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LOCAL GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION AND THE CHALLENGES OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Local government administration has been adopted as the main fundamental instrument for the acceleration and sustenance of rural development. It serves as vehicle for political education and mobilization among others. Several efforts have been made towards moving the system from local administration to local government with functional political and economic autonomy. Within the framework of Basic Needs Approach (BNA), the paper analyzed issues of local government administration and the challenges of sustainable development in Nigeria. It argue that local government administration is confronted with issues and challenges such as federal and state government's interventions in constitutional responsibilities of local government. Yet, it is seen as avenue for dispensing political patronage to party loyalists. These among other challenges facing local government administration have rendered it incapable of producing good governance and democratic dividends to the people. Drawing experiences from developed and developing countries in the globalized era, it concludes that local government administration in Nigeria cannot successfully address the challenges of sustainable rural development unless the country returns to true federalism, enthrone positive leadership anchored on rule of law, transparency and accountability, administrative probity, pursue economic self-reliant through internally generated revenue and embracing the culture of good governance and global best practices.

Keywords: Local Government, Challenges, Nigeria, Rural Development, Sustainability

Introduction

Local government administration in Nigeria has come of age, not so much of because of its efficiency and effectiveness, but primarily because of its longevity and resilience of its relevance in the administration of the country (Igbokwe-Ibeto, 2003). The expediency for the creation of local government anywhere in the world stems from the need to facilitate development at the grassroots. As important as local government administration has been, there seems to be some constraints that have been infringing on its operations over the years. These challenges range from political but undue interference of federal and state governments, coupled with high rate of bribery and corruption to embezzlement and gross inadequacy of well-trained and qualified human resources among others (Akhakpe, Fatile & Igbokwe-Ibeto, 2012).

The process of achieving local government administration that would have engendered sustainable development was not visibly seen in Nigeria, from the colonial period to the year 1975. Thus, the colonial masters concentrated on the welfare of a minor elite population which lived in the towns and cities (Akhakpe, Fatile & Igbokwe-Ibeto, 2012). Prior to the advent of the British colonial administrators, the various communities, kingdoms and empires had evolved their own unique forms and patterns of native administrations which were able to meet the needs of their various peoples at their different levels of development. If the colonial administration in Nigeria had not halted the natural evolution of the peoples' unique system of native administrations, perhaps greater socio-economic and political development would have been realized in different parts of the country. The once vibrant and dominant level of government is presently seen as an appendage of the state and federal governments. As a result of this, several attempts and approaches have been adopted since the 1976 local government reforms to bring about efficient local government administration in Nigeria. Thus, the subsequent local government decree of 1989, 1990 and 1992 have all intended to operationalize the third tier status of local government in Nigeria, therefore, granting it a high degree of autonomy as well as increase in their revenue allocation.

It is important to note that despite various reforms in local government administration in Nigeria, much has not been seen in terms of provision of essential services in the local governments that will translate to sustainable development at the grassroots' level. Ordinarily, local government administration encapsulates adapting appropriate technology in agriculture; establishment of skills acquisition and development centres; increasing literacy levels; creating awareness of rural possibilities; political education and mobilization; providing information on rural resources, deploying technical assistance; sensitizing potential volunteers and donors as well as focus on peoples' felt needs and basic amenities such as provision of good roads, electricity, health centres, markets, schools, and farm settlements among others. Unfortunately, the reverse is the case in Nigerian local governments. Given the crucial role local government administration plays in development at all local levels, it is imperative to interrogate how to mitigate this catalogue of challenges facing local government administration in Nigeria.

Methodology

The paper adopts the methodology of documentary analysis of current literature which enhances critical and contextual analysis of nature and character of local government administration and sustainable development in Nigerian. The issue of government administration and rural development is of serious concern to both the people and government and has therefore attracted a plethora of public commentary. To improve on the reliability and validity of the paper, multiple secondary sources were used to minimize errors.

To address the fundamental issues raised and for ease of analysis, the chapter is structured into five sections. Section one, deals with conceptual and theoretical issues. Section two, traces the evolution of local government administration in the country. The third examined the role local government as agents of local development. The fourth section discussed the issues and challenges confronting local government administration in Nigeria, while the fifth section proffered the way forward within the context of the identified problems and then conclusion.

