



Local Government Autonomy and Restoration of Hope for Rural Transformation in Nigeria

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Abstract

Over the years, there have been several attempts to grant local governments autonomy, but most of these attempts have been unsuccessful. This has led to a situation where local governments are largely dependent on state governments for funding and decision-making. Hence, the study seeks to assess the current state of local government autonomy in Nigeria and its impact on rural development. It aims at establishing the key factors that constitute the local governments and clarify the ways such obstacles make it difficult to revive the hope of change to rural ill fate. Also, the research finds out measures that can be taken to advance local government self-governance, so as to foster rural development within the Nigerian context. This research paper is purely qualitative and only secondary data sources were used. Secondary data was collected from books, reviewed articles, journals, magazines, and scholarly publications containing scientifically related information to the study topic. The study adopted Systems Theory and emphasized how LGs should be seen as subsystems of the larger Nigerian political system. The study found the importance of local government autonomy for rural transformation in Nigeria. Autonomy enables local governments to effectively mobilize resources, implement targeted programs, and foster accountability. However, challenges, including lack of political will and insufficient capacity, hinder effective implementation. The study concluded that autonomy is a crucial factor in promoting rural development and transformation in Nigeria. The study suggests the reality and visibility of local government autonomy, establishing monitoring frameworks, and enhancing officials' capacity for rural transformation.

Keywords: Local Government, Restoration, Autonomy, Rural Transformation.

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Introduction

Local government autonomy has been a contentious issue in Nigeria for several decades. The essence of this autonomy is to empower local governments to develop their communities and meet the needs of their people. Over the years, there have been several attempts to grant local governments autonomy, but most of these attempts have been unsuccessful. This has led to a situation where local governments are largely dependent on state governments for funding and decision-making. However, recent efforts by the federal government to grant local governments autonomy have raised hopes for rural transformation in Nigeria. Local government autonomy has been a subject of debate in Nigeria for many years due to its potential for transforming rural communities by providing essential services, promoting economic development, and reducing poverty.

Gray and Barford (2018) argue that local government autonomy is essential for effective service delivery and the promotion of economic development in rural communities. Similarly, de Haro-Rosario, Sáez-Martín, and Pérez (2018) suggest that social media can enhance citizen engagement with local government, which is essential for promoting accountability and transparency, while Lee (2019) contends that local government disaster management capacity is critical for enhancing disaster resilience in rural communities. However, despite the potential benefits of local government autonomy for rural transformation, there are concerns about the effectiveness of local government structures in Nigeria. Goodman (2019) argues that the fragmentation of local government structures in Nigeria is a significant challenge that can hinder effective service delivery and citizen participation.

Moreover, Zeemering (2018) suggests that the lack of adequate sustainability management, strategy, and reform in local government can hinder economic development and poverty reduction in rural communities. Local government as a subnational or lower order tier of government within the political structure, is empowered to make local legislation and policies such as by-laws (Aliyu, M.K., Afolabi. O.S &Akinwwande, A.E, 2013). But state governors have remained adamant in relinquishing full autonomy to the local governments, and in one way or the other use one trick or the other to frustrate their desire for independence with a view to controlling their financial resources (Aliyu, M.K., Afolabi. O.S &Akinwwande, A.E,



2013). Eneanya aver related that, local councils have been experiencing a gradual loss of their power and authority; No clear distinction of powers so typical of presidential system.

The state governments have the responsibility by virtue of the 1979 Constitution to make laws for the organization, structure, composition, financing, and roles of local governments. The said legal regime can indeed be said to subjugate local governments directly under the control of state governments – a status that state authorities have not infrequently used, for instance, through the practice of installing caretaker committees instead of local councils. This constitutional setting has enabled governors to very much influence the local councils mainly via the state-Local Government Joint Account (SLGJA) contrary to the vision of fiscal decentralization for the local governments. Therefore, the concept of real development and delivery of services in local settings still proves to be far-fetched. Borrowing a leaf from the report of the RMAFC in 2019, state governors often fail to respond to their statutory mandates with regard to state/local revenue sharing, but rather personally allocate funds meant for local developmental projects.

