

## The Role of Local Government in Nigeria

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### INTRODUCTION

Issues regarding internal administration of any country are fundamental to determining the character of that given society. One major problem in the developing world is the question of development of rural areas in our national development matter. The quality of life of our rural areas has remained a source of worry and concern to policy makers, administrators, town planners and other agencies of development in developing countries especially in Nigeria. All over the world, various approaches and strategies have been adopted or used by governments for the management of its rural setting. But, there is no rapport or congruence on the most appropriate administrative structure for the administrations of the rural areas. This could be due to the varied perspective on the actual roles of local government, which differ from one environment to another. In Nigeria, local government administration has undergone several reforms, restructuring and mutations. Currently, the local government, as the third tier of government operates a uniform structure based on the presidential system of government. This is aimed at making the system more functional. In view of the above, the paper takes a brief look at the genesis of local government administration in Nigeria. It also took a look at the various functions of local government and problems of the local government system. Some suggestions are also made to help strengthen the system to enable it achieve its stated objectives.

### CONCEPTUALIZATION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM

Various definitions of local government exist, as there are various writers on the subject. We shall only sample a few. According to the United Nations Office for public Administration, a local government refers to ; a political sub divisions of nation or (in federal system), state, which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local affairs, including the powers to impose taxes or to exact labour for prescribed purposes. The governing body of such unit is elected or otherwise locally selected [1].

The above definition is apt and widely accepted and has been considered as the United Nations definition because it is all embracing. The indicators in the above definition connotes citizen participation in the management of local affairs; efficient and equitable provision for essential services and resource mobilization for development purposes. [2], also defined local government as: a system of local administration under which local communities and towns are organized to maintain law and order, provide some limited

range of social services and public amenities and encourage the co-operation and participation of the inhabitants in joint endeavour towards the improvement of their living.

### **BRIEF HISTORY OF MODERN LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NIGERIA**

With the advent of colonialism in Nigeria, the British colonial government introduced a system of local administration called Indirect Rule aimed at managing the rural areas through existing Chiefs, Emirs, Obas and Warrant Chiefs. The 1910 Native Authority Ordinance gave impetus to the effective implementation of indirect rule policy by the colonial officials. In 1933, the local government system (Native Administration) witnessed its first major reform (Native Authority Law 1933), which regularized the positions of the traditional rulers as the sole native authorities.

Under Sir Barnard Bourdillion (1939-1943), group of provinces were carved out from the regions. Each province had Divisional Administration with a District Officer (D.O) at the helm of affairs. Local government in Nigeria before the 1976 Local Government Reform operated outside the Constitution as it was never mentioned in the constitution. It was rather a residual subject reserved exclusive for the regional/state government. Federal government had no direct dealing with the local government.

In 1976, the famous uniform structure of local government system was adopted throughout the country after a thorough review of the Udoji Commission's Report. Thus, local government became the third tier of government and was entrenched into the 1979 constitution and other subsequent constitutions in the country. The main features of the reform included the following:

- (1) Large measure of autonomy giving to the local government.
- (2) Financial allocation made to the local government for the first time.
- (3) Staff matters were removed from the control of elected councilors.

The 1999 constitution in its section 7, sub-section 1 makes provision for a democratically elected Government Councils. In its section 8, it allows each state to ensure the existence of law which provides for the establishment of structures, composition, finance and functions of such councils.

### **THE ROLES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS**

Our major task in this paper is to discuss the role of Local Government in Nigeria.

Fundamentally, the local government is aimed at;

- (1.) Promoting participatory democracy at the grassroots.
- (2.) Mobilizing local reserves for rapid social and economic development.
- (3.) Providing certain basic amenities and services at the rural areas.
- (4.) Encouraging initiative, and leadership potential in managing local affairs.
- (5.) Development of agriculture and natural resources other than the exploitation of mineral.
- (6.) Provision and maintenance of primary adult and vocational education.
- (7.) Decentralizing political power and institutionalizing co-operative federalism.

The above could be summarized into two major sectors. Local governments perform two key roles in the system; political and socio-economic roles. Let us look at each of these roles.

