

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND SUSTAINABLE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

Adeline Nnenna Idike, PhD

Department Of Public Administration And Local Government,
University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Abstract

It is argued in this study that despite the claims by state officials to the contrary, the pace of national development in Nigeria remains abysmally in a negative position. In the Nigerian state therefore, it has largely remained a scenario of affluence and affliction. The local government areas have also largely remained underdeveloped. It is further posited in this contribution that the issue of sustainable national development in Nigeria is immensely intertwined with developments in the local government system. Hence, it is concluded in this study that one of the best ways of going about the overall development of the Nigerian state is to concentrate on the development of its local government segments.

Keywords: Local Government, Sustainable National Development, Nigeria

Introduction

Despite the spirited protestations of Nigeria's officialdom, it is yet to be empirically settled that national development has been on the ascendancy in the Nigerian State. On the other hand, evidence abounds that local government in Nigeria is a neglected paradigm of national developmental mobilization (Abada, 2012; Idike, 2013; Eze and Muanya, 2013; Uzuegbunam and Nwofia, 2014). The Nigerian condition has accordingly been depicted as a situation of affluence and affliction (Ibeanu, 2008), which signifies an apparent contradiction. Kuka (2012) further describes the Nigerian nation as being on autopilot. The general objective of this study therefore is to examine the relationship between local government and sustainable national development in Nigeria. The specific objectives are as follows: (i) to examine the extent to which the local government system in Nigeria, promotes the course of sustainable national development and (ii) make recommendations on how the local government system in Nigeria can aid the course of sustainable national development. The theoretical framework for the study is the empowerment framework. Uche and Uche

(2014) have in this regard posited that empowerment is a process by which individuals and groups gain power, access resources and gain control over their own lives. It enables them to gain the ability to achieve their highest personal and collective aspirations and goals. Furthermore, the methodology of the study is logical argumentation.

Conceptual and empirical issues

Positioned as conceptual constructs, local government and national development are seemingly irreconcilable. Local government suggests localism while national development suggests an extensive developmental spread. As empirical processes however, local government and national development are fully interrelated. In order to further explain the surrounding issues of conceptual and empirical relevance in the study, we shall engage in some conceptual explications, beginning with local government. To this effect, the concept of local government has been amply demonstrated by Abutudu (2011), to be of the following variants. Citing Ola (1984), he highlights as follows:

The focus of local government as a unit of government has been the subject of much interest by scholars. The democratic-participatory school holds that local government functions to bring about democracy and to afford opportunities for political participation to the citizen as well as to socialize him politically. Local government is therefore seen as an avenue for training and inculcating habits of democracy in the grassroots. These habits of democracy are construed to include participation, mobilization, accountability and responsiveness and of course, self-governability. However, from the perspective of the efficiency-services school, the appropriate functional focus of local government should be the provision of services, and its success or failure has to be judged by this yardstick. The proximity of the Local government to the grassroots makes it especially suited to provide certain functions far more efficiently and in a more cost effective manner than the much more remote government at the higher level. Such functions should be allocated to the local governments with powers, resources and the necessary autonomy to handle them (Abutudu, 2011).

The third perspective continues Abutudu (2011) is the developmental school. This school essentially seeks to make the local government a tool for the promotion of national consciousness and national integration. Its emphasis is political development which modernization theorists see as the breaking down of primordial loyalties and the transfer of such loyalties to the central and national government. The local government becomes a tool of nation building and national unity. It decongests the activities of the centre by locating such to the locality but in doing this, it brings the influence of the centre to the locality. It creates an awareness of life beyond the locality and

in this way, serves as an instrument for the breakdown of dysfunctional parochialisms that tend to interfere with the development of a national consciousness. Local government can also complement this in another way. It can act as a means of dispersing and localizing political tension, and in that way, neutralizing its impact (Abutudu, 2011).

