

**POLITICS
AND GRASSROOTS
ADMINISTRATION IN NIGERIA:**

Issues, Challenges And Prospects

Editors

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Chapter Five

THE PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION IN NIGERIA

Paddy Assibong & Dominic Akpan

Introduction

Local government and local administration have been widely used with a view to not only mobilizing the rural communities towards national development but also to bringing government nearer to their door-steps. In Nigeria, for instance, both the military regimes and the civilian administrations have instituted series of reforms. These were aimed at obliterating all the structural rigidities that had hampered the smooth running of the local government and thus paving the way to a viable and vibrant local administration.

In specific terms, some of the innovations that have been introduced in the realm of local government administration include, abolition of the ministries of local government, termination of joint account between the state and local government, more funding of local government and the recognition of local government as the third tier of government. However, regardless of wide range reforms that have been introduced, local governments in Nigeria have not been able to discharge their constitutional responsibilities creditably.

This chapter is therefore designed to critically examine the problems and challenges of local government administration in Nigeria. The work is

organized as follows: section I is the introduction, section II examines the conceptual issues. In section III, the rationale and justification for the establishment of local government is discussed. Section IV analyses the problems and challenges of local government administration. The last section is devoted to the summary and conclusion.

Conceptual Issues

A lot of ambiguities trail the definition of the term, local government. For this reason some scholars use the terms, 'Local administration', 'grassroots government', 'native administration' and "third tier government" inter-changingly with local government. In order to obviate any misunderstandings or misrepresentations of our view point, let us examine the meaning of local government.

Local government is not the same thing as local administration. The latter, as observed by Oyediran (1988:2), is the administration of local communities essentially by means of local agents appointed by and responsible to . . . the central government, regional or national. The key element of the above definition is the imposition of governing authority on local inhabitants without their consent or will. Thus, this is not local government.

Local government, on the other hand, implies, "a system of territorial units with defined boundaries, a legal identity, an institutional structure, and power and duties laid down in general and specific statutes and a degree of financial autonomy" (Hill, 1974:23). While corroborating this position Ola (1988) asserts that, "local government is a political division of a nation which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local affairs, including the power to impose taxes or exact labour for prescribed purposes". He adds that

the governing body of such an entity is elected or otherwise locally selected.

In the same vein, Orewa and Adewumi (1992), define local government as a system of government in local communities and towns which are organized to maintain law and order, provide some limited range of social services and cooperation of the inhabitants in joint endeavours towards the improvements of their conditions of living". The duo further argue that, local government provides the community with formal organizational framework which enables them to conduct their affairs effectively with a view to regulating the actions of their members for general good.

On the basis of the above definitions, local government is, a "government exercised through representative councils, established by law to exercise specific powers within defined areas" (FGN, 1976).

Rationale and Justification for Local Government

As the third tier government which is the nearest to the grassroots people, local government is justified on the following grounds.

1. it provides the people a platform to conduct their own affairs in line with local needs, aspirations, resources and customs which they alone understand better than any outsider (Anifowose and Enemuor 1999:318).
2. it provides a framework for mobilizing and sustaining popular zeal and initiative in local development. According to Sady in Oyediran (1998), the local government does this through:

- a. decongesting the central government and thus freeing national leaders from unnecessary involvement in local issues.
 - b. aggregation and heightening of the peoples' level of awareness with respect to social and economic activities.
 - c. stimulation of policies and programmes to improve the living conditions of the rural inhabitants;
 - d. political enlightenment and training of the people in the art of government; and strengthening of national unity;
3. local government is also justified because it serves as a two-way channel of communication between the local population and the central government. In this sense, it aggregates local interests and transmits same to the centre and also keeps the local population abreast of the central government policies and programmes;
 4. it provides an invaluable socio-political laboratory for testing new proposals for government organization and economic policies, and
 5. local governments, by virtue of having elected chairmen and councillors, are more easily held accountable to local people than are other levels of government.

In the main, the existence of local government is justified on the grounds that:

local government enables services of local importance only to be locally administered, provides education in citizenship, provides training in political leadership, makes available to the central government information about localities which is essential for adequately meeting their needs efficiently, and minimizes concentration of political power by diffusing it. These values promote democracy and are contributive to the development of democratic climate (Gboyega in Awofeso, 2004: 37).

Functions of Local Government

Like other tiers of government, the local government council is expected to perform executive, legislative and judicial functions. However, according to the Fourth schedule of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, local government council is constitutionally assigned with the responsibility of performing the following functions.

- a. the consideration and the making of recommendations to the State Commission on economic planning or any similar body on:
 - i. the economic development of the state, particularly in so far as the areas of authority of the council and of the state are affected; and
 - ii. proposals made by the said Commission or body.