The restoration of hope in rural communities is an essential component of rural transformation, requiring effective local government structures that can deliver basic amenities and services, promote economic development, and reduce poverty. Huang and Liu (2018) suggest that welcoming cities, which promote immigration policies at the local government level, can enhance economic development and social inclusion in rural communities. Similarly, Adiputra, Utama, and Rossieta (2018) argue that transparency in local government is critical for promoting accountability and citizen participation, which is necessary for restoring hope in rural communities. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature by critically examining the relationship between local government autonomy and the restoration of hope for rural transformation in Nigeria. Indeed, this work seeks to assess the current state of local government autonomy in Nigeria and its impact on rural development. It aims at establishing the key factors that constitute the local governments and clarify the ways such obstacles make it difficult to revive the hope of change to rural ill fate. Also, the research finds out measures that can be taken to advance local government self-governance, so as to foster rural development within the Nigerian context.



Literature Review

Concept of Local Government Autonomy

Local government autonomy refers to the level of independence and self-governance granted to local governments in a country. It is the degree to which local governments have control over their own affairs, including the provision of basic services such as water, healthcare, and education, without interference from the central government. Blom-Hansen, Houlberg, Serritzlew, and Treisman (2016) posited that local government autonomy is a crucial precondition for democratic governance and effective service delivery at the local level. Autonomy allows local governments to respond to the unique needs and circumstances of their communities, and to develop policies that best serve their citizens' interests.

The autonomy of local government in Nigeria can therefore be as a result of the federal nature of the federation. Federalism entails devolution of powers, funds and legitimate power to subnational governments. It comprises the tax sharing mechanism, the retention of revenue and the methods of distributing centrally collected revenues consistent with the constitutional roles of each level of government as provided under the Nigerian constitution (Osakwe, 1999). Local government autonomy, therefore, is the extent to which a local government can govern itself (Defunct Centre for Democratic Studies, CDS). In this respect, autonomy means the degree of freedom of local governments from state and federal control in the performance of their duties concerning their local affairs (Adeyemo, 2005). It is an autonomy which, in addition to the legal and, presence of a structure of an apparatus of government for instance a legislative assembly, or a governor. court etc, but that each government must exist not as an incidence of another government but as in the manner of being an individual legal entity and, therefore, having independent will in the management of as it should be in political affairs without influence from another government. Local government autonomy means freedom of operation in obviously different subject, territory and juridical personality from other Local, State or Federal government.

Restoration of Hope

Restoration of hope means reigniting of hope when a community has lost hope in better times after hardship of different kinds has befallen a region – be it economic poor performance, social vices, or political instabilities. This idea is to restore the belief that positive change and progress in the society is feasible to encourage people and come up with good effort towards



change. In the sense of Porumbescu (2015), hope is not only a mere recreation of morale but an explicit and proactive social process through which hope is recovered is often at the heart of sustainable community development. It inspires people to participate in the re-creation of their community and increases the cohesion between the country's population.

In all the communities with such issues as a vice, hope restoration fosters resilience because people rise to the challenge and interact proactively. Often when the people of a given community have hope for the future, they partake in Lauren's community projects as well, support local causes, and engage more in social activities that bolster the fabric of society. Such collective optimism plays a role in building up a stronger population so as to overcome adverse situations in the future and is helpful in the long-term formation of a stable and prosperous society.

Rural Transformation

Rural transformation may therefore be described as the broad strategy for the development of rural areas whereby interventionist measures are taken to catalyse the growth of the economy and social progress. It is not about economic development alone, but a quest for a better quality of life for the latter where structural factors depriving them of opportunities are corrected. Expected measures encompass the construction of substructures, for instance, roads, electric power, and installations for water supply and sewerage, which create connections to centrality, markets, and services and enhance the standards of living. One of the key components of the rural change process is rural finance. Besides, inadequate funding, especially in banking services with few credit facilities, depicts a true picture of huge restrictions to resource mobilization for investment in income generation activities such as improvements in agriculture and other small business ventures in rural areas.

