

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA: ISSUES AND ECOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

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ABSTRACT

The paper examined among other issues the philosophical basis and practical imperatives of creating local governments – qua government – including a proper understanding of its role in the society. The position of the paper is that the experiment in government at the grassroots level through the instrumentality of local government, though desirable, has recorded very limited success due largely to the political environment within which it has been pursued. That, while not unmindful of the inevitable flaws interval to the local government system in Nigeria, the bane of local government in governance derives from ecological constraints especially those that are politically induced. The paper argues that unless some radical changes occur in the area of Federal / State / Local Government relations, including a reasonable check against wanton interventions by the Federal and State Governments in the affairs of local governments, meaningful governance at the local level will remain, at best, an elusive dream; and that this condition will bring the much cherished development no nearer.

KEYWORDS: Local Government, Inter Governmental Relations, Political Ecology, Intervention, Constraints.

INTRODUCTION

As far as Nigeria is concerned, institution of local government has, in the last three decades, become both object and subject of considerable interest to scholars, policy – makers and the generality of Nigerians. A major stimulus that kindled this interest is the deplorable state of the rural areas of this country which regrettably had been victims of debilitating marginalization and underdevelopment. The political leadership, past and present – obviously recognized the need to address the poor condition of the silent majority of Nigerian populace who largely are rural dwellers, if we go by official declarations and policy statements. There is equal realization of the fact that the goal of development engineering and administration at the local level is best pursued through institutions and structures that are rooted in these locales. To this end, it became logical to create local

governments vested with sufficient political and administrative autonomy, adequately funded, empowered to pursue objectives, within its sphere of jurisdiction, and possessing clearly defined powers and constitutionally delineated responsibilities. Both the 1979 and 1988 reforms sought to achieve the goal of putting in place local governments qua governments in Nigeria (see Guidelines to reforms, 1979 and 1988).

For almost two decades since the creation of the unified local government structure, Nigerians and other keen observers have watched unimpressed, the trend of events and unfolding developments that appear to make our journey to the promise – land (of local governance and rural development) no shorter. The promise of arresting the vexing decadence characteristic of the rural areas which was offered by institutionalized local government, qua government, structure since the 1976 reforms

appear to have petered out too soon.

Considering the fact that for the purposes of governance, local government is viewed as one institution with the greatest potential for engendering positive changes at the grassroots with regard to mobilization of human and material resources for local and indeed, national development, many are left wondering how far this cardinal expectation had been met. Evidence point in the direction of poor performance as far as governance goes; and the question as to why this is so inevitably arises. The primary questions this essay attempts to address therefore is: How effective has the local government system been in governance in Nigeria? If the performance of the local government system is adjudged poor, to what extent can this condition be ascribed to environmental factors?

Answers to the above questions very often focus on those more readily identifiable administrative inadequacies internal to the Local government structures namely; organizational and resource mismanagement, ineptitude and corruption, poor resource base, among others. We certainly cannot ignore or understate these factors in accounting for the relatively poor level of performance. But there is a clear shortcoming in this approach. This is in its narrowness of focus. We achieve little by isolating factors that are internal to the system without due regard to those equally strong factors external to it but overwhelmingly influential over its activities—the political environment per se. It is pertinent to point out that, by and large, much of the shortcomings internal to the local government system in Nigeria is a function of the political environment; and indeed, may well be only symptoms of even more complex environmental degeneracy. Let us examine the basis of local governance on a general note as a prelude to closer discussion of the Nigeria's experience.

ISSUES IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND GOVERNANCE

In large measure, the traditional western

thought on local government has shown an emphasis and view of local government as a political socialization agency and nursery for democracy.

