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LOCAL GOVERNMENT

**Administration
in Nigeria**

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE FUTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NIGERIA: ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES

Jacob Olufemi Fatile AND David Kehinde Adejuwon

Introduction

One of the important challenges in the new millennium will be to find successful ways to engage the public in shaping the communities of the future. Building upon the social capital in a community will be essential. Local government has a crucial role to play in creating sustainable communities. It can lead the local community, reflecting and responding to the needs and priorities of local people. It brings together a wide range of services to deliver the outcomes that matter to people locally. And it is democratically accountable to all citizens, balancing the interests of individuals and groups with those of the wider community.

Local government is created to ensure meaningful development of the grassroots through participatory approach (Lawal and Oladunjoye, 2010:227). The local government is essentially created as a viable political and administrative organ for the transformation of all communities and for delivery of essential services to the citizens. The primary purpose of the local government and the basis for its existence is to create a mass development impetus to the grassroots transformation (Adeyemo, 1995). The need to catalyze balanced development, maximize citizens' participation, and arouse government

responsive necessitates the creation of the local government. The local government serves as a form of political and administrative structure facilitating decentralization, national integration, efficiency in governance, and a sense of belonging at the grassroots. The local government is a unit of administration all over the world (Agagu, 2004). The local government system has been a major feature of the Nigerian government and politics since colonial rule though, over the years, there have been changes in name, structure, and composition, while the system was operated differently all over the country. It was on this premise that the rising tide of progress, growth, and development experienced in the local government was based.

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The Present State of Nigerian Local Government

Performance of the third tier of government in Nigeria is no queerish. But it is not an variance with the general pattern observed in other Third world countries. The analysis of the Nigerian case logically holds relevance for other new nations. Local governments over the years have not been existing in a freeze state. They have demonstrated remarkable resilience in sub-serving the goals of changing political systems (Ola and Tonwe, 2003:290).

Local government administration in Nigeria has undergone a long and tortuous journey. Since the colonial era, local government in Nigeria has shown a lot of divergence across the various parts of the country. From the misapplied, distasteful and ill-conceived indirect rule system in some part of the country, the over-ambitious reforms of the 1950s and the varieties of experiments between 1966 and 1976 great changes are recognized in local government administration in Nigeria. The situation also during the first four years of the Nigerian fourth republic was that elections were not held into the local government councils. This also resulted from the failure of the National Assembly to enact acceptable Electoral Act for the conduct of the election (Agagu, 2004).

Another basic problem is the subordinate location of the local government within the chaotic Nigerian intergovernmental system, which has made local government in Nigeria over-dependent, for both its policies funding, on either the state or federal government or both. Policies and structures of local government in Nigeria, have witnessed incessant changes. The veracity of such changes has led Dare (1988:14) to argue that, "no Nigerian institution has been subjected to as much review as the local government". Which, is in contrast to what obtains in many developed societies.

Over the years however, there has been corruption, fraud and mismanagement of funds by local functionaries in the country. Services provided by local governments have been both quantitatively and qualitatively inadequate to quench the growing thirst of the citizenry to their local government councils have been largely that of apathy. These developments are no doubt unpalatable. However, it must

be emphasised that these developments are not only a reflection of the happening at the higher levels of government, but have also been largely dictated by their short-sighted and selfish actions

The Future of Local Government

Presently, there are big challenges facing local government in Nigeria. The new approach for result oriented local government should be based on the following:

Establish a more coherent and stable relationship between local and central government – the need for national standards in key areas is widely accepted, but this relationship has sometimes been characterised by over-burdensome controls, conflicting priorities and unjoined up initiatives. There will still be a need for different approaches in relation to different services. But central Government as a whole should provide a coherent face to local government and, in turn, local government and its partners should be able to engage in a joined up way with central Government;

Clarify accountabilities and responsibilities at each level for the delivery of services – the current arrangements of targets, standards, funding, monitoring and engagement are highly complex and often confusing. Clear principles are needed about where the primary responsibility of local government for setting priorities, standards and targets should lie on a service by service basis;

Improve local community leadership – some local governments are seen as major players in their areas, but elsewhere they lack the confidence of citizens and the trust of local and national partners. In some cases, central

Government and other partners prefer to go around rather than work with councils to get things delivered;

Increase levels of citizen engagement – people have low levels of trust in politicians and low levels of participation and engagement in local decisions. It is vital to increase both in order to deliver sustainable communities and to make public services more effective and responsive;

