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**The Search for Viable Local Government System in Nigeria: An
Interrogation**

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Abstract

The history of the Nigerian local government system has been one long episode of trails and errors aimed at achieving viable local government institution without much success. Local government in the country began its long series of reforms from the colonial period when the colonial government attempted to de-concentrate the local administration as a basis for socio-economic development of the Nigerian state. With the shift in the mandate of local government from being primarily extractive, law and order agency to one engaged in grassroots development, the objective came to be re-defined as comprising bringing government closer to the people. However, the success of the local government as a veritable tool for grassroots development is largely dependent on its viability. This paper was thus inspired by the desire to interrogate why the search for viable local government system in Nigeria has been futile since the country's political independence with a view to proffering the pathway to sustainable viable local government system capable of ensuring effective grassroots development and transformation in the country.

Key Words: Local Government, Search, Viable, System, Interrogation,
Development, Transformation.

Introduction

The local government system in Nigeria has been in a state of transition since the country's political independence and to date, it does not appear that a permanent structure has been achieved. The need to achieve an appropriate and virile local government whose objective would be the optimal satisfaction of the yearnings and aspirations of the people at the grassroots level informed the continued search for a viable local government system in the country.

Local government system in Nigeria has taken different forms from one historical epoch to another. There was the pre-colonial experience culminating in different traditional political systems among the Hausa/Fulani in the north; the Yorubas in the west, the Igbos in the south – east; as well as the minority ethnic groups in the Middle-Belt and south – south. There was also the indirect rule system whereby local governments were run through the traditional rulers i.e. the emirs, chiefs, obas and warrant chiefs.

The major reforms in the local government system in the country since independent include the 1955, 1958 and 1960 reforms in the defunct Eastern Region (Fajobi 2010). Similarly, in the Western Region, there were the 1952 local government law; 1957 local government law; the regime of sole administrators during the military era; amongst others. In the former Mid-west, all local government councils were abolished by 1966 and Management committees took over their functions and by 1974, the defunct Bendel state adopted a development administration system of local government. Also in Cross River, the former South – Eastern state (Calabar), there was no clear-cut idea of local government until 1970 when a new local government system known as development administration was established. In the Northern Region, the reforms in the local government system were operationalized in piece-meal starting from the British colonial government, which considered suitable the native authority system.

The northern Nigeria native authority of 1954 was in use up till 1966 when the military struck and overthrew the first civilian government in the country. As Fajobi (2010) noted, amendments in the system were done in 1956 – 1957; 1958 – 1959; and 1960 – 1961 with the aim of achieving efficiency and effectiveness of the local governments. The various concerted efforts were geared toward strengthening the local government system but achieved less than satisfactory results in terms of service delivery. The 1976 local government reforms represented an attempt to overcome the failure of the myriad of isolated, regional and state – centered efforts to address the problems of local governance in Nigeria.

However, the debate over the form, content, structure and functions of the local government system in Nigeria has remained a critical element of political discourse in

the country. There is every indication that this debate might continue much longer until a proper and unambiguous constitutional value is accorded local governments and the citizenry sufficiently enlightened on the essential character of local governance.

Conceptual Clarifications/Framework

Nigeria operates a federal system with three-tier structure of government i.e., federal, state, and local governments. The local government is the lowest level of government and the closest to the people at the grassroots. Due to its proximity to the people, it has a multi-purpose functionality in terms of socio-economic service delivery at the local level; stimulating and encouraging local initiatives in community works; promoting the democratic process; serving as training ground for national political leaders; serving as medium of communication between the people and the higher levels of government; among others. Local government activities have therefore, generated a lot of interest from the people due to the tremendous impact and influence they could exert on the general life of the rural inhabitants who constitute the larger majority of the Nigerian population. The people expect the local governments to live up to their expectations and perform as government.

Fajobi (2010) defined local government as government at the grassroots level exercised through representative councils set up by law to carry out certain responsibilities within the area covered. Local government is thus, concerned with the regulation and administration of local affairs by the local people themselves through their representatives. The local government is distinguished from any other instrument of local administration by the essential element of popular participation in its affairs by the locales. The local government should possess the following essential characteristics:

- Local government should provide opportunity for the local inhabitants to determine their own destiny through their active participation in the decisions which affect them;
- Local government should bring the decision – making organ close to the people who are to be affected by the decision i.e. “the target group”;
- The local government functionaries, especially the elected representatives should be responsible and accountable to the local electorates rather than the state or federal government; and.
- The local government should have a large measure of executive freedom within the spheres of activities assigned to it as well as powers to impose taxes including legal status and powers which are protected by law.

