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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE CHALLENGES OF GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The rural Nigeria has the largest number of citizens with not less than 75% of the country's total population living in the rural areas. It is the collective desire of this vast majority of the Nigerian population to access development irrespective of political, economic and social status. The local government is the most veritable agent of developing the rural areas. This is informed by the local government's proximity to the people at the grassroots level and its intimate knowledge of the needs, aspirations and preferences of the rural people, which it could bring to bear on the formulation of rural development policies and programmes to address the developmental needs of the people. Despite the vantage position of the local government for effective and efficient services delivery at the local level, it has failed to perform to expectations in grassroots development across the country. This has inspired this paper to interrogate what challenges have constrained the effective performance of the local government in grassroots development and to suggest measures to address such challenges. The paper concludes that despite the poor performance of the local government in grassroots development, it is still best suited to engender development at the local level, hence the urgent and compelling need to fix the local government system in order to enhance its service delivery capacity.

Keywords: Local government, Challenge, Grassroots, Development, Service.

Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that no central government can effectively conduct administration from the centre through the civil servants based at the headquarters. This has naturally necessitated the need for some forms of decentralization to enable the central government reach out to the people at the local level. This underscores the rationale for the creation of local governments to provide services aimed at meeting the peculiar needs of people at the most basic level of society. In other words, the major reason for the existence of local government in Nigeria and elsewhere in the world is to facilitate grassroots development. The objectives of grassroots development in Nigeria include the following: Reducing the level of rural poverty and rural unemployment; Integration of the grassroots communities into the national socio-economic and political development through effective participation in their own affairs; Improve incomes of the rural people whose major economic activity is agriculture and non-farm activities such as craft, petty trading, among others; and Improve the quality of life of the people through the provision of basic necessities such as food, potable water, electricity supply, health-care services, schools, etc.

The local governments are therefore, saddled with the responsibility of raising rural productivity and income, diversify rural economy and enhance the welfare of rural dwellers. Since agriculture is the main economic activity in the rural areas, the most effective instrument for the realization of grassroots development has been agricultural programmes. As Olayide (in Zoaka et al. (2010) noted:

The spatial structure of the rural environment and the skills of its inhabitants indicate that agriculture constitutes the dominant activities of the population considering that the only readily available resources are land, water and labour.

In the light of this, successive governments in Nigeria have shown much interest in agricultural development through a number of programmes such as Operation Feed the Nation (OFN); Green Revolution; River Basin Development Authority (RBDA); among others. The policy documents of these programmes came out clean on what government planned to do for the people without indication of their participation. However, a strategy of grassroots development must place the mobilization of rural communities as the centre piece of development through an integrated approach.

According to Egwemi and Odo (2013), the wide range of activities in an integrated rural development approach must be centrally planned and co-ordinated with the active involvement of the people to ensure that the objective of programme sustainability is achieved. The integrated approach is gravitated on the need for actions to be taken on several fronts simultaneously in a manner that will break the vicious cycle of poverty and underdevelopment of the rural people. The application of the approach to grassroots development will entail programmes of agricultural productivity; health-delivery services; investment in rural non-farm activities; nutrition; education and training; electrification; co-operatives; water supply; rural credit facilities; roads construction and maintenance; etc to be planned and implemented in an integrated manner.

Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) in its strategy of developing the rural areas, recognized the centrality of people's participation in their own development. The Decree No. 4 of 6th February, 1986, which set-up the agency stressed the mobilization of rural

community organizations as the centre-piece of the strategy for rural development. Section 5(9) of the Decree quoted in Zoaka et al. (2010) stated thus:

The Directorate shall be charged with among other things to identify; involve and support viable local community organizations in the effective mobilization of the rural population for sustained rural development activities, bearing in mind the need for promoting greater community participation and economic self-reliance of the rural community.

On this premise, the pivotal role of local governments in grassroots development cannot be over emphasized. They are better positioned than other levels of government (state and federal) to engender grassroots development due to their closeness to the people at the local level. Also, given their limited areas of coverage, it is easier for local governments to plan and execute programmes that can impact directly on every member of their communities. Furthermore, the Honourable members of the local government councils, which is the policy-making body for the local governments are part and parcel of their local communities with intimate knowledge of the needs, aspirations and preferences of the people. Thus, to all intents and purposes, the local governments are the most effective agents of development at the local or grassroots level.

