Decentralization and grassroots Participation: Nigeria Local government Experience

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to interrogate the capacity of local government as a tool of decentralization to enhance grassroots participation in Nigeria. Ecological theory as a framework of analysis was used. The methodology was qualitative and analysis done with content analysis. The study posits that local government in Nigeria since 1999 have been incapable of creating much latitude for local inhabitants to participate meaningfully at the third level of government due to the ecological factors impinging on local government in Nigeria. It argued that the absence of autonomy of local government and how the State Governors deploy local government as a tool of political patronage and consolidation of power could well be understood from the nature and character of state in Nigeria. Instead of functioning as a tool of devolution, local government operates as administrative extension of State Governments where they are controlled by the State Governors. The logical consequence is non-existence of local self-government at the sub-national level with no room for ordinary people to elect their leaders. It found that the vested interests of elites at the macro level governments have been at the centre of all the negative tendencies affecting local government in Nigeria. It recommends that there is an urgent need for constitutional amendment of section 162(6&7) of the 1999 Constitution as amended. This will free the Local Governments in Nigeria from dependence on the State Government who through these provisions siphons its revenue and gives it financial autonomy without any interference.

Keywords: Local Government, decentralization, autonomy and godfatherism

Introduction

Countries over the world, designed local government structures, though with varying systems and practices. The one thread that run through them is the attempt to decentralize government in such a way that government will get closer to the people at the grassroots level so that they can participate meaningfully in taking decision that affect their lives. This is because, people at the local level understand their peculiar problems far better than persons or governments, that are farther away from them who do not have the better knowledge of local circumstances unique to those at the local environment. This stems from the feeling that when governmental activities are carried out and dictated from the centre, it tends to be impersonal, and against this impersonality arises rebellion (Tonwe, 2012). The point being advanced rest on the premise that localities are not areas or sites, but are people living together as neighbours, overtime who possess special knowledge of themselves and feel that they have better capacity to address their problems better. From this view, local government is placed to serve as a bulwark against the overbearing influence of central and state governments in the lives of the people at the grassroots level (Kikkpoye, 2012, Tonwe, 2012). Given the enormous work to be done at the country-wide, it is widely acknowledged that central government cannot have all the local knowledge needed to cater for all the diverse challenges at the locality. It becomes imperative for a structure of government very close to the people to be in place to cater for these unique local necessities for the people at the rural communities.

It is in this sense, Laski (1975, p.311) maintained that "we cannot realize the full benefit of democratic government unless we begin by the admission that all problems in their incidence require decision at the place and by the persons by whom the incidence is most deeply felt. In essence, what Laski argued, is that democracy could only be sustained when there is the opportunity for participation by the people at the rural level. In other words, development will be attained if only when the latent potentials of the rural people are galvanized in development process. Services such as pipe-born water, rural electrification, and maternity homes when provided by local government could impact positively on the lives of the populace at the local government level. In another sense, the decentralization of government will ensure that there is wide latitude for people

at the local level to participate in democratic process. This serves as a platform for nursing grassroots leadership who will later become national leaders.

Despite the transition from military rule to civilian democracy, the nation faces a spectrum of pressing issues that erode the functionality of its democratic institutions and the vibrancy of local governance. Nigeria's democracy is operating in a tough political environment due to the nature and character of the state leading to primacy of politics. Today, due to the influence of the macro-political elites in the structures of local governance in Nigeria manifests series of problems such as absence of self-government at the local government level. The absence of self-government means that the participatory opportunity of the rural people to meaningfully engaged in setting their priorities are not being met due to the vested interests of the macro level politicians who now use the structure of local governance as an arena for consolidation of power. Seen in this light, local self-government is compromised at the local government in Nigeria and caretaker committee has become the most convenient tool for administering local government. When elections are conducted in local government councils, the political party in power dictates the process in ways that opposition parties do not have any chance of winning even a councilor.

The objective of the study is to examine the challenges of local government in grassroots participation in Nigeria
Apart from this introduction, this paper is divided into four parts. Part one focus on methodology and theoretical framework, part two focuses on literature review, part three focus on data analysis why part four focus on conclusion and recommendations.