According to the United Nations Office for Public Administration, cited in Abbah, et al (2007), local government is a political sub – division of a nation, which is constituted by law including the powers to impose taxes or to exact labour for

prescribed purposes. The governing body of such an entity is elected or otherwise locally selected. Ogunna (1996) defined local government as a political authority, which is purposely created by law or constitution for local communities by which they manage their local affairs within the limits of the law or condition. Similarly, V.V. Rao in Abba, et al (2007) described local government as that part of government, which deals mainly with local affairs, administered by authorities subordinate to the state government but elected independently of the state authority by qualified residents.

To William Robson in Maduabum (2006), local government involves the conception of territorial, non – sovereign community possessing the legal right and the necessary organization to regulate its own affairs. This presupposes the existence of a local authority with power to act independent of external control as well as the participation of the local community in the administration of its own affairs. According to Massoud (2003), local government in many parts of the world is regarded as a competent unit of government that can assess the needs of local dwellers; that can mobilize and harness local resources with the help of local talents and support of the central government. A modern local government is expected to play the role of promoting the democratic ideals of a society and co-ordination of development programmes at the grassroots level. It mobilizes popular support and participation in development as well as initiating local projects and resolving competing claims over scarce resources through planning and budgeting.

Local governments are closest to the people at the grassroots level and as such possess intimate knowledge of the people's needs, problems and potentials; hence in many parts of the world today, central governments are increasingly relying on local governments to perform services related to economic and social development. Thus, in Nigeria, the continued search for viable local government system is aimed at increasing the contributions of the local governments to economic and social development programmes of the nation.

The Federal government of Nigeria's national Guidelines for the 1976 local government reforms provided a more comprehensive definition of 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 these areas, and to ensure through active participation of the people and their traditional institutions that local initiatives and responses to local needs and conditions are maximized (FGN, 1976).

Some form of local government therefore, necessarily exists in every country of the world, even though they may differ in such distinguishing features like constitutional status; historical experience; structure and organization; as well as in the scope of their statutory; delegated or devolved responsibilities and functions. Generally, local governments act as veritable agents of local service delivery; mobilizes community based human and material resources; and organizers of local initiatives in responding to a wide variety of local needs and aspirations.

Indeed, the definition of local government put forward by the federal government of Nigeria in its Guidelines to the 1976 local government reforms adequately captures the essence of local government. While the local government has been subjected to a variety of definitions, each definition tends to emphasize one or more important features or attributes of the subject. However, all the definitions seemed to agree that local government is an institutional device for effecting political and administrative decentralization by devolution, the functions of government.

There is a wide consensus on the general conclusion that local governments in Nigeria have ceased to exist as autonomous politico-administrative entity designed to authoritatively react to local needs and local demands (Egwurube, 1986). There is therefore, a very wide gap between the practice of local government and the theories and assumptions which form the basis of their existence. As Zoaka, et al (2010) observed, Nigeria has never had local government in the true sense of the term. What we have had in Nigeria has been a mixture of local administration and local government.

The foregoing discussion of the conceptual framework is intended to depict the defining elements of a viable local government system that is much needed to bring about the desired development and transformation of the rural Nigeria such that the standard and living conditions of the rural inhabitants are positively enhanced.

The Challenges of the Nigerian Local Government System

Local governments in Nigeria have never been allowed to play their proper roles as institutions and agents for change, progress and development of the rural areas. Most of the attempts at reforming the local government system in the country before the 1976 reforms have ended up as smokescreen because they were meant to serve the interests of the political elites rather than the rural populace. The local governments have been seriously constrained by a number of factors to play their proper roles as institutions of grassroots development and transformation. The paper discusses below these challenges.

Lack of Adequate Funds

The acute dearth of funds facing local governments in Nigeria had continued to make the local government system ineffectual. Finance is crucial to the achievement

of the aims and objectives of local government. However, in Nigeria, finance has been a major headache of the local governments as it remains one of the apparently immutable constraints to efficient performance of the local governments. Of the major factors inhibiting the effective and efficient performance of local governments in the country, finance tops the list. Due to shortage of funds, the ability of the local governments to execute projects and provide services that meet basic community needs and aspirations is limited.

The local inhabitants have therefore, continued to wallow in poverty and underdevelopment, a situation which leaves them politically, socially and economically inactive. Hence, rather than making positive contributions and inputs into the system, the rural dwellers become apathetic, unmoved, unable and uninterested.

