

Effective Rural Community Participation in Local Governance in Nigeria: A Discuss of the Imperatives, Experience and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

Globally, Local Government is increasingly being seen as key institution for enhancing development particularly in the rural communities. Nigeria has institutionalized local government cardinally for this purpose. Sadly, this objective is not being met. Governance at the local government level, which ordinarily should be close to the people, appear as distant as the government at the state level. Policies and projects are imposed on the people and the members of the communities show minimal or no interest in the activities of government at this level. It is in this context that this paper critically examined the imperatives of community participation in local governance. Using the 'Partnership theory', the researchers analyzed the critical relevance of community participation in local government development process in Nigeria. The paper finds that effective participation of the community will be better realized by proper engagement of the relevant community based organizations in decision making processes and at the implementation stage.

Keywords: Global, rural, community, local government and Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Local government is conceived in political systems as a key institution for enhancing development of the rural communities at the grassroots [1], Abonyi, 2010) [2]. Indeed, the basic function of local government is to improve the social, political and economic well being of the inhabitant of the rural communities particularly through supplying public goods, providing essential services, creating conducive conditions for economic development and encouraging and widening the spectrum of political participation for the rural inhabitants. These the local governments do through initiation and execution of

social, economic, political and cultural programmes and projects. However, doing these effectively requires the active participation of the citizens of rural communities that are usually directly affected by development policies, programmes and projects [1].

It is in this context that the paper is out to highlight the imperatives of community participation in local government development process, the experience in Nigeria and the prospects. The paper is structured in the following order: Part one is introduction. Part two is clarification of major concepts. Part three is brief literature review. Part four is the imperative of community participation in local government in Nigeria. Part five is the prospects for improvement in rural community participation in the local government development efforts in Nigeria.

CLARIFICATION OF THE MAJOR CONCEPTS

Community: This is an organization of individuals within a given geographical area who use common facilities or share common institutions, values, goals, problem, behavioural patterns, interests and experiences. A community is also conceived as a group of people who live in a geographical area and have an interest in each other for the purpose of making a living and developing themselves individually or collectively. An example of a community is a town or a village. A community could be rural or urban. It is rural when the inhabitants of the community engages mainly in primary production activities like agriculture and rearing of livestock; has a relatively homogenous population, few basic modern infrastructures and low population density. Over 70 percent of the communities in Nigeria are rural ones. A community is described as urban when it is characterized by high population density, heterogeneous population and vast modern infrastructures and services. A community is the most important framework through which people address their development needs, develop economic, social and political potentials and values.

Community participation: This entails that the inhabitants of the community should be taking active part in the governance of the local area in which they are part of. In specific terms, it entails the participation of the inhabitants of the community in the development programmes and activities initiated by the local government. Participation could be at the level of defining problems, specifying the alternative course of action, choosing the preferred alternative lines of action, implementing the chosen lines of action (programmes or projects) participating in the sharing of the benefits of the implemented programmes and evaluating the outcomes of the implemented programmes.

Mass Mobilization: This is the process of stimulating the interest of the masses for involvement in local government activities, programmes or projects at the level of either decision making, implementation or evaluation.

Local Government: This is the order of government closest to the people at the grass root. In Nigeria Federal system, it is regarded as the third tier level of government. There are 774 local governments in Nigeria. The basic socio-political units that make up a local government area are communities. As such, it is the communities that are the basic framework for enhancing the social, economic and political development of the people in a local government area. Communities should, therefore, be the centre of development efforts and activities of the local government.

Development: Development basically is a process of progression that involves changes in structures, attitudes and institutions as well as acceleration of cultural, social, political and economic growth, reduction of inequality and eradication of absolute poverty. Development is also conceived as involving increasing the available resources in a community and improving the utility of these resources. Development is enhanced or realized through concerted and planned efforts by governments both at national, state and local government levels in partnership with the governed.