PART I

Methodology

This study adopted secondary method of data collection; it involves the collection of data from textbooks, seminar papers, journal and conference papers etc. Content analysis was utilized in analyzing the data

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for the study was the ecological theory. The term ecology was developed in 1886 by a Swiss biologist, Ernest Hackel who used it to study the relationship between living organisms and their environment. From ecological perspective, living organisms depends on the environment for their healthy functioning and sustainability since they interact with the environment in the exchange of matter. These environments may be favourable or adverse to the functioning of the living organisms. However, in 1945, John. M .Gaus viewing institutions of government as an organism that interact with their environment adopted this ecological approach in studying institutional foundations of public administration as being influenced and affected by the presence of environmental factors (Kiikpoye, 2012, Ibodje, 1999). In the 1950s, Frederick Riggs used this approach to study public administration arguing that the efficiency and performance of administrative structures lies in their settings. That is, it means that environment in which public administration takes place affects its performance. From here, ecological approach became a key theoretical construct for studying institutional foundations of public administration (Tonwe, 2005, Kikkpoye, 2012). The ecological approach emerged from the fact that the transplanting of public administration structure to the newly independent countries after Second World War were performing as expected in the new nation-states. Attention was directed in understudying this problem and how to solve them.

The ecological approach believes that local governments as an institution of public administration, interacts with the environments and are influenced by the environments and in turn also influences the environments. The environment cut across diverse factors such as the economy, political system, religion, legal and socio-cultural (Kikkpoye, 2012). For example, an ailing economy may pose a serious challenge to the functioning of local government in terms of revenue generation and policy formulation and execution to impact positively in the lives of rural dwellers. That the nature of these environments may shape the way it functions within a particular society. What this theory emphasizes is that there are certain environmental factors that impinge on the performance of institutions within its political system. These factors may explain how institutional performance across regions or countries varies and throws insights why certain

factors that are found in the environment becomes a challenge to the administrative structures designed to usher in development in a particular society. The analytical strength of this theory rests on how the environmental factors hinted above have become fetters for performance of local governments, hence its application in studying the impediments for local government in serving as a tool that make government and people participation at the grassroots in Nigeria challenging.

Part II

Literature Review

Local Government

The term local government is always used specifically in contrast to national government as well as, in many cases, the activities of sub-national, first-level administrative divisions (which are generally known by names such as cantons, provinces, states, oblasts, or regions). Local governments generally act only within powers specifically delegated to them by law and/or directives of a higher level of government. In federal states, local government generally comprises a third or fourth tier of government, whereas in unitary, states local government usually occupies the second or third tier of government. The institutions of local government vary greatly between countries, and even where similar arrangements exist, the terminology often varies. Common designated names for local government entities include province, districts, counties, municipalities, borough, parish, city, councils and local government areas respectively. However, the local government is an off-shoot of decentralization which implies the transfer of responsibility to sub-national structures. In the context of Nigeria in principle, it is a devolution type where the real power and autonomy to financial discretion is given to the local government councils by law. The place of local government has been recognized as critical institution in all societies. Akani (2017) stated that local government expresses governance at the primary level of society with an express function to cater for all the basic needs within a locality. It becomes a device to extend the frontiers and processes of government to the people who may not feel the impact of the central government for the fact that the centre is far away from them. The rationale for decentralization is that it will be difficult for the other level governments to have an eagle-eyed view to the activities of the rural people. The Local Government Councils become

the bridge between the people and other levels of government. Odion-Akhaine (2009, p.27) was of the view that local government is a "political authority which is purposely created by law or constitution for local communities by which they manage their public affairs within the limits of the law. This brings the idea that local government activities operates within the framework of law. However, the local government in Nigeria has undergone several changes starting from the native authorities which were introduced by the colonial masters to the military era that brought a unification of the local government in Nigeria.