Scholars and theoreticians of this persuading including Bentham, Laski, Mckenzie, Arthur Mass, Sharpe, Mills and Keith Panterbrick (Eguma, 1991, 1991b) underline the political utility of local government in terms of mobilizing and motivating citizens to participate in Local affairs - a factor upon which democracy is built—especially the opportunity to vote and be voted for. Thus, local government is viewed as a veritable instrument for enthroning and sustaining the ideals of democracy at the local levels in addition to providing the necessary shield against wanton arbitrariness on the part of the central government. L.J. Sharpe further illuminates the political rationale for local government existence when he identified the three major components of the role of local government, namely: political training, political education and political accountability (ibid) which are reasonably served when the local government offer the citizens the opportunity of participatory democracy and self-governance at the local level.

Closely related to the thesis of 'political utility' raised above is another argument which is essentially administrative in character. The emphasis of this view is that local government is most equipped to efficiently and effectively provide those services and local needs that hitherto has been the monopoly of the central authorities whose activities are all but encumbered by distance from those local areas they ostensibly serve. Thus, the task of performing certain functions from the vantage position of having intimate knowledge of the conditions, needs, geography, peculiarities of and proximity to areas concerned is best served by local government. This orientation derives from the theoretical frame of Development Administration with its emphasis on devising means or structures to serve the unique conditions or those developing areas of the world whose peculiarities could not be

appropriately served by the means of structures of conventional executive administration associated with the developed areas of the world. In this regard, therefore, local government is viewed as a means to an end – the end being development of the grassroots – or in terms of ‘development unity’ per se.

The process of governance entails the utility of the two positions ‘political utility’ and ‘development utility’ theories. For sake of clarity, and especially for the purpose of this essay, governance connotes all politically directed actions and activities geared towards overall political and socio-economic advancement of a given polity authoritatively pursued. In its entirety, local government involves basically the authoritative allocation of values, including the mobilization of resources – human and material – for rigorous development engineering at the local or grassroots levels (Uphoff and Esman, 1984).

Our efforts in understanding the issues in local government and governance will be further enhanced by our understanding of issues raised in the following questions:

What goals or ends are served by local government?

Who exercises authoritative powers?

Whose interest (s) is served?

Who owns or created it?

Obviously, answers to these questions, as critical to our understanding of issues in local governance as they are, depends on the peculiar nature and configuration of various polities. We, therefore, need to extrapolate to further our understating of the place and character of local government in Nigeria.

At this stage, Easton’s (1957) systems theory becomes useful in understanding the relationship between the local government and its environment. Whereas, in the Easton’s approach the central political actors operating within the political system would have the wider society as its environment, in the case of local government, the activities of such central political actors and

central political system itself constitutes in essence the most critical environmental variable upon which local government activities depend. This theoretical framework will, in large measure, guide our discussions in this work,

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA : SOME CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS

More than ever before and more than anything else, the pronounced revival of interest during the last two decades in governance at the local level in Nigeria was largely a product of realization of the fact that meaningful national development should and must begin with and carry along the local communities. Hitherto, governance at the local level had been, in practical terms directed by the authorities at the central or regional level. The result of such arrangement was not very rewarding in terms of political and socio-economic development. Then came the turning point that ushered in the local government reforms – first, in 1976 and second, in 1988.

The various provisions of the major reforms cannot be discussed in detail here, but a brief look at the rationale and highpoints of the reforms will suffice. For all intents and purposes, the two reforms share common ends even if slight differences exists in their provisions and the means to the ends. The unity of purpose was clear : to strengthen the hitherto beleaguered and effete local government system by granting it greater autonomy and constitutionally defined powers with the ultimate aim of bringing governance to the grassroots to promote overall development. The implication of this development is that, as the third tier of government, the local government had joined in the collective responsibility of national development by all tiers of government in Nigeria-taking for granted the availability of the political and economic means and resources to the end.

The status, powers and functions of the

local government got enshrined in section 7 (1) of the 1979 constitution (and sustained in the 1989 constitution) and section 7 (1-6) of 1999 constitution of Nigeria. The highlights include: the recognition of local government; as a distinct third tier of government ; the granting of greater autonomy to local government; institutionalizing presidentialism at the Local government level ; broadening and enhancing the revenue base and sources of local government; wider discretion to local government in the formulation of socio-economic policies and planning development schemes in their areas of jurisdiction; and perhaps interesting, the creation of a framework for governance at the local level exercised through elected representative councils, which in the words of General Babangida (1988) can only be meaningful if it is firmly rooted at the grassroots level of the society.