However, despite these obvious advantages, many local governments have failed to perform to expectations in the socio-economic and political development of their areas. The paper is concerned to interrogate this paradox. In so doing, it is structured into four sections as follows: Section one is the introduction. Section two provides clarification of concepts while section three examines the challenges that confront the local governments in grassroots development. Finally, section four discusses what needs to be done to enhance the performance of local governments in grassroots development; and then the conclusion.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Local government and grassroots development are the key concepts in the paper that require clarification to ensure proper understanding of their operational usage in the discourse. The political necessity to extend the power of government in order to be felt throughout the political system is one primary justification for the establishment of local government in a political system (Wraith, 1971). In Nigeria, this compulsive need to extend the power and presence of government has inevitably compelled the government to accept the need to distribute power and the principle of power sharing in the political system. Local government is thus seen as an instrument of power, which exists in order to bring into effect the extension and the distribution of power in the political system.

The implication of this conceptualization of local government is twofold. In the first place, such an idea of local government will tend to draw attention to the fact that local government is an administrative unit of the political system, which has been established as a consequence of the decentralization of power. This structural interpretation of the local government system implies that the local government unit exercises power derived from a superior authority i.e. state or central authority. Accordingly, the status of local government in the political system will be subordinate to the authority of the central government or state.

The second implication is the notion that local government as an agent of government exists to exert power and influence over the community. Local government will therefore, inevitably operate as an agent of external interest be it the state or some vested interests in control of the political system. Consequently, local government leaders and functionaries will not see their primary responsibility in terms of championing the interest of their people.

One recent attempt to re-define the concept of local government in Nigeria was the popular slogan to make local government “development-oriented” or to bring government “closer to the people”. These slogans were coined during the early phase of the military rule in Nigeria, when each of the then newly created states undertook a re-organization of the local government system (Odo, 1986). A development oriented local government system is expected to be a vehicle for the provision of goods and services, which are necessary pre-requisites for meaningful grassroots development.

The 1976 local government reforms in Nigeria in its Guidelines defined 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 devolution of functions to these councils and through the active participation of the people and their traditional institutions, that local initiatives and response to local needs and conditions are maximized (FRN, 1976).

For the purpose of our discussion in this paper, local government is defined as an institution created to provide public services according to local situations through the involvement of the people and to ensure maximum efficiency in the administration and provision of such public services to guarantee grassroots development. The institution of local government is therefore, established to achieve the triple objective of ensuring political participation; efficient services delivery; and resource (both human and material) mobilization with the overall goal of achieving improved standard and living conditions of the people at the grassroots level.

The most critical reason for the creation of local governments in Nigeria is grassroots development otherwise known as rural development, which embraces a host of economic, social and political activities aimed at improving the standard and living conditions of the rural dwellers. It is a process in which the people are key participants or ought to be key participants in their own development.

Grassroots development is also viewed as a self-generating process of socio-economic and political development in which the rural inhabitants themselves are actively involved and share in the cost and benefits of such development. The essential elements of grassroots development include poverty reduction; rising incomes; increase in health and nutrition status of the people; provision of quantitative and qualitative basic education; improved agricultural activities; provision of infrastructural facilities; amongst others. Grassroots development is the

responsibility of the local government with the active co-operation of the state and federal governments; aimed at improving the welfare of the masses within its areas of jurisdiction.

Ibrahim (1980) defined grassroots development (rural development) as the process by which the standard of living at the grassroots level is enhanced politically, socially and economically. This definition views grassroots development as a multi-dimensional process involving important changes in social structures, conditions of life, as well as the involvement of the rural dwellers in decisions that affect their lives. Grassroots development, in this wise, is regarded as an effective strategy of addressing the basic needs of the rural population. Adegboye (1973) cited in Egwemi and Odo (2013) sees rural or grassroots development as the development of rural people in such a continuous manner as to enable them to effectively and efficiently utilize their intellect, technology and other resources for further development of themselves and others.

Grassroots development is a process of bringing improved level of living to the inhabitants with notable and reasonable changes in all ramifications. According to Gana (1990) cited in Egwemi and Odo (2013), grassroots development is the re-structuring of the rural economy in order to grow it from a dependent peasant and largely agricultural economy to one capable of sustaining an improved quality of life at the local level. Whatever, the conceptualization of grassroots development, the bottom-line is that it is about improving the standard and living conditions of the rural people. The thrust of the paper is that local governments, having as they do, intimate knowledge of their areas of jurisdiction are most suited to mobilize both human and material resources of the local areas for grassroots development.

There are several theoretical windows through the issue of local government and grassroots development can be anchored. While other theories may be right on their own, we underpin this paper on the integrated rural development theory. Abutu (in Igbokwe-Ibeto, 2003) views the concept of integrated rural development as that of total transformation of the lives of the rural populace. According to him, integrated rural development is “that process of taking deliberate and concrete actions to ensure the positive transformation of the productive forces of the rural populace and the exploitation of rural resources for their common good. Hence it involves the mass mobilization of the rural populace in Policies that affect their lives, modernization of their productive Techniques and abilities and equitable distribution of whatever benefits that result from processes among different families, communities and classes. Integrated rural development therefore has “social, political and economic dimensions”.