Community Based Organizations (CBOs): These are organizations set up by people of homogenous or heterogeneous attributes but living or working within the same community. CBOs are also conceived as voluntary organizations, clubs, societies or associations within the community that work to achieve certain objectives. Members of CBOs may have similar identities and share some needs and aspirations. CBOs are usually non-profit oriented and usually do not have permanent paid officials. CBOs which are very common in most communities in Nigeria have been observed to serve as wheels for community mobilization for participation in public or government programmes or community initiated projects. Indeed, CBOs provides services to bridge the gap in the provision of social facilities and sometimes to complement or supplement the ones provided by the government. CBOs include among others, town unions, age grade association, social clubs, occupational groups, faith based organizations and neighbourhood vigilante groups. CBOs are usually regarded as forms of civil society organizations.

Theoretical Framework: The theoretical framework for the paper is partnership theory: A synthesis of the discussions of the partnership theory by scholars like [1], [3],[2],yields the following as the basic assumptions of the partnership theory:

- (i) That success in societal development effort requires the partnership or co-operation of government, civic or non-governmental organizations in the society.
- (ii) That in partnership, the aim is to build links between the function or work of government agencies and non-governmental organizations in the development process.
- (iii) That the creation of partnership is a way of making more efficient use of scarce resources, increasing institutional sustainability, improving beneficiary participation, strengthening transparency in administration and challenging prevailing top-down approach to development.
- (iv) That no one sector (public or private) has the competencies, resources and motivation to alone deal effectively with given development concerns or challenges.
- (v) That partners may have unique characteristics that provide them with advantages in specific aspects of service or project delivery
- (vi) That partnership results to highlight of perspectives on development from leaders in civil society and government and sharing of information on development alternatives.

In relating the partnership theory to the topic of the paper, the following prepositions are made:

1. That partnership between the community and the local government can result to enhancement in the development of the rural communities
2. That partnership between the community and the local government can enhance transparency, accountability and bottom-up approach in community development process.
3. That partnership between the community and local government can lead to effective and efficient use of resources.
4. That partnership between the community and local government can lead to the development and sustenance of people's interest in local government development activities.

The Imperative for Community Participation in Local Government Development Process

Preponderance of scholars are of the opinion that community participations in local government development activities facilitate development in all ramifications in the local governments. Basically, the thesis is that community participation is crucial for enhancing

the effectiveness of the development efforts of the local government and as such, an effective strategy for rural community development.

Participation by the mass of the community is imperative as it gives democracy a meaning and makes its practice interesting and dynamic. Indeed, it is a veritable way of conforming to the basic tenets of democracy as a political system in which the citizens participate actively in not only determining the kind of people that govern them but actively also participate in determining the policy and programmes of the local government [3],. The participation by the inhabitants of the community in the institutions and system that govern them are central to human rights [2]. Another strand of argument is that through participatory programmes and activities, it is possible to mobilize local knowledge and resources for greater community development and such could as well lead to innovative ways of meeting local needs [2]. Some scholars too argue that participation has an advantage to the local government as it enables the local government to have a greater understanding of community needs and about who benefits from and who is excluded from services. Participation in local government development process improves members of the community and increase their ability to understand what is going on as far as local government's efforts in community development is concerned. Community participation also improves local governance practices and increases self-reliance, creativity and homegrown technological and scientific innovations. This in itself enhances development.

Community participation also results to effective and timely feedback on the success or failure of local government programmes or projects, creates deep community mindedness and evokes the spirit of co-operation in executing local government development projects. From the perspective of governance, Abonyi, (2010) [2], argues that participation is one of the institutional basis of good governance noting that good governance largely comes through inclusive decision making process. Ojukwu (2013) [3], arguing on the need for community participation in the democratic process at the local government level notes that wide spread active participation in public affairs is good in itself as well as constitutes a means of achieving best value and effectiveness in administration of public service.