Conceptual and Theoretical Underpinnings

Local government as a concept has attracted several definitions. But unlike other concepts, it has not generated much controversy as to its actual meaning. A sketch of some of these definitions could be helpful. Local government can be defined as the substructure upon which the superstructures of state and federal governments are erected. Yet, Bello Iman (in Akhakpe, 2011) defines local government as “that unit of administration with defined territory and powers as well as administrative authority with relative autonomy”. According to 1976 Local Government Reforms, local government could be defined as:

Government at local level exercise through representative council 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 and implement projects so as to compliment the activities of the state and federal government in their areas and to ensure, through devolution of functions to their councils and through the active participation of the people and traditional institutions, but that local initiative and response to local needs and condition are maximized”, (FRN, 1976).

The above definitions no doubt are exhaustive, and try to cover much ground in addressing the meaning of local government administration. The essence of local government administration therefore, is to provide for the needs of the people at the grassroots’ or rural areas.

According to Ekong (in Akhakpe, Fatile & Igbokwe-Ibeto, 2012), rural areas refer to small, inward-looking, and idyllic communities held together by kinship relations and supporting basic agricultural occupations. The differences between rural from urban areas can be seen in terms of: size, population density; homogeneity; presence of few social classes; low standard of living, presence of few or no social amenities such as electricity; pipe-borne water; mainly agrarian in nature; rural-urban migration of young able-men and women in search of greener pastures; domestic labour; poverty; high death rate; high birth rate; illiteracy, high health risks, inadequate access to productive resources, and lack of credit/market access among others.

This brings to the fore the question whether local government administration and democracy are related. Two theoretical perspectives have been put forward in this regard. The first perspective argues that in a democratic local government system, people's participation in governmental affairs brings about better politics which impact positively on the lives of the people. Thus, where democracy is practiced in local government system, it opens up the political space for different individuals and groups to contribute to community development and human self-fulfilment. The second perspective argues that there cannot be "an inevitable tie of reciprocal dependence between democracy and local government". According to this perspective, while democracy attempts to create a social whole, a universal norm and pattern that applies to all, "local government is by definition a phenomenon of differentiation of individualization of aspiration" (Gboyega, 1987; Akhakpe, 2012).

From the point of analysis, it would appear from empirical facts that there is an interface between local government administration and democracy. However, local government administration in Nigeria is still evolving towards the stage where we can safely talk about a reciprocal dependence between local government and democracy. Thus, the struggle for a democratically elected third-tier of government has not been an easy one and the process is still on-going.

Development refers to man's progressive qualitative and continued improvement of human labour (Chukwuemeka, 2013). Development is needed not only to enable citizens have higher standards of living and material advancement, but to achieve socio-economic and political transformation as well as attain technological feats over the environment (Igbokwe-Ibeto, 2003). Yet, development have been viewed as "multi-dimensional, referring to positive changes which affect the majority and which lie in the social, economic, political and cultural spheres of societal life. To Rudeback (1997) development is about the people, beginning from the grassroots where majority of Nigerians live. It is the ability of a people to use their cultural values over a period of time to change their situation whereby each new stage is better than the preceding one. Development involves a departure from the past to the new situation, which is reflected in the economic, social, educational and political aspects of a nation.

Sustainable development is seen as development that meets our present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (UNDP, 2009). After examining the issues of sustainable development, Anazodo, Igbokwe-Ibeto, Osawe & Nkah (2014), concluded that sustainable development can only make sense to people when they are involved in the process of decision making through a Bottom-top approach. Popular participation is seen here as the active involvement of the people in a process of setting goals and making decisions about involvement in the process not just the acceptability of end results which satisfies the need to participate (Ake, 1994). This view on popular participation aligns with the democratic principles of freedom, equality, consent and liberty.

Several theoretical approaches can be useful when applied to local government administration and sustainable development. The Basic Need Approach (BNA) which is one of several centres on the essential needs of the people at the grassroots'. Yet, it may not be far-reaching enough because it merely scratches the surface of the existing development objectives and processes. The exigential social conditions of the people at the local government level call for expansion of this approach to enable it to tackle local level challenges. The BNA approach to local government administration should be conceptualized to make the basic needs package more heuristic to retrieve and release the "creative energies and potentials of the rural dwellers held down and crippled by centuries of degrading oppression and servitude" (Alernike & Olumodeji, 2005).

