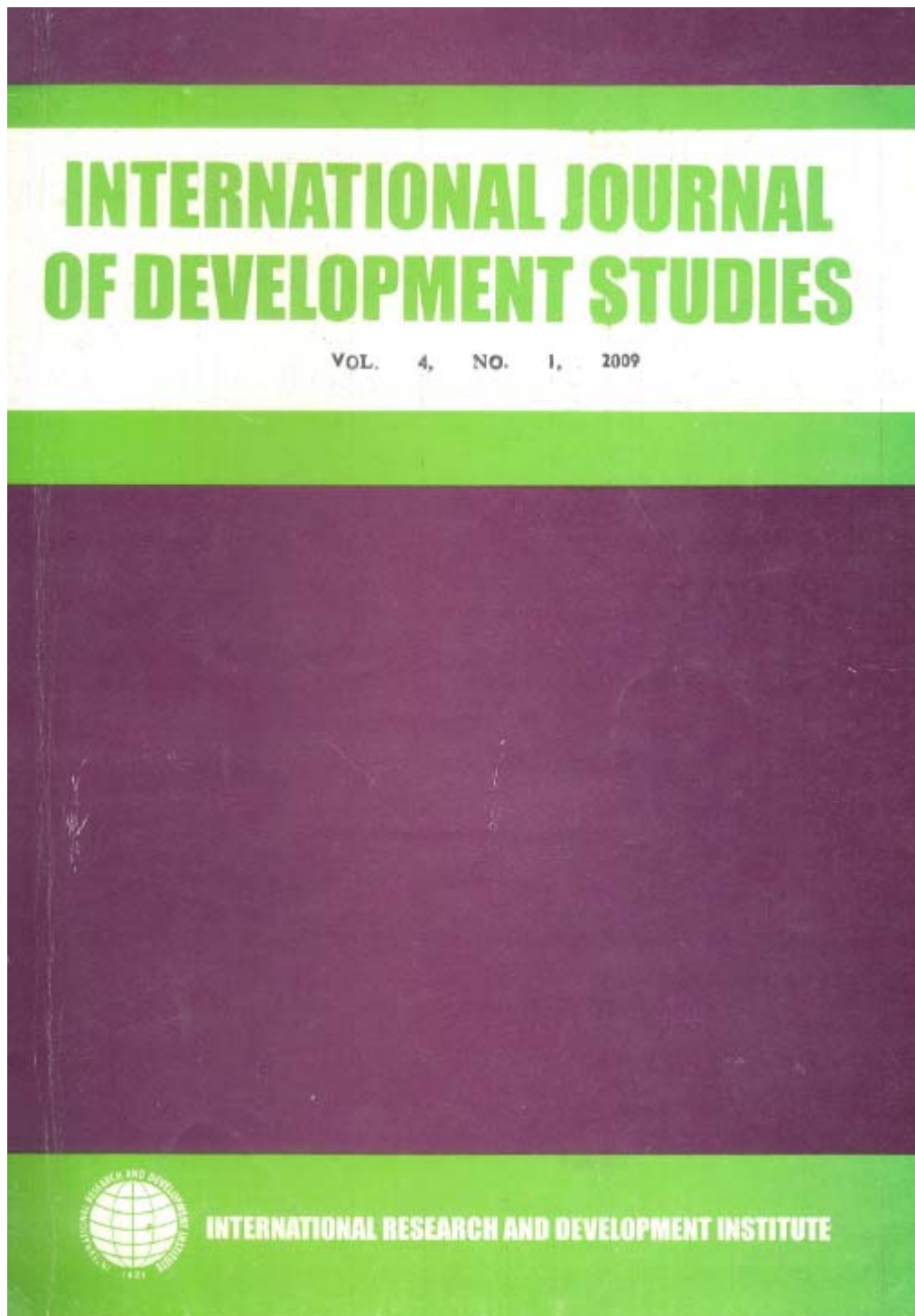


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MAKING LOCAL GOVERNMENT EFFICIENT AND EFFECTIVE FOR NIGERIA'S DEVELOPMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

It is generally believed that the local government system anywhere in the world should offer the best approach to sustainable development in the respective country in which they are situated. This belief is premised on the fact that Local Governments are closer to the people and as such in a better position to bring development to them. However, rather unfortunately, there have been constant reports of slow and poor performance of this tier of government in many parts of the world especially in developing countries and Africa in particular. This paper therefore examines the Local Government system in Nigeria from a functional perspective and revealed that there is dire need to make the Local Governments very autonomous operationally and financially so as to enable it key in to democratic dividends and socio – economic development of the country in the 21 century.