The Challenges of Grassroots Development in Nigeria

The state of development in rural Nigeria is unacceptably grim with slow overall economic growth and development. The indices of this sordid situation include poor agricultural productivity; gross infrastructural deficit; rapid population increase; unemployment; lack of social amenities; among others, which had culminated in dehumanizing rural poverty and underdevelopment in all ramifications. The people live on the fringe of starvation, destitution and ignorance, which undermined their immunity and natural resistance to diseases; such that epidemic continued to kill thousands every year (Ekpe, 2006)

The local governments in Nigeria are bedevilled with a legion of problems, which tend to weaken their capacity and ability to achieve developmental goals and objectives. They have thus, failed to respond positively to local needs. Several reasons have been advanced for the poor performance of the local governments prominent among which are the following:

Lack of Qualified Politicians: Often, most qualified politicians do not vie for positions in the local government councils; hence unqualified individuals are elected to become councillors, supervisory councillors and chairmen of the councils. As Ganduje (2008) rightly observed, it is not uncommon to find in some local government councils, school dropouts serving as councillors or chairmen. This calibre of people cannot conceive and formulate development policies and programmes that will transform their local government areas.

Excessive Politicking at the local level: Party politics at the local level tend to promote parochial rather than broad community interests. It divides instead of uniting the diverse rural communities, which had made even modest progress difficult at the local level. Accordingly, instead of the political parties making positive contributions to grassroots development through aggregating the demands and interests of the people, they have acted in the negative. The excessive politicking at the grassroots level has therefore, continued to make local governments ineffective and ineffectual in grassroots development.

Corruption: In Nigeria, corruption is rife in both public and private life. Most Nigerians see official positions in or outside government as avenues for self-enrichment, an opportunity to get rich overnight. Corruption has therefore, deprived many local government councils the needed resources for development. Corruption manifests at the local government level through the award of inflated contracts to cronies for projects, which may either not be executed or abandoned once the contractor is paid huge percentage of the contract sum as mobilization fee. Corruption is also perpetrated at the local governments through dubious expenses in the form of duty tour claims, hospitality allowances, financial assistance, among others. Through these means, large quantum of the local government resources is siphoned by both elected and career officials of the local government.

Lack of Community Participation in the development Process: Development is about people and if it is to be meaningful, the people must be its active agent and not just passive beneficiaries (Odo, 2012). Many development projects in the local governments failed due to non-involvement of the local communities in the conception, design and implementation of such projects. As Odo (2012) noted:

Any development programme, which marginalizes the contributions of the primary beneficiaries, could hardly make serious impact on the lives of the people including lack of sustainability. This is because the local communities, which could have owned the programme and continued from where the government stopped, are from the levels of conception, design and implementation, excluded.

Local government is people's government at the grassroots level and as a government that represents the interests of the people, the people should be seen to be involved in its affairs. Participation of the local people in the decision-making and administration of the local authority is what gives the local government the character of self-government or grassroots democracy. Once the local community does not participate in the affairs of the local government, they become alienated and would not support any development programmes of such councils.

Misplacement of Priorities: This is a fall-out of non-involvement of the people in the decisions on matters that affect them directly. On this premise, many development projects executed by some local governments do not reflect the basic needs of the people. Many white elephant projects with huge capital costs such as secretariat complex, dam construction for tourist site, taxing local governments to fund university education, among others are undertaken to the criminal neglect of the basic needs of the rural people. This is a negation of grassroots development, which ought to address the critical areas of rural development such as construction and maintenance of rural feeder-roads; provision of potable water; electricity; primary health-care services; basic education; agric extension services; amongst others.

Poor Revenue Base of Local Governments: Lack of dependable revenue base is a critical factor that has constrained the efforts of most local governments in grassroots development. As Odo (2014) observed, even though one of the criteria for creating local governments as provided by the 1976 local government reforms guidelines was the issue of viability, most local governments created since then have come to be solely dependent on their statutory allocations from the federation account to run their affairs. Although the revenue accruing to the local governments from the federation account has been increasing over time, the cash flow has not been correspondingly constant. This is because the federal government revenue is exclusively dependent on the sales of crude oil at the international market. Since most local governments depend entirely on federal allocations to run their affairs, the fluctuations in the country's earning from oil has adversely affected their performance in services delivery to the people at the grassroots level.

Dearth of Highly Skilled Manpower: Most local governments in Nigeria suffer from poor and inadequate staffing. The paucity of executive capacity in the local government service undermines the effective performance of the councils in grassroots development. This underscores the centrality of human resources in the development process. The available staff in most local governments across the country are dominated by the generalists such as administrative/executive officers; clerks; artisans; office assistants (messengers); typists; among others. In areas of critical service to the people such as agriculture, health, education, works, finance, and administration, most local governments are lacking in qualified and skilled personnel to offer professional and expertise services designed to transform rural communities.