Egbo (2018) viewed the local government as the smallest unit of government below the central, regional or state levels introduced by law to exercise political authority via the representative council within a defined geographical entity. In the same vein, the 1976 local government reform in Nigeria viewed local government as a government that control powers at the local level via representative council introduced by the Act. The State governments have the duty to create local government subject to ratification by the National Assembly of Nigeria. However, Azumah, Emmanuel and Ogele (2020, p.4) stated that local government is "*a political administrative unit that is empowered by law to administer a specific locality*". What is unique about local government in all settings stem from the fact that their jurisdiction is restricted to the locality with functions that locally bound to the rural people. Fatile and Adejuwon (2017) argued that local governments are local entities, with defined territories, discretionary power, functions, responsibilities and, more importantly, autonomy. This definition bears on the critical issue of local government which has been at the heart of local government politics over time now. This is the autonomy of local governments in Nigeria. The central government and states over the years have not allowed free hands for local governments to function effectively.

Decentralization

The idea of decentralization has been an important tool of making the local people to have access to government. The key objectives are to strengthen governance at the sub-national unit where attention is on local government and non-state actors in providing solutions to problems and meeting the aspirations of the people at the locality (European Union, 2016, Tobi and Ayodeji, 2023). Opinion differs about decentralization and variations of institutional restructuring, but there is a wide

consensus among scholars that it is basically concerned with the shift of responsibility and power to a sub-national unit with wide latitude of opportunity for popular participation at the local level (Chaudhary, 2019; Kuhn and Morlino, 2021 Tobi and Ayodeji, 2023). While the varieties of opinion are diverse, it is a term with rich conceptual and empirical meaning. As seen by Ekpo (2008), it implies the transfer of power from the central level government to the sub-national unit with the core objective of improving efficiency and responsiveness of the public sector. Rondinelli (1981, p.137): see decentralization as:

> the transfer or delegation of legal and political authority to plan, make decisions and manage public functions from the central government and its agencies to field organizations of those agencies, subordinate units of government, semi-autonomous public corporations, area wide, or regional development authorities; functional authorities, autonomous local governments, or nongovernmental organizations.

From the excerpts above, it shows that decentralization could take varying forms and contents with idea that it is designed to increasing the scope, responsibilities, power and involvement of local units into their governance. With respect to local government, the central objective of decentralization is to create latitude of opportunity for people at the locality to involve meaningfully in decision-making process and for engineering development through the instrumentalities of local government. This is hinged on the ground that as authority and responsibility are shifted to the sub-national unit, it could engineer development from below, foster integration and nurtures local grassroots participation.

Part III

Challenges of Local Government in Grassroots Participation in Nigeria

The Local Government Reform of 1976 was aimed to strengthen this institution with the possibility of widening the opportunity for people at the local level to engage meaningfully at the local level being the most closest to them. Since the returning to democratic politics in 1999, the administration of local government has been marred by twists and turns thus rendering the efficacy of local government ability to encourage participation by inhabitants at the community level challenging. This issue is due to the constitutional ambiguity which has

made local government administration very chaotic. To be sure, section7(1) of the 1999 Constitution of Federal Republic pointed out that "*the system of democratically elected government council is under this constitution guaranteed, and accordingly, the Government of every State shall ensure their existence by law which provides their establishment, structure, composition, finance and functions of that council*". However, this constitutional ambiguity has made it possible for the macro level governments to override the existence and functionality of the third tier of government with respects to its autonomy and as a tool of decentralization in Nigeria.

The thorny and vexatious issue is the absence of autonomy of local governments in Nigeria. The Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 as amended in Section 162(5, 7-8) guaranteed the autonomy of the Local Government Councils. The idea of autonomy implies that an individual or entity has the freedom to act without external influence. With respect to local governments. It implies that it has the financial discretion in managing its resources without external interference from the upper levels of governments.