INTRODUCTION

It is generally believed that the local government system anywhere in the world should offer the best approach to sustainable development in the respective country in which they are situated. This belief is premised on the fact that Local Governments are closer to the people and as such in a better position to bring development to them. However, rather unfortunately, there have been constant reports of slow and poor performance of this tier of government in many parts of the world especially in developing countries and Africa in particular. The poor performances of the local governments in Nigeria in

particular have led to the underdevelopment of the rural areas all over the country and have bred lack of trust by the people in the ability of their elected officials at this level to lead them or deliver democracy dividends (Epelle, 2008:32). Local government administration as observed by Nelson (2008:103), constitute a very strategic and systemic option within the context of the current quest to promote accountability, encourage popular participation in governance, enhance governmental efficiency and effectiveness as well as mobilize local resources and initiatives to accelerate socio-economic development in developing countries. It is apparent that most of the local governments in Nigeria are not functional. In terms of meeting their core mandate they have been largely inefficient and ineffective. This explains why several years after the comprehensive and democratically minded local government reform of 1976 was carried out, little social dividends can be found in most local government areas (Ighodalo, 2008:44). The problems of efficient performance of local governments in the country are not different from those that have bedeviled administration at other levels of Government. Scholars have exposed various aspects of these pathologies in local governments. These include; manpower problems, corruption and fraud, party politics, poor accounting system, uncooperative intergovernmental relations, nepotism and favouritism e.t.c (Marcellies, 2008:25). The completion of the last transition programme that culminated into the withdrawal of the military from politics ushered in the nascent democracy on May 29, 1999. The hope, expectations and aspirations of the masses then were very high given the fact that the people, who had struggled and groaned for survival under the repressive and oppressive military dictatorships for about thirty years from forty-nine years of the country's independence, were expected to reap the dividends of democracy in a bountiful manner. However, indications from some empirical studies on the "realization of the peoples' hope and expectations from promises made by local politicians" conducted by Akinola (2002) across southern Nigeria vividly show clashed hopes and piped dreams. The local government design to be centrifugal points of socio-economic emancipation and welfare propagation for the citizens have morphed into diversion of public resources into private pockets

embezzlement, inflation of contracts, nepotism, corruption and position consolidation among others. The political leaders at the local government level could be described as predators of public resources meant for the benefits of all. Local governments as mentioned earlier are the most relevant government to the local people given the fact that it is the closest to the grassroots, hence, "a most effective conduit for the public's problems". (Robinovitz, 1996:1). However, the dependence of the Nigerian local government on external grants jeopardizes the imperative for capacity building initiatives. As it was during the military era, so it is in the nascent democratic dispensation. A considerable number of Mayors in other countries, which are of equivalent status to local government chairmen in Nigeria, are now responding to new challenges and beginning to turn their councils into instrument of change. Such countries include: Brazil, Senegal, India, Jamaica, Mexico, Chile, Ecuador, China, and South Africa to mention a few. According to Robinovitz (ibid.), inspirational and imitable example of mayoral leadership, which combine innovative management strategies with participatory concepts, do exist worldwide. In Nigeria, the case is contrary, socio-economic projects designed and implemented for societal welfare and development have failed the acid test of welfarism, rather, they constitute channels for diverting public resources to private pockets of sycophant and vampire politicians, fake contractors, party stalwarts at the corridor of power and opportunistic traditional

rulers. Under the present nascent democratic setting, uncommitted bureaucratic administration still predominates. The irony of it all is that the leaders focus on the central governments for grants, while abundant resources remain unexploited at the local level. This weakens accountability more so that the leaders pretend not to be responsible to the electorates that voted them to power at the local level. A study of the local government system of a country like Nigeria as observed by Tonwe (1995:21) would not only be an effort of national importance, but would have concomitant relevance to the developing world at large. This is because it canvases and accommodates all heterogeneities and variability's found in most developing countries.