Evolution of Local Government Administration in Nigeria

The evolution of local administration in Nigeria is traceable to the early 1950s. This according to Chukwuemeka (2013) was the period during which the first form of local government reform that ushered in the anticipatory of local government in Nigeria was carried out. Before this time, the native authority and indirect rule system were in existence. The struggle to realize an effective and efficient local government administration in Nigeria has been a recurring decimal. To transform local administration to local government with autonomous powers, took several decades. This was due to the country's colonial antecedence which sub-planted the indigenous political arrangement for the British colonial administrative structure. As Guyer (1992) observed:

The British colonial endeavor in Africa, and Nigeria in particular, seems in retrospect to have tried to duplicate the English sequence over a period of a few decades, to establish central government and taxation systems on authoritarian bases, to promote the market using these mechanisms fairly ruthlessly in some places and finally in the last decades to allow limited systems of representation and expansion of the salaried local civil service.

The centralization of power and resources in the federal government in a multi-ethnic and deeply divided society like Nigeria has serious implications for development at the local level in all parts of the country. For instance, in the Eastern, Western and Mid-Western regions, several local government ordinances were enacted to bring local administration to the status of local government. However, in all these reforms, real powers were not given to the people who ought to be the ultimate power holders and beneficiaries of the local government system. The conservatism of the British colonial administrative system and the nature of political leadership in the country made efforts at reforming the local government system difficult (Osaghae, 2006; Suberu 2004).

However, the most fundamental efforts to institutionalize a democratically elected local government system in country were the 1976 local government reform. It remains till date the bench mark for local government reforms in the Nigeria. It brought among other innovations, democratically elected local government system, uniform structure, regular allocation of funds and functions enshrined in the constitution. In spite of these innovations, local government administration is still struggling to find its feet. At this juncture it is imperative to x-ray local government as agent of local development as well as the justification for its existence.

Local Governments as Agents of Local Development

Local governments are created to bring about development in the rural areas. As agents of rural development, local governments are to use the funds made available to them by both the federal and state governments and their internally generated revenue to improve on the lives of the people within their areas of operation through initiating and attracting development projects to the local government such as provision of access roads, water and rural electricity; sustaining livelihoods through the provision of credit facilities for agriculture, arts, crafts and small scale business; and encouraging the formations of cooperative societies and other economic groupings (Akhakpe, Fatile & Igbokwe-Ibeto, 2012).

It is equally important to reiterate that no kind of desirable development can be achieved if there is a political framework defined by; a tendency to divert public resources for private gain; failure to establish a predictable framework of law and government behaviour conducive to development, or arbitrariness in the application of rules and laws; excessive rules, regulations, licensing requirements, and so forth, which impede the functioning of markets and encourage rent-seeking; narrowly based or non-transparent decision making.

In all emergent states, local government administration has been adopted as the main fundamental instrument for the acceleration and sustenance of rural development. Various arms of government must aim at stimulating and motivating rural people to take an active part in the development of their communities. Yet, motivating people is the duty of local government and it is a complex process. It has to do with defining development so that there is no logical and operational break between past practices, past beliefs, the present and the future. Thus, local

government is widely acknowledged as a viable instrument for rural transformation and delivery of social services to the people.

The above discussions shows that there is no way one can talk of local development without placing more emphasis on the role of local government. Also, rural area cannot develop socially, politically, economically and even technologically without local government. No wonder, Maddick (in Igbokwe-Ibeto, 2003) notes that:

to achieve social change and general economic growth requires a spreading efforts so that local communities and individuals can participate to bring under ideal conditions, energy, enthusiasm and most important of all local development activities... local authorities provide the opportunity for local people to participate in local decision and local schemes within the general national policies, and to act above all, as local centers of initiative and activity conducive, to development.

The above statement buttresses the fact that local government has a meaningful and positive role in development process. Akhakpe Fatile & Igbokwe-Ibeto (2012) noted that community development through the instrumentality of the local government is essential for a sustained development process. The local government system is therefore the surest way to get the grassroots' through planning and sustenance of implementation strategies if adequately funded under a corrupt free system.

Local government serves as training grounds for politicians while local government administration trains people for higher political duties and responsibilities. A number of people holding political positions at the higher levels of government started their political career at the grassroots' where they were recognized for future appointments. Yet, local government administration helps to promote development at the grassroots' as earlier discussed. In a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria, decentralization of power through local government gives the people of the community a better knowledge of their environment and opportunities therein and contributes to their community development. It also helps other levels of government to bring policies and programmes closer to the people at the grassroots' (Anazodo, Igbokwe-Ibeto, Osawe & Nkah, 2014).