Unfortunately, in spite of the lofty ideals aimed at strengthening the capacity of the local government councils, it has failed to justify its relevance by offering the best opportunity to the people to bring local knowledge, interest and enthusiasm to bear on the solution of their own local problems (Kapur, 2006, p.692). This constitutional contraption has been at the epicenter of the control of local government by National Assembly and State Governors prior to the Supreme Court judgment where the court ruled that the former do not have the right to alter the tenure of the local councils in Nigeria except the Federal Capital Territory. This judgment placed the control of local government in Nigeria under the State Governors through which they are squeezed, strangled and manipulated at the caprices of State Governors through the compromised State House of Assembly (Kiikpoye, 2012, Tonwe, 2012, Obioha, 2019, Ubani, 2019). A cursory look at the relationship between the Local Governments and the State Governors will reveal that the latter, hiding under section 7 of the constitution amend the Local Government Edict to suit their purpose. This is by using Caretaker Committees to run the Councils, while elections are postponed indefinitely. In some States where elections are organized, the ruling party in the State wins all the positions even in

the stronghold of the opposition party. What are the implications of the use of caretaker committees in running local government in Nigeria? How does this impinge on the efficacy of local government as a tool of decentralization? We can gain better insight into these from the perspective of the theoretical tool of this study on ecology of local government.

The nature and character of state and politics in Nigeria is such that structures of governance becomes a means of production and feudalized structure (Ekekwe, 1986 and 2015), captured and serves as instrument of primitive accumulation(Ihonvbere,1989) and prebendal (Joseph, 1987). This implies that the instrument of local government becomes a tool of accumulation of wealth by appointed or elected office holders. The point is that, the local government is used by State Governors as a means of accumulation through the existence of State-Local Government Joint account. By virtue of the provision of Section162, sub-section 6 provide inter alia:

> Each state shall maintain a special account to be called 'State Joint Local Government Account' into which shall be paid all allocations to the local government councils of the state from the Federation Account and from the Government of the State.

What this point out is that the resources of the councils are used by the State Governors to underwrite their own consumption and deplete the resources of local governments. In this manner, the resources of local government needed for grassroots development is misappropriated by the state government through diversion of the statutory allocations due to local government (Ubani, 2019, Obioha, 2019, Hassan and Iwuamadi, 2018). According to our tool of analysis, local government interacts with the environment which may be political, economic and otherwise. The Nigerian state being prebendal, the Governors use local government as a reward to their boys who have worked for them in the electioneering process. The patron-clientele network implies that the local government is a tool of consolidation of power as a means of shutting away the opposition from gaining access to the grassroots. Tonwe (2012, p.80) captured this as follows:

> National/state elites are interested in the substance rather than desirable form of politics. Motivated by pragmatic politics, they

> perceive and use government at the local level to serve their political interests. The ruling political parties endeavour to captures local government machinery to consolidate their grassroots support.

It is not unusual to observe the tendency of the non-ruling opposition elites to also capture the grassroots government as a means of battering the ruling party. The implication of this is that as a decentralized government, local government is sacrificed for political interests. Riggs made it clear that due to the incompatibility of interests among the state and federal governments, the centralization of control by State Government stems from the fear of losing the local governments through elections. Conducting open, free and fair elections will jeopardize their authority over the structures of decentralization. In this manner, the processes by which the ordinary people participate disempower them and make accountability difficult. This argument is sustained from the fact that since the Council Chairmen and Councilors are hand-picked by the State Governors and their godfathers, they owe their allegiance to the Governor and their godfathers. Due partly to the fact that the chairmen derived their mandate from their godfathers and not from the people, in this sense, the Chairmen and Councilors owe their allegiance not to the electorates rather to Governors and godfathers. This results to the absence of civic engagement by the citizens over their Council elected officials. Instead of bringing government closer to the people, it takes local government very far away from the ordinary people. This is the dialectics of local government in Nigeria which has made the challenge of participation so excruciating for the people at the community level into their own affairs.

Within the context of Local Governments, the relevance of decentralization is stated by Bonnal as in Lawal and Oladunjoye (2010, p.230) when they argued that:

> ..... kept its promise as far as the strengthening of democracy at the national level is concerned, as well as the central government's commitment in favour of rural development. It has thus contributed toward moving away from the bias toward urban areas in matters of development; to better management of the coordination of integrated rural development projects, and ensuring their sustainability.