Through credit and financial service availability, rural transformation fosters the expansion of local enterprises and agricultural producers, which creates employment and pecuniary diversification. Farm technology is also one of the main contributors to the process of rural transformation. In the same respect, a facility to adopt new technologies used in farming such as irrigation technology, animal breeding, and post-harvest technologies among others improves productivity, yields better outcomes, and food security both for the local populace and the entire country's supply chain. Similarly, new opportunities in education,



telemedicine, and communication bring a broader economy and society into rural areas through digital technology. As important as that is the work towards improving service delivery in basic amenities such as health and education. The concept of Rural transformation relates to extending health care, and education to such a population hence when the health care is improved for the inhabitants, the tone of the population is made to be intelligent through education hence a conducive ground for the provision of sustainable rural development is created. As Araújo and Tejedó-Romero (2016) underlined rural transformation is one of the key SD for sustainable development because it tackles poverty, and hunger and results in improved environmental outcomes.

Historicizing Local Government System in Nigeria

Local government autonomy has been a subject of discussion in Nigeria since the amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates in 1914. The Local Government Ordinance of 1916 established the framework for local government administration in Nigeria, which provided for elected councils at the local government level. However, local government autonomy in Nigeria has been characterized by a history of political interference, centralization, and financial dependence on state governments.

According to Krause et al. (2014), the Nigerian local government system was highly centralized during the military era, which had a significant impact on local government autonomy. The military governments in Nigeria saw local governments as mere extensions of the state governments, and as such, local governments were deprived of financial and administrative autonomy. The result was that local governments were poorly funded, and the ability of local officials to prioritize rural transformation was limited. John (2014) suggests that local government autonomy in Nigeria faced a significant setback during the adoption of the 1976 local government reform. The reform brought about the appointment of local government chairmen by state governors, which created a situation where local governments became appendages of state governments. This situation further weakened local government autonomy, as local officials were more accountable to state governors than the local population.

The 1999 Constitution of Nigeria, which ushered in the Fourth Republic, provided for local government autonomy. Section 7 of the Constitution provides for a system of democratically



elected local government councils, which should be autonomous and financially independent. However, the reality on the ground is different from what is provided for in the Constitution. The state governments still exercise control over local governments, and local officials are often at the mercy of state governors.

Cuadrado-Ballesteros (2014) found that local government autonomy is hampered by weak institutional frameworks and the lack of transparency. The absence of transparency in local government operations is a significant hindrance to local government autonomy, as it creates avenues for political interference and financial mismanagement. Local governments in Nigeria are often starved of funds, and this affects their ability to initiate and execute rural transformation projects. Furthermore, the lack of financial autonomy in the local government system in Nigeria has been a significant challenge. The state governments are responsible for the allocation of funds to local governments, which often leads to a situation where local governments are financially dependent on state governments. Drew et al. (2014) suggest that economies of scale can be achieved through the consolidation of local government areas, which would provide for more effective and efficient service delivery. Local government autonomy in Nigeria has been a subject of discourse, with several attempts made to ensure that local governments are autonomous and financially independent. The historical background of local government autonomy in Nigeria is characterized by political interference and financial dependence on state governments. The 1999 Constitution of Nigeria provides for local government autonomy, but the reality on the ground is different.

Theoretical Foundation

Consequently, this research utilizes Systems Theory, originally elaborated by Almond (1960), and Easton (1965). A social construct of 'system' as postured by several authors refers to an arrangement, integration of interrelated components/elements separable from the surroundings with inputs getting transformed into outputs. The emphasis is made on the relations between parts and the occurrences that result from them, and each system element is linked logically for a particular goal. According to Systems Theory, political systems consist of subsystems that make up the entire political system. These subsystems have specified roles and are provided with the resources, powers, and scope needed for them to provide service in an optimum manner.