Hence, from the standpoints of the democratic-participatory and the efficiency-services schools, local governments are seemingly strictly about local issues. However, the empirical linkage between local government and national development is more critically highlighted by the developmental school. This study gravitates towards the developmental paradigm of local government. In empirical terms, the viewpoint of local government that is applicable to this study is the paradigm of local government as a process. It has to do with what local government councils do or fail to do, what local government areas achieve or fail to achieve and how the inhabitants of the various local government areas in the Nigerian state are recognized or not recognized in national developmental drafts. It has to do with a developmental approach to governance at the grassroots level. This critically entails the conceptualization of local government as a process of sustainable national development.

Our conceptual explications truly require the highlighting of the meaning of development. In this regard, we agree with Lawal and Oluwatoyin (2011) that development as a concept is a victim of definitional pluralism. However, Gboyega (2003), subsequently cited in Lawal and Oluwatoyin (2011) opines that development implies improvement in material well being of all citizens, not the most powerful and the rich alone, in a sustainable way, such that today's consumption does not imperil the future; it also demands that poverty and inequality of access to the good things of life be removed or drastically reduced. It seeks to improve personal physical security and livelihoods and expansion of life chances. The concept of development in this study is in tandem with the opinion of Gboyega (2003). National Development therefore refers to nationwide development in a nation-state. It implies the well being of a covert majority of the citizens in material terms, it implies decreases in inequality levels. Above all, national development implies the guarantee of security of lives and property in the nation-state. In this study therefore, national development is not denoted in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) paradigms that leave the average citizen bewildered and even neglected.

On the concept of sustainable development, Nwafor (2006) cited in Nwakaire and Oreh (2013) contends that the concept of sustainable development is enshrouded in ambiguity. This study agrees with him. However, WCED (1987) in the Brundtland Report succinctly defines sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present

without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This study agrees more with the position of the Brundtland Report.

Current indications of negative national development in Nigeria

The clearest evidence of negative national development in the Nigerian state is shown in the living standards of Nigerian citizens, as different from abstract figures from Nigeria's officialdom and more recently, collaborated figures between the Nigerian sides and internationally recognized rating institutions. According to Emejo (2014), the World Bank believes there had been positive economic trend as well as significant progress made towards poverty eradication in Nigeria. It said in its newest edition of the Nigeria Economic Report (NER) that going by the recent rebasing of the Nigerian economy as well as analysis from the new General Household Surveys (GHS) conducted by the Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) with the support of the Bank, new poverty estimates in 2010/2011 and 2012/2013, should be within the range of 35.2 per cent and 33.1 per cent respectively. Although the previous NBS Harmonized Nigeria Living Standards Survey (HNLSS) 2009/2010, which took a larger study sample into account had estimated poverty rate at 62.6 percent, the Breton woods institution said it had strong reasons to believe that consumption was seriously underestimated in the large HNLSS household survey in 2009/2010. It stated that an analysis of a panel survey data (GHS) of 5000 households for 2010/2011 and 2012/2013 provided evidence that consumption is likely higher than previously estimated from the HNLSS survey (Emejo, 2014).

Furthermore, the new GHS analysis put rural poverty at 46.3 per cent and 44.9 per cent in 2010/2011 and 2012/2013 respectively, compared to 69.1 per cent and 51.2 per cent respectively in the HNLSS 2009/2010 estimates by the NBS. The World Bank estimates further suggested that the number of poor Nigerians remained at 58 million adding that more than half of the figure is located in the North-east or North-west. Specifically, it noted: Poverty rates range from 16 per cent in the South-West to 52 per cent in the North-East. While the South and North-central experienced declines in the poverty rate between 2010/2011 and 2012/2013, the poverty rate increased almost unchanged in the North West (Emejo, 2014).