Secure improvements in public services – rising expectations of service users are not always matched by improvements and innovations in services. Local authorities should drive improvement in the services they deliver directly and also influence the other services which local people rely on. Services must become much more focussed around the needs and preferences of service users, with increased personalisation and choice;

Ensure the finance system is fair and fit for the purpose – supporting what we expect local government to deliver in the years ahead and supporting local flexibility and local accountability. Work on finance will continue alongside the development of this strategy, ensuring a clear link between the two. For both local and central government, this agenda means building trust and confidence in the other as a partner. This trust cannot be simply willed. It must be built on evidence of change on both sides and demonstrable improvements in the outcomes that matter. But this also means both sides being prepared to try out new ways of doing things and taking some managed risks.

Taken together, these challenges present a tough and wide-ranging agenda for reform. But one which, if it is secured, would create a stable, long term relationship between local and central government, allowing both sides to meet the priorities and expectations of local people.

A roadmap for the future of local government in Nigeria should be based on the following seven principles;

- i. Local government's time has come: global forces and events in Australia have presented the sector with the opportunity of a lifetime, which we must use to our advantage
- ii. Local government to speak with one voice: there is a need for the
- iii. sector to work together and adopt a leadership role
- iv. Local government to be community driven
- v. Local government to derive power from community engagement
- vi. Local government to demonstrate efficiency and effectiveness
- vii. Local government to pursue community sustainability
- viii. Involve all levels of government in the change and the process.

In light of the multifarious handicaps and the resultant unimpressive performance of the third tier of government in Nigeria's modernising federal polity, it is obvious that, if the third tier of government is to acquire effective performance capabilities to enable it play its role in the social, economic, and political development of the country, the present set up must be overhauled. Such overhauling according to Ola and Tonwe (2003:300-301) should bring about the following innovations; —

- Consolidation of the emergent tripartite political arrangement,

- Handling the issue of traditional authorities with caution,
- Reshaping the personnel system,
- Resurrecting and redesigning the planning processes,
- Re-orienting the tactical thrust towards development of the grassroots,
- Balancing the functions and finances of the third tier of government,
- Digesting the issue of local autonomy and the question of external control,
- Need for caution in the spate of innovations and reforms, and
- Containing the proliferation of local government units.

Local government in its reformed state is also supposed to catalyze the political modernization process by increasing the operation variables for the polity and encouraging in the key elements of political modernization identified by Lucian Pye as equality, capacity and differentiation

Concluding Remarks

One of the important challenges in the new millennium will be to find successful ways of the future local government of the future. Generally, local government administration in Nigeria has all it takes to provide the needed developmental apparatus as it affects persons living in the rural areas and the local communities in particular.

A longer term vision for local government must provide a clear view of a local authority's role and relationship within this strengthened regional level, not just as it stands at

present but as it may look in the future. They should, also, endeavor to imbibe real democratic practice in order to promote value systems and democratic ethos at the grassroots level.

The local government should provide special mechanisms for active and maximal participation of local residents in local government affairs. People should be allowed to participate in the initiation and implementation of the project in the local government system.

Accountability and transparency must be encouraged and promoted in the local government system so as to attain good governance for effective development at the grassroots level. Corruption must be deterred and punished in the local government system to enhance efficient and effective service delivery at the grassroots level. The local government finance system must provide a sustainable platform for the roles and responsibilities we see for local government in the years ahead, fit for the purpose.

Local government is the veritable instrument of sustainable development, given the remoteness of the federal government from the people and the magnitude of work before the state government, local government has great role to play in reducing the menace of poverty at the grassroot. It is imperative that the powers and financial position of local governments should be strengthened to enable them perform efficiently and effectively. There is therefore the necessity for a new fiscal policy to regulate revenue allocation to local government. This according to Akinboye (2007:236) is consistent with what operates in other communes. More importantly, the allocated fund should be transferred to a special local government account in the state rather than the state-local government joint

account. In other to ensure compliance and check indiscriminate diversion or expropriation of local government funds by the state government, the allocation should be constitutionally guaranteed.

For a future result oriented local government in Nigeria, what is needed is not the alteration of the present structures of local government, but appropriate reforms on the operation of the structures so as to ensure greater accountability, transparency and optimal performance. Pragmatic efforts should be made to strengthen the institution of local governance and provide the wherewithal to energize sustainable development at the grassroots level in Nigeria.

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