Inter-Governmental Relations

Under the Nigerian federal system, the three tiers of government i.e. the federal, state and local governments play complimentary roles in the economic, social and political life of the country. However, the state – local government relations have often been marked by rivalry and distrust, which had hindered smooth and efficient running of governmental activities at the local level. The establishment of developmental projects as well as the provision of social amenities, rather than being a complimentary role between the state and local governments often turned out to be “a cat and mouse” affair. The unwholesome relationship hampers sustainable economic growth and development at the grassroots since the state and local governments do not work in harmony.

Autonomy of Local Governments

Though the 1979, 1989 and 1999 constitutions of the Federal Republic of Nigeria recognized local government as third – tier of government, the appellation is a mere lip-service because some functions of the local government are still being usurped by the state governments. The budgetary estimates of the local governments had to be scrutinized by the state governments and their appointments are interfered with by either the state government or by the agents of the state government such as Local Government Service Commissions. Also, the Ministry of Local Government was charged with some administrative controls over the local governments. In many instances, local governments had to seek the approval of the state government before engaging in some projects.

Furthermore, state governments also have powers to appoint auditors to look into the financial records of the local governments or conduct enquiries as the case may be. The lack of autonomy by the local governments and the consequent interferences by the state governments in their internal affairs constitute an impediment to the achievement of viable local government system in the country. Also, bordering on the lack of autonomy by the local governments is the persistent actions of the state

governments in diverting the allocations from the federation account remitted through them to the local governments. The local governments are therefore, being starved of funds, which has constituted a major snag in the realization of virile and viable local governments, capable of addressing issues of development at the local level.

Accountability in the Local Government

Corruption is admittedly acknowledged as one of the most debilitating vices plaguing the local government system in Nigeria. Corruption and other social vices that have become the past – time of local government officials have seriously deprived the local government the funds needed to execute developmental programmes and projects that can impact positively on the standard and quality of rural life. Similarly, funds needed to hire and retain the right caliber manpower at the local governments are often corruptly siphoned into individual pockets thereby leaving the local governments to wallow in acute dearth of skilled and professional manpower, badly needed for efficient and effective services delivery at the local level. This has given rise to a vicious cycle in the local government wherein inadequacy of funds due to corruption has resulted in inadequate infrastructural facilities for grassroots development.

Manpower

Poor and inadequate staffing has been the bane of the local governments in services delivery. The lack of executive capacity in the local government has seriously undermined an effective local government administration because without the human element, no development programme can succeed, no matter how well conceived. The local governments lack qualified and skilled manpower to provide professional and expertise services to the people in such areas of critical need like agriculture, health, education, works, finance, amongst others.

The preponderance of staff in most local governments across the country are the generalists such as administrative, executive, clerk, messengers, etc. Thus, the staffing arrangement to secure a virile local government system had been inadequate to guarantee effective service delivery and enhanced quality of rural life. The effectiveness of local government as a service – oriented institution depends on the caliber of its personnel. In other words, the staff input in the management of local government is vital for the success of its service delivery programmes.

These inadequacies have no doubt rendered the local governments in Nigeria ineffective and ineffectual as viable institutions of local governance. This raises the question of what needs to be done to achieve a viable system of local government capable of effective and efficient services delivery at the local level.

Towards Achieving Viable Local Government System in Nigeria

Local governments play pivotal roles as the foundation of development and the most important democratic unit under the Nigerian federal system. This is because local

government is the domain where majority of the Nigerian population live and consequently where the impact of government is most felt positively or otherwise. The development of the local government area should therefore, be the hallmark of every government in power. Thus, despite all short – comings and challenges, local government is and will continue to be the basic unit of local governance and an essential instrument for grassroots development and transformation.

For the local governments to effectively and efficiently internalize these functions, they must be viable. The viability of local government in turn depends on a number of variables including the nature of power sharing under the Nigerian federal structure; financial adequacy and viability; executive capacity; popular participation of the local people in their own affairs; etc. If and where these factors are available in good measure, the local governments are bound to be viable and vice – versa. Local governments as a unit of government at the local level must of necessity possess such qualities as the following: -

- (a) Must be an organized entity with corporate powers;
- (b) Must display a governmental character with its principal officials being elected and therefore, accountable to the local people;
- (c) Must enjoy substantial autonomy over its administrative, budgetary, revenue and fiscal matters.