The curious issue about these figures of increasing great performance of the Nigerian state is that from our individual experiences as Nigerian elite, we know that these figures do not tell the truth. For example, as the indices of improving performance of the economy are released and we jubilate in our official capacities, in our unofficial capacities, the personal burdens of shouldering the responsibility of our less privileged compatriots keep increasing on daily basis. Every single Nigerian business or political

elite, every single Nigerian than is comparatively well placed on the social ladder, whether he resides abroad or is resident in Nigeria, knows the number of Save Our Soul (SOS) calls he/she receives on daily basis from fellow citizens on sundry daily survival issues. It is either about hospital bill of wife or children, a wife in labour, a child that is dying, children's school fees, entrance examination fee into an educational institution, accommodation in the city, house rent, food to eat, employment opportunity, transportation costs, police extortion, plans for going abroad, etc. The list remains endless. Indeed, there is hardly a notable Nigerian citizen that does not have one form of Foundation or the other, under which these innumerable needs of fellow citizens are currently accommodated.

As the World Bank source cited above, presents the level of developments in the Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, Southwest and South-south the truth remains that these are all geopolitical divisions in Nigeria. The study is about uniform development in all these geopolitical divisions and once any of the areas is lagging behind, no matter the further analysis that the indices are subjected to, the fact remains that national development is not recording increases.

Another major indication of negative national development in Nigeria is in the increasing level of insecurity (of lives and property) of the citizens. It remains the truth that a plethora of studies have been conducted on insecurity of lives and property in Nigeria (Igbuzor, 2011; Loimeier, 2012; Okpaga, Chijioke and Emeh, 2012; Adegbami, 2013; Joshua, 2013; Ewetan and Ese, 2014; Olaniyan and Asuelime, 2014; Peters, 2014; Zenn and Pearson, 2014). The fact remains that this scenario is gravely indicative of negative national development. Furthermore in this study, we shall turn attention to how the neglects in the local government system in Nigeria have resulted into the current state of developmental negativity in the affairs of the Nigerian State.

Local government and sustainable national Development in Nigeria: current neglects and the way forward

Contrary to the expectation that the local government areas in Nigeria would become veritable avenues of citizenship mobilization for sustainable national development, the local government areas have rather turned out to be areas of developmental neglect. In place of engendering empowerment, the local government system rather endangered it. According to Eze and Muanya (2013) there is no doubt that the local government system in Nigeria was not conceived in error. Citing Odigbo and Osuagwu (1998), they argue that the local government system in Nigeria represents part of an identified effort at solving perceived problems as it concerns rural development. Ironically, it is in this tendency to solely conceive local government, in line

with rural development efforts that the neglect of local government as a developmental mobilization process, finds its most disturbing expression in the Nigerian State. Meanwhile, the Nigerian Federation is geographically, structurally and constitutionally subdivided into 774 local government areas. The local government system in Nigeria therefore is not essentially about rural mobilization. It is about the empowerment of Nigerians of both rural and urban residency for effective and sustainable national development.

According to Odigbo (2013), the local government system in Nigeria has undergone several stages since independence in an effort to re-position the local government councils for greater efficiency. These efforts involved reforms and constitutional amendments geared towards providing the local people with a form of participatory administrative system that would be a catalyst to development and build apt democratic values for democratic survival. The most fundamental of these reforms and amendments was the 1976 local government reforms which sought to create a uniform local government system throughout the Nigerian federation and placed the local council as the third tier of government. Odigbo (2013:42) continues:

There are myriad of challenges confronting the local government system in Nigeria. The endemic corruption that seems to have eroded the essence of government, financial dependency of the local councils and most importantly the 1999 constitution that ceded the right to control, dissolve, dismiss and institute panel of inquiry into the general administration of any local government council by the states. Consequently, over the years, especially since the return to democracy in 1999, the local government in Nigeria exists at the mercy of the state governments in the manner that frustrates or ridicules their existence.

Eze and Muanya (2013) further highlight that in Anambra State of the Nigerian Federation, despite the constitutional requirement of the practice of elected local government councils, only caretaker committees appointed by the different State Governors, within the period of 2006 to 2013, manned the local government councils. There would not be any doubt about it that the caretaker committee members while in office mainly represented themselves and the Governor that usually appointed them.

