

Conclusion:

This study evaluated the role and challenges of Local government in the process of community development in Nigeria. It identified Local Government as the nearest government to the people and thus, a channel through which the community feels the pulse of other higher levels of government. To this effect, the paper contends that Local Government is the hub for social,

political and economic mobilization and galvanization of the citizens for effective participation in the community and national development.

Far from providing community with supports such as funds technical, material and financial support for the community development practice, Local Government also undertakes some developmental services in the community even without the financial/technical assistance of the said community. However, the study identified several challenges that militate against these role and they includes: official corruption, the Nigerian factor, poor revenue generation, political instability, social injustice and economic inequality and general poverty among the vast majority of the populace amongst others.

Finally, the study proffered some functional solution to the challenges and they include: strengthening and use of grassroots institution, establishing and adhering strictly to accountability procedure to guard against corruption and other unwanted behaviour, diversification of revenue generation, attitudinal change through value re-orientation and effective utilization of grass roots communication procedure to secure the active participation of the community amongst others. After all, community development is all about the development of the community through active involvement of the indigenes.

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