As political systems, they are supposed to be stable, and although instabilities may occur, they result in reduced effectiveness in any of the two or both the subsystems and the total systems. Since the LGs are needed to meaningfully participate within the Nigerian political system and ensure the system's stability, they need adequate resources. Systems Theory emphasizes how LGs should be seen as subsystems of the larger Nigerian political system. By penetrating the roles and responsibilities assigned to them, LGs perform a very significant role in delivering quality services to the population.

Methodology

This research paper is purely qualitative and only secondary data sources have been used. Secondary data was collected from books, reviewed articles, journals, magazines, and scholarly publications containing scientifically related information to the study topic. As such, given the contents of the abovementioned sources, the study relies on the findings of previous empirical research and on theoretical concepts that will enable the creation of a methodological framework for addressing the given issue. The research design adopted in the study is an ex-post facto one; it is a post-fact experiment research design that is used in social sciences to analyze relationships or effects whereby the independent variable occurs after the dependent variable. This design is appropriate for research scenarios where variables can merely be recorded in their natural environment. Here, the ex-post facto design allows for patterns and correlations of existing data concerning the topic under study to be investigated, increasing depth.

In analyzing data, content analysis was employed, which is a scientific approach to understanding textual data to reveal themes, trends, or patterns. By organizing the material, content analysis enables them to pick out patterns and details suitable to answer all the important questions presented by a study. In doing so, the paper aims at posing subsequent questions as the synthesis of this literature review shall be a compilation of knowledge from several secondary sources towards a definitive understanding of the selected research topic.

Discussion of Findings

Nigeria is a country that has been challenged in terms of rural development and transformation due to various factors such as poor governance, lack of infrastructural development, and inadequate funding. The local government is meant to be the closest to the



grassroots and the primary source of development in the rural areas. However, the level of autonomy granted to the local government has been a persistent issue in Nigeria.

Local government autonomy is the degree of independence granted to the local government in managing its affairs without interference from higher government authorities. The concept of local government autonomy is crucial in promoting rural transformation in Nigeria. According to Cederman et al. (2015), Territorial Autonomy provides opportunities for local communities to take ownership of their affairs and create policies that reflect their priorities. When local government is granted autonomy, it is empowered to make decisions and implement policies that will drive rural transformation. The local government can also channel resources and funds towards rural development projects without interference from higher authorities.

However, local government autonomy in Nigeria has been limited. The central government exercises significant control over the local government, thereby limiting its effectiveness in driving rural transformation. The autonomy of the local government is limited in terms of financial resources, administrative powers, and legislative powers. According to Slemph et al. (2015), the lack of autonomy in the local government results in a lack of motivation and commitment towards rural development. The study found that local government autonomy is a crucial factor in promoting rural transformation in Nigeria. Local governments that enjoy autonomy are better able to mobilize resources and implement programs that are targeted at rural development. Autonomy enables local governments to have more control over their finances, human resources, and service delivery. This results in more efficient and effective service delivery, which in turn promotes rural transformation. The study also found that local government autonomy promotes accountability and transparency in the use of public resources, which is critical in ensuring that resources are channeled towards rural development.

The study supports the findings of previous studies, which have also shown that local government autonomy is essential for promoting rural development. For instance, Siroky & Cuffe (2015) argue that autonomy is critical for promoting nationalism and separatism. Similarly, Steinberg & Silverberg (1986) argue that autonomy is crucial for promoting adolescent development.



The restoration of hope is a critical factor in driving rural transformation in Nigeria. Hope provides the necessary motivation and commitment required for policymakers and stakeholders to drive rural development. According to Lammers et al. (2016), the desire for power and control reflects a need for autonomy. Autonomy provides individuals with a sense of control over their lives and their environment. It also fosters a sense of responsibility and accountability towards achieving set goals. The restoration of hope requires a significant shift towards granting more autonomy to the local government. By doing so, local government officials can take ownership of policies and programs that drive rural transformation. The central government can also channel more funds and resources towards rural development projects, thereby creating an enabling environment for rural transformation.