Section 7 (1) of Nigeria's current 1999 Constitution expressly guarantees the existence of a system of local government by democratically elected local government councils. That subsequent sections of this same Constitution, succeeded in tying the local government councils to the apron strings of the State Governments, is for now a different matter in this study. It is held in this study that by the provisions of Section 7(1), the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria guarantees that as part of the governance process in

Nigeria, there would be the participation of 774 local government Chairmen and their complementary councillors, freely elected by Nigerian citizens. These officials are expected to be development catalysts from their various locations, to the ultimate benefit of the Nigerian nation-state. Diejomaoh and Eboh (2010) have accordingly opined that local governments worldwide are considered as strategic institutions for the provision of the basic socio-economic environment and other services for developmental purposes. Their strategic vantage proximity to the grassroots they argue, make them valuable and viable for providing effective and efficient services required by the community. They can and should be engines of growth and drivers of development. They provide cultural, educational, management, research, commerce and political services. They also offer employment, health facilities and boost the local economy, and by extension, the national economy. Local government and national development are accordingly, interrelated in empirical terms.

The way forward in the application of local government to sustainable national development in the Nigerian State entails the empowerment of the local government councils and accordingly, the empowerment of the local citizens. This paper is of a strong opinion that local government Chairmen in Nigeria should constitutionally be empowered to periodically articulate, document and transmit to higher governmental levels for implementation, the needs, concerns and input of Nigerian citizens towards sustainable national development. The local government Chairman and his councillor-colleagues should not be made to look like some inferior representatives of the people, in comparison with the elected officials at the state level. Local governments are by design the governments that are nearest to the people and in very practical terms, this level of government must be made to be near the people. The office of the Local Government Chairman must be made to evolve into a veritable avenue of citizenship mobilization for sustainable national development.

The local government areas in Nigeria should indeed be made the focus of employment generation. Every federal or state government employment-generation programme that is not rooted in the local government system indeed appears like a false idea. Every unemployed, every poor or every hungry Nigerian is resident in one local government area or the other. National developmental strides in the Nigerian state must be about employment generation for all the residents of these local government areas, they must be about the reduction of the poverty level in all the local government areas in the rural and urban centers and about the banishment of hunger from the local government areas. In a way, what the Nigerian elite do today with their ubiquitous foundations is to take up in an immense manner, the constitutional challenges of the local government councils, while the

performance scorecards of the councils show a net position of inaction. This state of inaction should not be allowed to remain the defining feature of the local government system in Nigeria.

Furthermore on the way forward, the local government Charman in Nigeria must be held accountable for the security of lives and property in his local government area. The security hierarchy in the country must recognize the existence of a government at this local level. This presupposes that the Chairman must be elected, not appointed, as fully guaranteed by the Constitution. Under the current dispensation, the local government Chairman may even be resident in a different city that is not located in his area of ostensible jurisdiction. This is how insecurity crises escalate in the country because truly, nobody is in charge in the various locations. The Local Government Chairman must be further empowered by the Constitution to take charge in his area of jurisdiction.

Conclusion

A nation cannot be believed to be recording increases in national developmental indices when human and material resources in its component local government areas remain immensely immobilized. Development is all about improved living conditions for citizens who reside in the various local government areas of a nation-state. Underdevelopment is also about hunger and starvation in these local government areas. Sustainable development is about doing today what must be done for life to be meaningful for the present and future generations. The way forward calls for the empowerment of the local government areas by constitutionally untying them from the apron strings of the State Governments. Indeed, the truth remains that the issue of sustainable national development in Nigeria is immensely intertwined with developments in the local government system. In this regard, this study concludes that one of the best ways of going about the overall development of the Nigerian state is to concentrate on the development of its local government segments.

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