The recent trend in the country shows that individuals with good knowledge of local government are getting more conscious of the need to subject local government to rigorous study and research.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT: CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL DISCOURSE

In order to leave no doubt whatsoever as to what our central concern in this study is all about, we begin this section by attempting to define local government. The reality is that it has been conceived and constituted in different ways. According to the United Nations Division of Public Administration as quoted by Ola (1984), "Local government is a political sub-division of a nation which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local affairs, including the powers to impose taxes or exact labour for prescribed purposes. In the views of late chief Awolowo as quoted by Ighodalo (2003), local government is the sub-structural base upon which the superstructure of the state and federal governments are erected. As Oyediran (2007:69), puts it, Local Government is the government in which popular participation both in the choice of decision makers and in the decision making process is conducted by local bodies which while recognizing the supremacy of other levels of government, is able and willing to accept responsibility for its decisions. Local government is a government at the local level exercised by law to exercise powers within defined areas... has substantial control over local affairs as well as the staff and institution and financial powers to initiate and direct the provision of services and to ensure that local initiative and response to local needs and conditions are maximized (Adamolekun, 1988). The Nigerian government, in order to avoid ambiguity in its interpretation used an extensive and painstaking conception of local government when it declared in 1976 that: Government at the local level exercised through representative councils, established by law to exercise special powers within defined areas. These powers should give the council substantial control over local affair as well as the staff, an institutional financial powers to initiate and direct the provisions of services and to determine and implement project so as to complete the

activities of the state and federal governments in their areas and to ensure through active participation of the people and their traditional institutions, that local initiatives and response to local needs and conditions are maximized (Awotokun, 1996:11) While Chand (2006:704) sees local governments as infra sovereign geographical units found within sovereign nations or quasi-sovereign states. Like other units of government, local government units possess a defined area, a population, an organization and also the authority to undertake and the power to perform public activities. With its territory, a local government unit seeks to give opportunities to the people for the expression of their opinion in regard to local affairs. It enables them to choose their representatives to take care of local affairs on their behalf.

The following facts relating to the nature of a local government emerge from the above definition.

- It is a sub-division of a nation.
- It can impose taxes and incur expenses
- It exists within a defined territory
- It has autonomous existence and legal entity
- It is comprises elected members who run it.

There are four main schools of thought on the performance of local government. These are:

- Democratic - participatory school of thought
- Efficiency - services school of thought
- Functional school of thought
- Developmental school of thought

DEMOCRATIC /PARTICIPATORY SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

Central to this theory is the concept of democracy. Local politics and politics at all levels deal with conflicts and conflicts resolution. Hence at the grass root levels, citizens are called upon to learn to make choices, to tolerate the views of the minorities and to respect others views whether supportive of their own view or not. Scholars of democratic school hold that local government functions to bring about democracy and to afford opportunities for political participation to the citizens as well as to educate and socialize them politically (Abangma & Oronsaye, 1999:168). Local government thus becomes a good training ground for upper levels of government and source of greater participation.

EFFICIENCY/SERVICES SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

To this school, the essential function of local government is not the bringing about of democracy nor is it the provision of a base for political participation and education, rather it views local government as existing for the provision of services to the citizens and must seek to provide such services according to standards required of them, and so efficiency would not be impaired at the level of co-ordination (Ola, 1984:13) Also, because of its closeness to an area, local government can provide certain services more efficiently than the central or state government. These services should be allocated to it and it should form its central functions. Based on the efficient performance of these functions, local government is the most efficient agent for providing such services that are essentially local.