Clearly therefore, the above constitutional provisions – in letter and spirit – had created a third tier of government qua government at the local level, thus settling the confusing issue of whether we operate administration or government at the local level in Nigeria hitherto. Observers are, however, skeptical that beyond the documentary provisions of the Constitution, there is very little to show for meaningful governance at the local level in reality. This apprehension could not be wished away nor dismissed as without merit in view of concrete developments in contemporary Nigerian history, especially the aspects of progressive erosion of local government autonomy which is not short of political castration. We may examine, at this point, other issues in inter-governmental (Federal /state/Local governments) relations which forms the basis of any meaningful assessment of local government and governance in Nigeria.

The examination of federal /State /local government relations is a study in power ratio between the 'centre' (Federal-State) and the 'periphery' (Local Government). Power, in this sense, include the capacity to decide , control direct and exact compliance authoritatively

.Power, so conceived , is the most critical basis of government and governance .Even the most generous optimist of workable autonomous local government system-as constitutionally envisaged – will not be convinced that local government in Nigeria had enjoyed or still enjoys reasonable leverage in governance in the face of intimidating control and overwhelming power erosion it is subjected to by the 'centre' authorities..The success or failure of the post – reforms local government in Nigeria depends on, more than anything else, the pattern of the relations between the 'centre' and the local government. Evidence abound that the local government has been tyrannized by the 'centre' .Such unhidden hegemony of the 'centre' over local government is evident in the manipulation of the obviously abused powers to create , restructure and later at will the status and powers of local government in a manner that is everything but constitutional .Critics point out that the often indiscriminate and unprincipled interventions in the activities of the Local government , especially the legislative and executive dimensions , undermine the capacity to govern by local authorities, is anti- development and therefore counter – productive , and at best it self – serving.

Empirical studies (T.Bottomore, 1964:B; Dudley, 1973; C. Ake, 1981a and b; Rothenberg, 1980 ; D Brown, 1979; Sathyamurthy , 1982) have shown that the peculiarly Nigeria's political arena is characterized by conflict – ridden culture intense and often times destabilizing rivalry over the capture and use of state power for control of national resources , and perpetually zero-sum. The end, by and large, justifies the means .It is of consequence to us that the 'centre's' proclivity to intervene in the affairs of local government is a by – product of the unprogressive culture characterized above. In other words, the meddlesomeness is no more than a means to an end, with ominous implications to national development.

It is, therefore , instructive to note David Brown's (1979) observation that the competing

elites in the 'centre' often canvas for the support of prominent people within and outside government circles at the local levels with a view to enhancing their power positions, just as the individuals or groups may seek to maintain such linkages in order to advance their own ends on local fronts. Thus, politics of 'spoils', 'patronage' and 'prebend' had and still remains the rule than exception in Nigeria. Weingrod (1968) calls attention to the adverse effects of this practice of 'political clientelism' which describes the way the political elites at the 'centre' employ public resources – including concessionary appointments (nepotism), unreasonable access to privileges and other forms of patronage to elicit support for their survival at the centre. A case in point, in this regard, is the pattern of appointments – reflecting a large number of retired military officers – to positions of 'care-taker' chairmanship in the various local government councils across the country by past military regimes in Nigeria. The overwhelming influence of the top hierarchy or the ruling parties over two plays which role at of the local government level is an evidence of political clientelism.

The problem of distortion and negation of development goals of local government received attention in Gavin William's (1980) contribution in which he pointed out how frequently in Nigeria local government gets incorporated into the spoils and reward system by which the political class at the 'centre' maintain their power base by distributing patronage to their allies at the local level in utter disregard for rules and provisions governing the goals and conduct of the institution. Adedeji (2000) agrees no less with William's position.