Local government administration facilitates political mobilization and sensitization of the people within its areas. The institutional framework of local government administration is pivotal to the success of any government programme. It has been consistently argued in literature that local government administration is an effective and efficient instrument for political education and socialization of the people at the local level. Local government administration allows for clientele participation in decision making and implementation of government programmes that affect their lives (Akhakpe, 2013). Corroborating the above statement, Briggs (2007) contends that the fundamental premise of clientele involvement is that it interest and commitment to programmes success is likely to be high when people regard such programmes as theirs.

Local government administration through internally generated revenue (IGR) raises revenue to finance development programmes at the grassroots'. This is in addition to the statutory allocation from the federation account. Through such monies, it provide social amenities and services such as pipe born water, boreholes, roads, cottage industries, skill acquisition centres, maternity and cottage hospital and health care delivery, market stalls, etc to the people.

Local government administration promotes democratic rule in the society. This is because, local government administration is the closet level of government to the people and as such, it provides the opportunity for the people to further learn the democratic values and norms. Local government administration in a federal system like Nigeria promotes nation building and contributes to socio-economic and political development in the country. However, despite the elaborate justification of local government administration, local government administration is faced with a number of issues and challenges.

Issues and Challenges Confronting Local Government Administration and Sustainable Development in Nigeria

The issues and challenges facing local government and sustainable development are so enormous and complex that space cannot permit us to do justice to all. Therefore, we shall concentrate on topical and salient ones.

First and foremost, poverty of leadership at the local government level remains one of the most daunting challenges of sustainable development of the grassroots' in developing countries. While we recognize the fact that leadership problem is a national phenomenon in Nigeria, local government administrations have come under serious criticism over years for poor service delivery and bad governance. Both political and administrative leadership are in deficit at this level of government due to keptocratic and patronage system of politics. Most leaders at the local government level have a sit-tight mentality which does not allow for new ideas, fresh initiative and innovation. Rather than concentrate on developmental efforts, some local government chairmen are busy boot-licking state governors and donors/donor agencies (Anazodo, Igbokwe-Ibeto, Osawe & Nkah, 2014).

The issue of autonomy of local government administration has been a recurring one as witnessed in the on-going constitutional review where the issue of local government autonomy got almost 100 percent support. While efforts have been made since 1976 to bring about local government as a tier of government under a three tier federal system, local government administration is still seen as an appendage of the state governments. In spite of the constitutional provision which defined functions and sources of funding of the system, local governments in the country have not been able to extricate themselves from the apron string of state governments. State governors appoint Caretaker Committees to whom they dictate and direct on how to run the operations of local governments in their respective states. Yet, these committees are dissolved at will.

Funding of local government administration in Nigeria remains a mirage. In spite, of the constitutional provisions and guarantee of funding of local governments from the federation account, local governments in the country operates a joint account with their respective state governments thereby making it difficult if not impossible to discharge their constitutional duties and responsibilities. State governments' releases money to local governments only to pay staff salaries and in some instances their staff are owed for months. Yet, financial paucity in local government administration could be blamed on lack of seriousness on the part of local government administrators to explore internal sources of revenue generation. Most local governments in the country are contented with the federal and or state allocations. Thereby serving as a mere distribution outlet for federal and state generated revenues; a situation Suberu (2004) describe as the cost of distributive federalism. In his words, "for a federal system that is dominated by the redistribution of centrally collected revenue, it is hardly surprising that the

revenue generation and allocation issue has remained particularly contentious and intractable in Nigeria".

In spite the problem posed by poverty of leadership, we also observe administrative/managerial credibility gap in most local government administrative structure in the country. The inability of local government councils in recruiting and retaining skilled and experienced human resources coupled with poor staff remuneration has given rise to the phenomenon of brain-drain in the system. Thus, inefficiency, ineffectiveness and low productivity is the hallmark of local government administration in Nigeria.

Training, retraining and development are supposed to enhance the performance of local government staff irrespective of their quality on entry into the civil service. However, training and development have been epileptic and nothing to write home about in the local government administration. Local government administrators would make an appreciable impact on the people if they are more innovative and imaginative in their methods of meeting societal needs. However, as a result of the increase in institutions of higher learning, there are competent hands emerging from them. But is highly regrettable that a new problem has since emerged in the area of quality of human resources in the public sector; most public administrators are ill-trained and abhor training where available (Akhakpe, 2012).

Perhaps, these challenges would not have been so pronounced if not for the endemic culture of financial mismanagement prevalent in local government. The level of economic crisis and its attendant poverty in Nigeria has made corruption a lucrative venture and a way of life in the civil service. As in other levels of government, local government administration is heavenly plagued by the canker-worm of bureaucratic and political corruption which have eaten deep into fabric of the entire society and public service in particular. Corruption in local government have arrested rural and community development which behind their creation and supposed to be the pivot of national development. Public interest is now a second priority in the Nigerian vocabulary.