DEVELOPMENTAL SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

According to this school of thought, Local Governments are veritable instruments for bringing Development to the people at the local levels. The school holds that development can be possible by making local governments involved in implementing

socio-economic programmes aimed at restructuring the needed infrastructure for improved living of the people (Abangma & Oronsaye, 1999:169).

The position of this school is that far more than developed western countries, local government in developing nations should have the function of helping to decongest the centre. This, it can achieve by being involved in implementing socio-economic programmes that attempt to reconstruct the infrastructure necessary for an improved way of life.

FUNCTIONAL SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

According to this school of thought, all the earlier mentioned functions of local government are to be expected in varying degrees from all local governments system whether in developed or developing nations. In a developing nation, most especially when the performance of functions are designed to promote the needed progress of the country, the other aspects of political participation, education and the socialization of the masses to the ideal of freedom, liberty as well as national integration and stability cannot be ignored. When both sets of schools are integrated, a functional approach evolves. This functional approach assures the efficiency and effectiveness of local government as a tool in developmental process.

REFLECTIONS ABOUT THE CURRENT LOCAL GOVERNMENT SITUATION IN NIGERIA

It is important to consider the autonomy question in local governments and the extent to which the operators of local government are willing to use the present leverages it enjoys to bring about development to the people. Several actions by the federal and state governments shows that local government is still an appendage of the higher levels of government. Unlike the federal-state relationship, the state-localgovernment relationship is not one between sovereign governments. In spite of the concept of the

third tier of government, which the Nigerian system supposed to be, the state is still the MASTER of local governments. While the federal constitution guarantees the existence of a democratically elected local government councils in the constitution, it at the same time, made the state in charge of bringing about that existence under the law (Fatile and Adejuwon 2008:93) The 1979, 1989 and indeed the current 1999 Nigerian Constitution explicitly guaranteed the existence of local government alongside federal and state governments in the country. One of the most serious problems currently militating against local governance in Nigeria is on the exact status of local government under the 1999 Constitution. The problem arises out of the various provisions in the constitution, which tend to contract or impair one another. Similarly, some of these provisions are blatantly ambiguous and, if stretched, could easily result into operational or functional stolidity.

Section 7(1) of the 1999 Constitution provides as follows: The system of local government by democratically elected local government system is under this constitution guaranteed; and accordingly, the government of every state shall, subject to section 8 of this Constitution, ensure their existence under a law which provides for the establishment, structure, composition, finance and functions of such councils. The implication of the above is that local government council cannot exercise the functions allocated to it in the fourth schedule to the constitution until the state House of Assembly has passed a law, which empowers the local government council to perform those functions listed in the fourth schedule to the constitution. It seems equitable therefore to infer from the above provision that local government is the responsibility of the state government. Although, this conclusion is riddled with contradictions, for instance, from what is being experienced in the relationship between the three tiers of government. From the unfolding political scenario, the future of local government systems appear to be one of the grounds on which the endurance limit of the Fourth Republic will be put to test. This is in the form of an unsavory jostling for hegemony in the unstable relationship between the triad of Federal, state and Local Governments. Moreover, local

government, functionally, is the lowest and widest base of political activities and contest. The control of this realm therefore means much in the calculus of power. The election of Senators and Representatives is a direct function of power relations at council levels. The interest of federal legislatures can therefore be seen from self-interest perspective. Secondly, political control over a reasonable number of local governments in a State is a valuable gubernatorial asset and indeed a presidential one. It must be emphasized that state-local government relations have received considerable attention in the numerous thinking to strengthen the autonomy and viability of the local government. Two antithetical views stand in the way of proper appreciation of state-local relations. Proponents of "paternalism" have struck to the view point that the local governments have to be regularly controlled, guided and "occasionally punished" to get work out of them. At the other end are the advocates of "populism" who are staunch supporters of unbridled council democracy run by elected representative opposed to any sort of inferences from the state government. It is our contention that local government can be an efficient and effective instrument of development in Nigeria in the 21st century if it is devoid of excessive hegemonic devices. Functional autonomy is important both to the individuals or groups who achieve it. To those who achieve it, it gives a sense of culture (Abangma & Oronsaye, 1999:169) and we believe this is also applicable to the Local Government in Nigeria. The search for functional autonomy is a major element in creating changes within systems which might otherwise lend to be in a state of equilibrium. For local government, granting functional autonomy will simplify decision-making process, and make the task of sustainable development easier. It will also avoid the use of control by other tiers of government, which can in most cases negate the objectives they are designed to achieve.