Lack of Autonomy: The local governments suffer from constant whittling down of their powers by the state governments. The excessive control of some local governments by the states has reduced them to local administration or local arms of state administration. This has greatly impeded the performance of the local governments in grassroots development as they have to work according to the dictates of the state governments. The practice is contrary to the spirit and letter of the 1976 local government reforms, which stipulated in its Guidelines that local governments should do precisely what the word government, implies i.e. governing at the grassroots or local level (FRN, 1976).

Also despite the efforts of the 1976 local government reforms and the 1999 constitution to confer more powers on the local government to participate in wider areas of the economic life of their communities, their activities are still largely confined to narrow functional competence areas. They are left out of the basic health scheme, major agricultural programmes, housing programmes among others, which are of high government priority. In the area of primary education, for instance, local governments in most states of the federation, participate only in the

financing but not in the administration. The administration of primary schools is under state School Boards, which are established by state governments, hence responsible to them

The Way Forward

This paper derives from the concern with the contemporary problems of grassroots development in Nigeria. After about 55 years of political independence, Nigeria has as in some other aspects of national development, experimented with one form of local government or the other. This is with a view to devising a more suitable structure for implementing developmental goals at the grassroots level. Much as various successive governments in the country have tried to design effective local government systems in order to enhance grassroots development, none of the attempts have produced the expected results.

This paper has therefore, attempted to offer suggestions that are capable of improving the performance of local governments in grassroots development. These suggestions are designed to provide a framework, which will address the problems that have frustrated and undermined the effective performance of local governments in socio-economic and political development of the people at the local level.

For local governments to be meaningful agents of grassroots development, they must be made to play more effective role as agents of agricultural and rural development; development of rural agro-allied industries; rural transportation; and provision of a wider range of rural social infrastructures and amenities. To achieve such diversification of the rural economy through effective participation in the development process by the rural communities, local government areas should be seen more as production units and growth poles rather than mere administrative centers.

Executive Capacity: Local governments need human and material resources to execute their functions and responsibilities, which are intended to engender grassroots development. The human resources are the most potent because it is needed to plan, organize and direct other resources towards the realization of the objective of the local government. This underscores the centrality of human factor in the success or otherwise of local governments in the discharge of their functions and responsibilities. It is therefore, recommended that the local governments should be manned by competent hands, which comprise both the career staff and elected chairmen and councillors.

Considering the strategic role expected of the local government in grassroots development, it would be unwise to leave its affairs in the hands of illiterate chairmen and councillors as well as unqualified career staff. The local governments must take advantage of the federal government's gesture of designating some universities as centres for the training of higher level manpower for local governments; to recruit highly qualified and skilled personnel. In the same vein, people at the local level should be enlightened to elect candidates who have the requisite competencies into the local government councils as chairmen and councillors; who could initiate and implement development programmes to develop the rural areas.

Community Participation: Grassroots development should emanate from a process in which the rural people are made to participate in all critical stages of decision-making from problem identification and project formulation; resource mobilization and implementation; to monitoring

and evaluation. This would ensure that the problems addressed are the priorities of the affected communities.

At the very onset, the local communities must be sensitized and encouraged to recognize their leadership roles and responsibilities in partnership with the officials of the local government in projects planning and execution. This will guarantee community ownership of projects, which is a pre-condition for programme sustainability and grassroots development. Planning and execution of grassroots development programmes should therefore, not and never be the exclusive activities of the local government officials if local governments must achieve sustainable grassroots development in Nigeria.

Adequate Finance: The local governments should have adequate financial resources to meet their development objectives. They should also exercise a high level of discipline in the management of their finances as having adequate finance does not automatically translate into development except with prudent and judicious utilization. Huge financial resources accruing to some local governments have frittered away through mismanagement, which manifests not only on how money is spent but also, on lack of clear articulation of policies and programmes that will lift the rural people from poverty and underdevelopment. The local governments should as well strive to reduce their over dependence on statutory allocations from the federation account through the exploration of various sources of internally generated revenue.

Local Government Autonomy: The state governments should lose their grip of control over local governments including arbitrary dissolution of elected local government councils by state fiat for varying political reasons. The local governments should be granted meaningful autonomy in the conduct of their affairs. This will strengthen the local governments to respond effectively to the demands for efficient services delivery at the grassroots level and make the people feel the positive impact of governance.

Conclusion

The paper has examined the socio-economic and political challenges that have impeded the effective performance of local government in grassroots development across the country; and offered suggestions for addressing the challenges. The suggestions are aimed at enhancing the capacity of the local governments in services delivery to the people at the grassroots level. This underscores the fact that local governments have significant roles to play not only in grassroots development, but also in the overall development of the Nigerian state.

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