Despite the importance of local government autonomy in promoting rural transformation, several challenges hinder its implementation in Nigeria. One of the significant challenges is the lack of political will to grant the local government autonomy. According to Dyson and Moore (1983), political elites are often reluctant to decentralize power, fearing that it may lead to a loss of control over resources and political influence. Another challenge is the lack of capacity and resources to implement policies and programs that drive rural transformation. According to Spiegelaere et al. (2016), different dimensions of job autonomy are related to work engagement and innovative work behavior. The lack of autonomy in the local government can hinder the ability of officials to be innovative and creative in driving rural transformation. The local government also lacks the necessary resources and capacity to implement rural development projects.

Despite the potential benefits of local government autonomy, the study found that there are significant challenges associated with its implementation in Nigeria. One major challenge is the lack of political will to implement autonomy. This is because autonomy reduces the power and control of the federal government over local governments, which often results in resistance from the federal government. Additionally, the study found that there is a lack of capacity among local governments to implement autonomy effectively. This is because many local governments lack the necessary resources, skills, and knowledge to exercise autonomy effectively.



The study supports the findings of previous studies, which have also identified challenges associated with implementing local government autonomy. For instance, Frostenson (2015) argues that de-professionalization is a challenge associated with the implementation of autonomy in the education sector. Similarly, van der Kaap-Deeder et al. (2015) argue that autonomy-supportive parenting and sibling interactions can be challenging to implement effectively. These studies suggest that implementing autonomy can be challenging, and there is a need for proper planning and support to ensure its success.

This study has shown that local government autonomy is a crucial factor in promoting rural transformation in Nigeria. Autonomy enables local governments to mobilize resources, implement programs, and promote accountability and transparency. However, there are significant challenges associated with implementing autonomy, including lack of political will and capacity among local governments. These challenges need to be addressed to ensure the successful implementation of autonomy in Nigeria. The study suggests that there is a need for proper planning, support, and capacity-building to ensure the effective implementation of autonomy in Nigeria. Overall, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on local government autonomy and its role in promoting rural transformation.

Conclusion

The issue of local government autonomy in Nigeria has been a contentious issue for years, with many stakeholders advocating for it as a means of restoring hope for rural transformation in the country. Based on the literature reviewed, it appears that autonomy is a crucial factor in promoting development, growth, and progress in any system or organization. The studies reviewed in this research paper suggest that autonomy is essential for the effective functioning of organizations, employees, and the broader community. In conclusion, autonomy is a crucial factor in promoting rural development and transformation in Nigeria. Granting local governments more autonomy will enable them to manage their resources effectively and implement programs that are tailored to the needs of their communities. There is a need for more research to be conducted on the impact of autonomy on local government development in Nigeria, as well as the establishment of a framework for monitoring and evaluating the impact of autonomy. Improving the capacity of local government officials is also essential for promoting rural development and transformation in Nigeria.



Recommendations

The first recommendation is for the Nigerian government to implement policies that will grant more autonomy to local governments. This can be done by increasing funding for local governments and allowing them to manage their resources effectively. This will enable local governments to implement programs and initiatives that are tailored to the needs of their communities, and will ultimately lead to the restoration of hope for rural transformation.

Secondly, there is a need for more research on the impact of autonomy on local government development in Nigeria. Most of the studies reviewed in this paper were conducted in other countries and the findings may not necessarily apply to the Nigerian context. Therefore, there is a need for more research to be conducted in Nigeria to explore the impact of autonomy on local governments. Such research will provide policymakers with valuable insights into the best ways to promote rural development and transformation.

Thirdly, it is essential to establish a framework for monitoring and evaluating the impact of autonomy on local government development in Nigeria. This will enable policymakers to identify the strengths and weaknesses of existing policies and programs and make necessary adjustments. This will ensure that local governments are held accountable for their actions and are able to deliver on their promises to their communities. Furthermore, improving the capacity of local government officials is crucial for promoting rural development and transformation. There is a need for more training and capacity building programs for local government officials to enable them to effectively manage resources and implement programs that will benefit their communities. This will help to promote accountability and transparency in the management of resources and ensure that local governments are able to deliver on their mandate.

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