MAKING LOCAL GOVERNMENT EFFICIENT AND EFFECTIVE: SOME REMEDIAL ACTIONS

Although fundamental changes aimed at placing local government on a sound footing in Nigeria have emerged in the process of modernization of the country's federal polity, these changes have not led to the flourishing of the local governments. There is no doubt that the local government like any other level of government exists within a socio-economic and political environment of society which affect it positively or negatively. The perennial problem of lack of adequate funding of local government makes it look like a beggar unit of government. Local government council must look inward and tap internal sources of revenue generations rather than wait for allocation from federal and state governments that are neither sufficient nor received as and when due. The more revenue local government can generate on it's own, the more autonomous and confident it can become particularly in relations with other tiers of government (Oyediran and Gboyega, 1979). Accountability and probity should be promoted in the local government system by activating sanctions against corruption; and other unethical practices. Also, federal and state governments must refrain from encroaching or intervening in the affairs of local government. The National Assembly therefore needs to revisit the constitution on State relations with the local government to make it more autonomous, financially and operationally, no matter its effect on their individual political interests. It is the duty of all stakeholders to render necessary support to the Local Governments so as to make them more democratic and imbibe sustainable democratic practices by taking the path of the rule of law and respect for fundamental human rights, which includes the right for sustainable development. If States are empowered to create councils and State Electoral Commissions are empowered to conduct elections into councils, it will not be out of place to have an independent electoral body to conduct elections at the local levels to remove hegemonic control from the State Governments. It is also important to note that efficient and effective performance can be assumed, if there is a good quality of leadership. We share the views

of Aransi (2006:52) when he suggests that there is a need to have in Nigeria's local governments' leaders who are free "to choose their course of action and be able to induce others to follow their lead because of their superior intelligence, knowledge, skill and the force of their personalities. There is the need for effective, innovative, pro-active leadership "imbued with the drive, determination, commitment, energy, wisdom, knowledge, probity, integrity and vision to stand firm against all manner of abuse, properly harness available resources to productive use and effectively motivate subordinates to ever increasing productivity. Emphasis on local government employees should shift from nepotism and lobbying as a recruitment strategy to a better option of meritocracy and the acquisition of adequate and relevant educational and professional qualifications, as well as appropriate skills and experience to bring about maximum productivity to the Nigerian local government system. It is our convictions that local government can acquire effective performance capabilities to enable it play its role in the social, economic and political development of the country, if the above suggestions are considered.

CONCLUSION

There is an increasing awareness among policy makers and governments that local government plays such a vital role in the socio-economic well being of the people that we could not afford to relent in our search for solutions that bedevil it. Besides, an efficient and accountable local government system is now recognized as the foundation of the democratic structures of countries the world over. Thus, the suggestions that have been proffered in this study are aimed at strengthening the capacity of the local government so as to make it to key into playing effectively, its protective, welfare and development roles in Nigeria. Unless and until we can get the grassroots governance equation right, our democratic system will remain low in intensity and fledging. No democracy can become dynamic and sustainable if the systems of government at the grassroots level are not solidly people-centered, participatory and accountable. This can

only happen when local governance is inspired by the history, tradition, culture and modes of social organization of the communities in the locality concerned. If governance at the local grassroots level is to be the cornerstone upon which the national democratic edifice is to be constructed, then we must turn our diversities into a source of strength by encouraging, appreciating and further developing them through basing grassroots democracy on them (Adedeji 2000:xvii). Considering the stated analyses of the recent trends in local government administration, especially the ways by which the reforms and the various procedural and structural changes make for effective management, it is hoped that a new dimension will be introduced into the development of the local government system in Nigeria.

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