(I) Political Roles

The principal issue here is that of democratization. Local government's political role is to serve as an instrument for promoting local democracy. The local government is well placed to mobilize the people politically through political education, political participative interaction, enlightenment and actions. Local government have become useful democratic platforms for electing leaders at the grassroot levels of government. Furthermore, leaders who get elected at local levels and serve as representatives of the people in the local government council are prepared through such experience for higher responsibilities. Local government is therefore a training ground for politicians and leaders. Such training includes that of representativeness and political accountability. [3].

Another political role is that provision of Law and Order. Local government work with the police, other security agencies and traditional rulers to enforce law and maintain security in rural areas. Moreover to enhance responsive governance, local government serves as two-way channel of communication between the government and the governed. Just as it transmits the decision of government to the local people, it also conveys the demands or feedback from the local people to governments.

(II) Socio-Economic Roles

The exercise of democracy and human rights can only be meaningful if demands and policies can be translated into physical development including the provision of basic socio-economic services. Such services are expressed in the functions of local government which include basic health, basic education, agriculture and revenue generation. People expect such services to be delivered to make any meaning of democracy and bureaucracy at the local level.

It should be noted that in providing such services, local governments have to work with community groups and citizenry to harness community energies as inputs into development. In local government therefore, there can be a totally government initiated development, a joint exercise with the community and completely community initiated self-help projects.

### PROBLEMS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NIGERIA

Nigeria local government face political, administrative, social and economic problems. Politically, the leadership has been very unstable over the years. Each leadership comes with different names like democratic leadership, sole administratorship, management or caretaker committee etc. where the leadership is constitutionally recognized and given tenure, they are often than not dissolved abruptly. Where this happens, to reconstitute them into democratic councils becomes a difficult task by state governments.

Most times, the state governments are more comfortable with non democratic council since they are at the beck and call of the state governments. However, this is becoming old fashioned.

The implication of such instability in government is that local governments do not have steady development plans as each leadership comes with its own agenda. This does not encourage continuity in administration and does not create the right environment for development.

Administratively, officials of local government have not shown quality in managing resources of local government or bringing about local development. They provoke a serious indictment on the image of local government. There have always been serious cases of mismanagement and corruption and these have threatened the viability and effectiveness of local government. In addition, in some cases the relationship between the state and local government does not help matters since state governments see local government as appendages of their administration and so make laws that take away with the autonomy of local government.

Socially, local government has come to display a low image in the country. It has become a dumping ground for low quality staff with very poor attitude to work. Low quality councilors do not cope with law making functions and do not acquit themselves before the public. The communities do not recon with local government because they do not deliver services they ought to. This even puts off the public when it comes to payment of taxes, fees and rates, social services are drastically lacking in many rural communities.

Economically, local government's economic base is largely poor, agrarian and is dominated by a subsistent economy. Local government generates some revenue on agricultural products from markets but this is a far cry from their internal revenue needs. Other sources like property rates exists but since most local government are rural; this form of tax does not really generate much. In some cases, it is ignored. Except in some states where urban local governments are viable e.g. Lagos, Kano, Kaduna and Oyo. Rural industries by way of agro-allied industries by way of agro-allied industries are a scarce phenomenon in our local governments. There is poor industrial base and low production coupled with poor network of roads in the rural areas. This in turn, limits the capacity of local government to generate revenue to deliver services.

### CONCLUSION

Local government like all administrative institution or organizations in a depressed economy like our present experience in Nigeria cannot live up to expectation. Without adequate finance, the objectives of the local government system cannot fully realized. There are enormous responsibilities entrusted on the local government by both the constitution and law. Local government administrators must be mentally and emotionally sound in order to achieve the set objectives of the system.

Local government administrators must not be selfish, and should show transparency and responsibility in the exercise of their duties. They should utilize what is available to optimal use to satisfy the yearnings of the people. Local government council officials must

show honesty, justice and equity to all stakeholders in the system. This is the only way to preserve the democratic culture and enhance national development.

There is also urgent need to consider increasing the statutory allocation to local governments. However, this should be followed by adequate monitoring of its usage by council officials.

There should be less interference from the political elites and other tiers of government to enable the officials perform. The officials must also realize that their election or appointments are call to duty and service to the people and not an avenue for personal aggrandizement. The essence of governance is to do better what we cannot do as individuals.

### REFERENCES

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