The viability of local government enhances its propensity to be responsive to the development needs and aspirations of the people at the grassroots level. This will bring about the transformation of the rural Nigeria, which had remained largely underdeveloped. The task therefore, is to develop the capacity of the local governments to perform basic community services at the most critical level of the society on a substantial basis. Indeed, the local governments should do precisely what the word “government” implies i.e. governing at the grassroots or local level.

There is also need to enhance state – local government relations through harmonious working relationship. The establishment of developmental projects as well as provisions of certain social amenities should be a complimentary role between the state and local governments rather than rivalry and distrust. The local government should be allowed to operate independent of the state government if they must effectively cater for the yearnings and aspirations of the local communities. This is because as Onor (2005) noted, the intervention instruments of supervision by states over local governments have been more of problem than a solution to the challenges of local governance. However, what is being advocated here is not complete or absolute independence but as extensive a freedom as is compatible with a due subjection to the central (state) government. While local governments are subject to the supremacy of the central government, they must be endowed in some respects with power, discretion and responsibilities, which they can exercise without control over their decisions by

the higher authority. For optimal performance, local governments should be allowed to function with a measure of autonomy within the context of a superstructure of supervision by the states in particular and the federal government at large.

The local government must embark on aggressive revenue generation drive to reduce their dependence on statutory allocations from the Federation Account. The present position whereby majority of the local governments depend mostly on federal allocations should be abhorred and jettisoned. The councils should be able to tap and utilize their internal revenue yielding sources.

Ultimately, local governments must work towards, self-reliance by being more resourceful in their revenue generation drives. It is also suggested that a review of the present revenue allocation formula is long overdue. More money should be made available to the local governments for development. Indeed, revenue is the fuel required to keep the machinery of the local government going just like any other level of government, hence no effort should be spared to rake in all revenues that are legally and genuinely due to the local governments.

Local governments generate their revenue from two main sources i.e. external and internal sources. The external sources include 20% of Federation Account; 35% of value added tax (VAT); 10% of state internally generated revenue; Loans, grants and aids from state and federal governments (Fajobi, 2010). On the other hand, the internally generated revenue of the local governments includes among others, tenement rates; taxes; local license fees and fines; rent on local government property; earnings from commercial undertaking; interest; repayments; dividends; and miscellaneous. However, the local governments have no control over what comes from their external sources of revenue. The only source of revenue which the local governments have control is the internally generated revenue. It is therefore, in their best interest to intensify efforts to enhance their internally generated revenue in order to guarantee their viability to perform as government at the local level.

If local governments are to operate at acceptable level of efficiency, effectiveness and economy, they must be able to attract high caliber self-motivating staff and devise means of rewarding high performance. They must also embark on aggressive staff training and development policies and programmes. The local government work-force must be skilled, motivated and contented in order to perform at optimal efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery to the people at the most basic level of the Nigerian society.

The rationale for the existence of local government in Nigeria as in elsewhere in Africa and the world is the need to involve the local people in the governance and development of the local areas, which entails satisfying their own needs and aspirations through effective service delivery at the grassroots. It means therefore, that no country

can really achieve meaningful development without some form of local government. This is particularly true of Nigeria where over 75% of the population lives in the rural areas. This underscored the various attempts by successive administrations in the country since independence at restructuring and reforming the local government system. As local governments increased in competence and resource base, they are used to reduce congestion of responsibility in the central government thereby, enabling the national agencies to concentrate on the overall development measures.

Conclusion

There is no denying the fact that a viable local government system is needed in ensuring grassroots development in Nigeria. In the light of this, the paper strongly recommends a holistic review and restructuring of the local government system in conformity with the requirements of grassroots development and transformation. The usual process of making just minor and peripheral adjustments to an existing local government system should for once be jettisoned.

The paper stresses the need for introducing far – reaching changes in the present local government system in Nigeria, which will make the local governments veritable tools of grassroots development and transformation. The desire to make the Nigerian rural areas a better place for the inhabitants should be the promise, the commitment and the goal of local governments. This will replace fear with hope for rural dwellers, replace uncertainty with confidence and replace despondency with dedication and purpose.

Thus, local governments in Nigeria in the 21st Century will not only be resilient and responsive to the ever changing dynamics of the Nigerian society but also, provide the enabling environment for sustainable development by government. Finally, the paper believes that the identified challenges of the local government system shall be obviated and surmounted to allow for the emergence of a viable local government system with a focus on the delivery of basic community services to the people at the grassroots level of the Nigerian society.

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