Our primary concern is to show how the 'penetrative activities' of the centre may lead to underdevelopment (Sathymurthy, 1982:11) since by its nature such penetration – and the 'spoils' culture it promotes – depletes the resources available for development (Lemarchand, 1972). Obviously, such conditions scarcely promote

effective government of governance at the Local level.

Whether viewed as political instrument for mobilization of the masses for democracy, that is, political participation, or as agency for socio-economic development, local government in Nigeria is far from being viable. On the political front, local democracy and popular participation are yet to gain root in the face of debilitating constraints imposed by various anti-democratic agents (operating at the 'centre') whose preoccupation include the erosion of resources for political participation at the grassroots. A commonly held view is that the logic of the system hardly allow for such mass participation in the political processes, since such condition is considered to be anti-thetical to the survival needs of the ruling class.

From the socio-economic development angle, local government is yet to prove a veritable socio-political mechanism capable of engendering development. Evidence abound in the deplorable state of public infrastructure and social services. The bulk of urban and rural dwellers still trudge several kilometers in search of potable water. Preventable diseases are ever on the increase. Food is progressively getting scarcer and unaffordable. Our streets are littered with unattended refuse, occasioning serious environmental pollution and attendant health hazards. Public health centres are deteriorating and health care delivery system have virtually collapsed. Educational system is a caricature of what it should be as structures are virtually unmaintained, where they exist. Inadequate staffing of such educational institutions has prompted a level of unimaginable decay. Housing situation is no less appalling. The scope of unemployment is scandalous. The army of unemployed, more than ever before, had become a fertile recruitment source for criminals. Crime rate is escalating. There is an ever widening chasm between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'.

The list of proof of failure in governance at the local level which is a microcosm of the 'centre' – is endless. But those spotlighted are just a pointer to failure writ large. Thus, the theory of functional necessity of local government – as instrument of positive change – is invalidated, going by Nigeria's peculiar experience. Even more farcical is the explanation which views the failure of local government system as a function of the 'internal dynamics' or inadequacy of the system itself to the exclusion of the environment within which it operates. We must avoid the dangers inherent in such argument. There is no denying the fact that poor performance of the local government system could, to some extent, be accounted for by some inadequacies internal to it. However, the more critical element to such failures derives from those environmental factors which combine to make smooth operation of the local government system, impossible, namely: the interventionist role of both the federal and state governments, political culture characterized by 'spoils' values, political instability and absence of political will and honesty on the part of Nigeria's leaders to make the system work. There lies the bane of local government and governance in Nigeria.

Recent empirical studies of the ecology or environmental context of local governments in Nigeria – even if scanty – attest to the critical role of the forces external to local government in shaping events and direction of progress (or lack of it) in local governance in Nigeria. In this regard, Olowu (2000) identified two major factors, namely:

1. Excessive dependence by local governments on the federal and/or state Governments for policy initiatives and programme.
2. Impairment of local government's sustainability occasioned by overburden – a good example being primary education imposed on them by the Federal and / or State

Governments without corresponding increase in the quantum of resources and capacity building. In the same vein, Egonmwan and Ibodje (2001) calls attention to the increasing erosion of autonomy of the local governments by deliberate acts of the Federal and / or State governments. They argue that, at virtually all levels – financially, legislatively, jurisdictionally, functionally and in terms of power relations, the local governments are blatantly shortchanged. They write thus:

In the face of the stifling rules coupled with coercive letters and directives from the state governments to local government councils especially from the Department of local Governments, it is inconceivable how Councils will be expected to act independently (2001: 100)

They argue further that the vision of enthroning a result – oriented local government system in Nigeria can only be realized if they (Local Governments) are regarded as partners in progress by the higher authorities and treated as such rather than dependent delegates. The following conclusion they reached is quite instructive :

So long as the perception of a hierarchy between levels prevails rather than horizontal parity as entrenched in the constitution, i.e. Concurrent / joint policy areas as economic planning in development of an area, local government shall continue to groan under suffocating controls in a relationship akin to that of a " horse and a horse rider" (Egonmwan and Ibodje, 2001:101).