Odo (2014) [4], and [2], contend that development is about people and if it is to be meaningful, effective and efficient, the people must be its active agents and not just passive beneficiaries. Odo (2014) [4] and Abonyi (2010) [2] also argue that many development programmes by the local government failed due to non-involvement of the

local communities in their conception, design and implementation. Odo (2014)[4], notes specifically in this respect thus;

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

In essence, local communities need to participate in the development efforts or activities of the local government right from the decision making to the implementation and evaluation stages as such gives local governance the character of self - government or grassroot democracy. Nico (2008) [5] and Udenta (2007) [6], note that effective community participation in decisions regarding development programmes, increases enthusiasm on the part of the community in implementing the resulting development programme and ensures that there is transparency in implementing development programs. Kincaid and Rupak (2008) [1], contend further that community participation in local government development efforts makes development decisions more practical and its implementation more sustainable in that their input allows for the accommodation and acknowledgment of local diversities and historical complexities that may exist in a particular locality. It is argued again by Rupak and Kincaid (2008) [1], that effective participation draws the local community closer to their elected representatives and that such enhances monitoring and control. Such active participation, as they further argue, allows the community to identify more with its political institutions thereby fostering a sense of ownership over common resources, political institutions and offices. Indeed, as noted by Nico (2008) [5], where local initiatives are sought or accommodated in local governance, the interest in local politics and participation in local elections inevitably increases. Nico (2008) [5], in his work further notes that local government, as premised on representative and participatory democracy, requires a bottom - up approach to governance. What this entails is that active participation by the inhabitants of the rural communities in the local government area is imperative. It is further argued as in the work of Kincaid and Rupak (2008) [1], that community participation in local government tends to enhance the legitimacy of the local government. Indeed, the argument here is that even though local government is created by a superior order of government (the Federal or State government), its legitimacy and authority are better derived from the inhabitants through community participation in its programmes.

[4] articulates the following as specific benefits of effective community participation in local governance:

1. One, by getting actively involved in local governance, citizens identify themselves with the institution of local government.
2. Two, community participation provides dignity to those who participate as their voices are heard and taken account of.
3. Three, the greater the participation in decision making by the community people, the more likely the acceptance of the decisions by the community people will be.
4. Four, community participation in development decisions of the local government results in decisions being able to address the real needs of the community.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: The Experience

Generally, community participation in local government development efforts is acknowledged to be very essential. This appears more so in Nigeria because of the following reasons: One, most communities in Nigeria are rural ones living on the periphery of the cities. Indeed, Nigeria is essentially a rural society with the vast majority of her population dwelling in the rural areas [7]. Specifically, about 70 percent of Nigerians dwell in the rural communities. These rural communities do not always have the basic services or facilities like water, good roads, electricity, primary health and educational facilities et cetera. Effectively addressing this myriad of problems or deprivations requires effective participation of the rural community people. This is more so as local government in Nigeria is increasingly becoming just vehicles for self-serving political elites rather than being community development centered [8]. Indeed, over the years, in Nigeria, political representatives have not shown sufficient will and interest to actually articulate the problems of their constituent rural communities and the strategies or programmes for addressing them. Specifically, the local government executives like the chairman, vice chairman, secretary, supervisors and the legislators or the councilors representing the rural communities all prefer to live in the cities or state capitals and only once in a while drive into their respective rural communities in posh cars to the chagrin of the rural populace.

So, in a country like Nigeria with such a growing case of poor political representation and general lack of transparency and accountability in governance, community participation has come to be very necessary. Community participation in such circumstance helps in ensuring that rural community problem gets into the policy agenda of the local government, that inputs results to commensurate output and that the community development objectives are being met as planned.

Ideally, the local government being the government closest to the people, is required to motivate, encourage or mobilize the local community people for participation in development process. Contrarily in Nigeria, community participation in local government development activities has been observed to be very low [8]. This experience is cardinal, attributable to the facts that:

- (1) There is lack of access to information by the masses of the community particularly on the issues that decision is being made on by the local government.
- (2) There is the lack of motivation to participate in decision making and implementation of development activities largely as a result of already existing poor political representation and the resulting mistrust of the political officers.
- (3) There exists the lack of decision making ability on the side of the masses of the rural community people due to general low level of education and professional training.
- (4) There is lack of communication between the local government and the rural community based structures like the 'Town Union', 'Age Grade Associations', Social clubs etc.
- (5) The local government development agenda often times are dictated by the state or even the federal government.
- (6) There is lack of interest and enthusiasm in politics and public life generally in the rural communities. This lack of interest is largely induced by poor political representation, bad governance and unfulfilled political promises. The low level of participation and interest in politics is reinforced by the dwindling interest on the side of politicians and political parties in rural/grassroot political mobilization/education as a result of 'godfatherism' or 'Political clientelism'. In Nigeria, political mobilization and campaign for local government elective political offices are concentrated at the state government or political parties' headquarters in the cities. Lobbying and 'horse-trading' too are largely centered around the 'political heavy weights' and political party executives or chieftains in wanton disregard to the people at the grassroot.
- (7) There is the absence of effective political education by the local government and other democratic institutions like state and national electoral bodies and other government information dissemination agents. Indeed, in Nigeria, political mobilization activities are usually urban based and mainly through the print or electronic media which are usually not easily available in the rural communities.
- (8) There is the lack of political will by the local government leadership to run an open administration due to selfish interest.

(9) The age-long belief by the officials of the local government that people are ignorant, illiterate and unenlightened constitutes a problem for effective community participation in the development programmes of the local government as they consider it unnecessary to mobilize them for participation.

(10) There is the strangulating/suffocating control by the state governor who through the state electoral commissions, ensure that healthy competition and democratic election comes to nothing at the local government level. The candidates anointed by the governor (or his party) usually 'wins' the local government elections (both Councillorship and Chairmanship) as the electoral body at the state level dare not declare anybody winner against the governor's candidate no matter how unpopular the governor's candidate is within the communities.

Enhancing Effective Community Participation in Nigeria: The Way Forward: A veritable way of enhancing an effective community participation is to use the CBOs like the 'Town Union', 'Age Grade Associations', Social clubs, Occupational Associations and Faith Based Organizations. This is in consideration of the fact that it will be difficult to involve the entire people of the community in local government development programmes. Indeed, a more effective and practical way of actually involving the community in local government development process is through the framework of the CBOs. However, in order for the CBOs to serve as an effective auspices for the community people's participation in local government, their capability to play the role must be strengthened. Local government, in this case, need to actually recognize and organize capacity building workshops for the CBOs particularly as it concerns decision making and ability to know and understand what local government is, how it works and how they can positively be a part of it.

Local government also need to provide structures and processes for effective participation by the CBOs. Indeed, for effective and sustainable functioning of the CBOs as community representatives, their role in local government structure or processes need to be given legal standing and encouragement through making it a constitutional matter. Further, local governments need to understand the dynamics of the CBOs' formation, membership, functions, values, resources, structure and capacities to be able to make good and effective use of the CBOs as partners in their development efforts. Indeed, in modern times, it is difficult to involve all the members of the community in local governance. What appears feasible is to identify CBOs that exist within a community and involve the leadership of such CBOs in local governance. The belief here is that, to a very large extent, the priorities of the CBOs would represent sufficiently and closely the preferences of the mass of the people of the community. Also the CBOs, as forms of civil society

organizations are envisaged to have the necessary commitment knowledge and enlightenment to make them fulfill the role of serving as the voice of the community. Finally, local government leadership should be made to be more reflective of the wishes and aspirations of the people residing within the composite communities. This will create natural sense of ownership in the people and facilitate participation. This can be achieved when institutions and processes through which local government leaderships emerge are sufficiently detached from the manipulative whims and caprices of the state and even the federal government.

CONCLUSION

Local government is essentially created for the development of the rural communities particularly. In doing this effectively however, there is the need for effective community participation in the development structures and processes of the local government. Such an effective community participation can be more practically achieved through the platform of CBOs rather the whole mass of the rural community people. Indeed, the involvement of the CBOs in local government development planning, execution, monitoring, evaluation and in giving of timely and reliable feedback will significantly enhance the possibility of the local government in achieving generally its development objectives for the individual communities that make up the local government area.

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