As overwhelmingly and complex as these constraints may appear, they are not insurmountable. Indeed, they can be managed and possibly be ameliorated. In the following section, we shall turn our search light on how this can achieved.

Local Government Administration and Sustainable Development in Nigeria: The Way Forward

Having identified and discussed some of the topical and salient issues and challenges confronting local government administration in the country. We shall at this juncture make some recommendations on the way forward.

First and foremost, positive leadership is crucial to the success of any human endeavor local government administration inclusive. Therefore, there is the urgent need to bring about political and administrative leadership anchored on rule of law, transparency and accountability, administrative probity and culture of good governance. The local government system needs missionary and visionary leaders with democratic credentials and readiness to transform the local government system in the country.

Local government administration should adopt the principle of public management summarized by Osborne & Gaebler (1993) to include: catalytic government: steering rather than rowing; community: owned government empowering rather than serving; competitive government:

injecting competition into service delivery; mission-driven government: transforming rule-driven organization; result-oriented government: funding outcomes, not inputs; customer-driven government: meeting the needs of the customer, not the bureaucracy; enterprising government; earning rather than spending; anticipatory government; prevention rather than cure; decentralized government; from hierarchy to participation and teamwork; and market-oriented government; leveraging change through the market. According to Osborne & Gaebler (1993), the above ten principles serves as a new conceptual framework for public administrators and an analytical checklist to transform government policies to action. Their position got support in the argument that traditional public administration theory has failed to transform the society and deliver the much needed public goods and service. The state had become too large and over committed and therefore the market offer superior mechanism for achieving efficiency in the supply of public goods and services (World Bank, 1997).

The ecology of public administration in any given country could hinder the goals of national development if not well managed. It is arguable that the ecological environment within which local government administration operates in Nigeria could shape and reshape their conception of management. However, in contemporary times, local government administrators should know that their goal should be the pursuit of public interest and in doing this; they must put national interest over and above personal interest and primordial issues.

Local government autonomy as captured in the constitution should be activated to forestall the undue state governments' interference in the management of local in the country. Yet, funding is critical to the success of local government administration. In this regard, internal sources of revenue generation in local government areas as enshrined in the constitution should be tapped. This will bring about both political and economic autonomy instrumental for the development of communities. Also, the importance of global best financial practices cannot be overemphasized. Financial control mechanisms in the system should be activated and reinforced to promote transparency and accountability.

Local government administration should place more emphasis on staff training, retraining and developments. This will enhance employee performance and productivity irrespective of their quality on entry point. In this era of globalization, competition is the order of the day and local governments can not be left out. For local government staff to compete with their counterpart elsewhere they should be well motivated financially and work environment made conducive. One major approach through which these objectives can be achieved is service orientation, attitudinal and behavioural change and procedural fairness.

The elite at all levels of government should show sufficient commitment to making the local government system work in the interest of all in the society. On the part of the people, beyond paying their taxes, rates, levies, fees, etc greater vigilance is required from them particularly in the area of ensuring that their votes counts and by stepping up their participation in all activities of local government councils in their areas.

Conclusion and Implications

We have seen from the analysis made that local government administration have important role to play in the governance and sustainable development in Nigeria. It performs vital functions such as: political education, mobilization of the people for popular participation in governance, vehicle for political accountability, among others. Efforts have geared towards moving the system from local administration to local government with functional political and economic autonomy. However, the path leading to the achievement of these goals is by no means smooth.

Local government administration in the country is confronted with issues and challenges such as federal and state government's interventions in the constitutional responsibilities of local government, leadership, structure, organization, attitude and values of the people, poor funding etc. It is seen as avenue for dispensing political patronage to party loyalists. These and other challenges facing local government administration have rendered it incapable of producing good governance and democratic dividends to the people of the grassroots'. As complex and intimidating as these problems may be, they are not insurmountable.

The implication is that, drawing experiences from developed and developing countries in the globalized era, it concludes that local government administration in Nigeria cannot successfully address challenges of sustainable rural development unless the country departs from her current organizational culture which hinders development, returns to true federalism, enthrone positive leadership anchored on rule of law, transparency and accountability, administrative probity, pursue economic self-reliant through internally generated revenue and embracing the culture of good governance and global best practices.

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