Ayoade (cited in Egonmwan and Ibodje, 2001) bemoans the asymmetrical relationship existing between the federal and /or state governments and the local government councils in Nigeria which clearly undermines the capacity of the latter to function effectively. He points out that one of the most serious sources of conflict and policy

distortion is the perception of hierarchy between levels of governments instead of a relationship of horizontal parity moderated by the imperatives of national development.

Commenting on the situation where partnership has been replaced by control in the Federal /State-Local Government relations in Nigeria, Adedeji (2000:245) observed rather reflectively that:

Instead of state – local relationship in which the complementary roles of each are recognized and respected, there has developed less trust and much disrespect between the local and domineering state bureaucracies.

Akinsanya (1999:97-98) raises issues, fundamental in nature, that directs attention to the incursions into local governance by forces external to local governments and the adverse potentials such incursions and breaches holds for the local governance system and local government in Nigerians. He has this to say:

The relationship between the state and local governments is a supraordinate – subordinated relationship because the state governments have powers of control and supervision over local governments... If state government can exercise power of control and supervision over local governments; if disbursement of federal statutory allocations to local governments can be suspended or withheld to ensure compliance with state policy and directives; indeed, if council chairmen can be removed from office, by a federal fiat, and if new local government areas can be created at the pleasure of federal and state governments ... we can not, strictly speaking continue to talk of local governments as the third-tier system of government. Additionally, if state:

governments can conduct inquiries into the activities of local government councils, one begins to question the propriety of disciplinary powers being exercised by local government councils over council chairmen.

Nigeria's political landscape currently is replete with cases of unconstitutional, irrational and self-serving interventions into the local government's spheres of influence or jurisdiction by the Federal and/ or State Governments or their agents. It is reported that there are over 40 cases of litigation in various courts in the land bordering on questionable meddlesomeness on the part of the Federal and, especially, State Governments (see ALGON news, January, 2001). Our thinking is that major defects in the country's constitution provided the basis for this wanton and capricious intervention by the Federal and State Governments in the affairs of Local Governments. A good example of the constitutional defect is the wide latitude or 'blank cheque' it gave state governments regarding the establishment, structure, composition, finance and functions of local governments in Nigeria (See, Section 7 (1) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria).The implications of this incursionist trends for local governance and governance is a priori progressive diminishing of their capacity to deliver the expected public goods. Any assessment of the performance of the local government councils in Nigeria that ignores these environmental factors which impact on the activities of the local government councils will obviously be of limited intellectual and practical value .

SUMMARY AND ONCLUSION

The title of this essay is self-explanatory. Our task had been to examine first, the philosophical basis of creating local governments including a proper understanding of its role in the society which Maddick argues is to provide the opportunity for the 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 ; second , to assess the degree of success recorded by the local government in Nigeria vis- a-vis the objectives for which it is created : and third , to critically examine those factors that make or mar the system of local government in Nigeria .

In so doing, presentation of existing scholarly perspectives was made regarding the rationale for local government system. It was observed that the coming of local government system in Nigeria was a welcome development given the vastness and heterogeneity of the country. The commendable reform measures by successive governments in Nigeria were equally noted. All in all, the relevance of local government in principle was affirmed . It is however, noteworthy that the level of performance of local government in Nigeria is a far cry from even the most modest expectations. It was observed that the reality of local government qua government is in doubt in view of its lack of capacity to effectively govern.

The position of this essay is that the experiment in governance at the local level through the instrumentality of local government, though desirable, has recorded very limited success due largely to the political environment within which it has been pursued .That while not unmindful of the inevitable flaws internal to the local governments system, the bane of local government in governance derives from ecological constraints especially those that are politically induced. It is further argued that unless some radical changes occur in the area of Federal /State/ Local Government relations including a reasonable check against wanton interventions by the federal and state governments in local government affairs, meaningful governance at the local level will remain, at best, elusive dream, and this condition will bring the much cherished development no nearer.

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