The widespread corruption by the local government Chairmen and Councilors with the senior staff of local governments in Nigeria who manages the administration of local government have made mockery of the justification of local government as tool for engineering development. To further the argument, Majekundumi (n.d, p.92) maintained that:

> Local governments nowadays have become vineyard of corruption where council political officers sit to share the statutory allocation from the federation account. Instead of being used for public good, the allocations are diverted to personal use. Indeed, since the advent of local government in Nigeria in the 1950s,... the social problem of corruption has dogged it.

This scenario is manifesting from the process of their emergence of the local government and the elected or appointed Councilors coupled with the nature of politics in Nigeria where public institutions are parceled out to individuals and groups as a tool of political patronage. This make corruption to flourish since it is the wider political malady in the system generally. Majekodunmi (n.d,p.80) maintained further that:

> Local government is no longer local government but local corruption. It has thrived, progressed, and flourished unabated in Nigeria. Corruption has taken the central stage in most local governments. This tendency is obviously a national malady. Most internally generated revenues do not go to the local government account. It is viewed by patrons of ruling parties and their clients as political reward for 'faithfully enabling the party to win or remain in office'. The sources of these revenues are regarded as "Cash Point" for daily reimbursement of 'operators.

The political experience in management of local governments in Nigeria is such that the aggressive godfathers ensure that their errand godsons are in charge of local governments where they bring returns to their godfathers. The party chieftains are blessed each month with rewards from their boys for negotiating on their behalf at the highest level of politics in their respective states. This has made local government administration since 1999 to be seen as a failure (Hassan and

Iwuamadi, 2018; Ezeozue, 2020) questioning the capacity of the local government to serve as a genuine platform for democratic politics at the local level in Nigeria against the values it has played elsewhere.

A report by Human Right Watch (HRW, 1999 in Kiipoye, 2012) hinted the manner at which contracts were awarded in some of the Local Governments in Rivers State at the cost far above what was needed to execute the job. This is not an issue peculiar to Rivers State alone but in all the states in Nigeria. The idea of rural development is a mockery in Nigeria because the local government has failed woefully to make rural people feel their presence. In the absence of rural development in communities, there is now emerging social capital tendency among communities in co-coordinating their effort to provide basic services that are the responsibility of the local government (Awotokun, 2014).

The values which local council is expected to nourish as Gboyega (1987, p.3) pointed out, unfortunately, these virtues are either lacking or unable to improve local government system in Nigeria since 1999 due to primacy of politics and accumulation through state power.

It is acknowledged that the challenges confronting local government in Nigeria are multidimensional. These problems will seize to exist if three fundamental problems are resolved according to Oyediran (2001, p.202-208, Tonwe, 2012, p.76-77) which are;

Part IV

Conclusion

Local Governments in Nigeria have undergone fundamental changes beginning from the colonial era to the present dispensation. Several reforms have been put in place by several regimes. However, the watershed was the 1976 Local Government Reforms which unified the system of local government administration and constitutionally recognize it as a third tier level of government. This marked the evolution of specific constitutional functions of local government across the federation. This noble effort as a tool of decentralizing government were incapacitated by the behavioural tendencies of the State Governors in 1979 who on assumption of office, dissolved the elected local government officials in manner

that stripped –off whatever constitutional clothes the 1976 reform gave to local government in the 1979 constitution. The most challenging moment for Local Government today is the constitutional provisions of 1999 which gave local government financial autonomy with one hand and take it with the other hand. This constitutional ambiguity has been at the root of the problems at the local government administration. Today, local government hardly functions as a tool of political decentralization making people participation at the local level very difficult.

Recommendations

i. There is an urgent need for constitutional amendment of section 162(6&7) of the 1999 Constitution as amended. This will free the Local Governments in Nigeria from dependence on the State Government who through these provisions siphons its revenue and gives it financial autonomy without any interference.

ii. It is important that elections into the offices of chairmen and councilors should be such that each individuals and political parties should be given a level playing ground to participate in an open, free and fair contest.

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