- b. collection of rates, radio and television licenses.
- c. establishment and maintenance of cemeteries, burial grounds and homes for the destitute or infirm;
- d. licensing of bicycles, trucks, canoes, wheel barrows and carts.
- e. establishment, maintenance and regulation of slaughter houses, slaughter slabs, markets, motor parks and public conveniences.
- f. construction and maintenance of roads, streets, street lighting, drains and public highways, parks, gardens, open spaces, or such public facilities as may be prescribed from time to time by the House of Assembly of a state.
- g. naming of roads and streets and numbering of houses;
- h. provision and maintenance of public conveniences, sewage and refuse disposal.
- i. registration of all births, deaths and marriages;
- j. assessment of privately owned houses or tenements for the purpose of levying such rates as may be prescribed by the House of Assembly of a state etc.

In addition to the above functions, the local government council is constitutionally expected to join the state government in performing the following functions:

- a. the provision and maintenance of primary, adult and vocational education;
- b. the development of agriculture and natural resources other than the exploitation of minerals;
- c. the provision and maintenance of health services; and
- d. such other functions as may be conferred on a local government council by the House of Assembly of the state.

In cumulative terms, local government councils are expected to perform the functions of revenue generation, provision of basic amenities and above all stimulation of rural development.

However, it should not be imagined that the elaborate constitutional provisions with respect to the statutory role of local government councils or the frequent local government reforms have led to the transformation of rural communities. The development stride of most local government areas in recent years, in spite of improved level of funding is to say the least, disappointing and frustrating. Some scholars attribute this to the myriad of problems that afflict local governments. This leads us to the problems and challenges of local government administration in Nigeria.

Problems and Challenges of Local Government Administration in Nigeria

The major problems that militate against smooth administration of local government in Nigeria are

essentially political, economic and socio-cultural in nature. Let us examine them in detail.

Political Problems

The first political problem that bedevils local government administration in Nigeria is the excessive intrusion and control by the federal and state governments. Constitutionally, the three levels of government are expected to be autonomous within their areas of jurisdiction. But in practice, this is not the case. As noted by Anifowose and Enemuoh (1999:324) instances are abound in Nigeria where the interference by the state and federal governments sometimes led to the dissolution of elected local governments before the expiration of their tenure. Such practices undermine the autonomy of local government.

Allied to the above fact is the problem of imposing Council chairman and councillors on the local government by either the state government or the ruling party. It is a disturbing matter that under the present political dispensation some politicians always attempt to impose candidates on the local government councils. Most of them are of the view that one single party should rule in all the tiers of government. Under this situation, elections are rigged in order to achieve this ulterior motive. This is not good for democracy. It has the propensity to hamper local government administration.

The next political problem is rivalry between the local government political office holders and the traditional authorities. This problem is rooted in the history of colonial rule when Britain first used the traditional rulers with a view to administering the vast country. This was done at the expense of the educated elite. However, with the passage of time, the interest of both the traditional rulers and the educated elite were

accommodated through the institution of the House of Chiefs and House of Assembly.

The structure of the modern local government has rekindled the old rivalry. This is because it is in conflict and competition with the traditional institutions. For instance, in Northern and Western Nigeria the influence of the Emirs and Obas are still very pervasive. This explains why most of them are accorded deep veneration. But this notwithstanding, they are not constitutionally given any meaningful role to play in either the state or local government. On the contrary, it is the local government chairman who by virtue of constitutional provision is given the role of the Chief Executive of the local government.

The logical manifestation of the rivalry between local government officials and the traditional institutions is divided loyalty. As observed by Anifowose and Enemuoh (1999:245), while most people desire to obtain services from the local government they do not feel it is their duty to support it by paying taxes and rates. Instead, they are more willing to support their town unions. The way and manner most rural inhabitants accord more reverence to their traditional rulers is indicative that they view the structure of local government "as alien while the traditional institution is considered more accessible and caring". The prevalence of this situation constitutes a sloth to the smooth running of local government.

Grouping of different communities into a single local government and the splitting of some ethnic groups into two or more local governments have constituted a stupendous problem afflicting some local governments in the country. What makes this twin problem very atomistic is that it has the potentiality of being translated into boundary disputes, with attendant border clashes. Once the problem reaches this point, political stability which is a sine qua non to development is stymied.

Widespread level of corruption is another crucial political problem that affects local government administration in Nigeria. It is not uncommon to witness local government functionaries share council revenues illegally among themselves after salaries and allowances have been paid. In some instances salaries are paid to ghost workers. In the same vein, in some local government areas, contracts are usually awarded but not implemented. And where they are implemented they are not executed according to specification. In a related development, it is a common practice that non-performing local government chairmen are in the habit of bribing their councillors in order to avert impeachment and thus continue in office. This and other fraudulent practices eviscerate local government of vital development fund.

There is the problem of lack of discipline, focus and vision among local government elected officers. Some politicians that aspire to serve in the local government council are not dedicated enough. They see politics as an investment. Thus, on assumption of office, instead of serving the people who elected them, they resort to stealing of public fund; for building many houses and buying expensive cars; in the process the masses are left in squalor and abject poverty.

Economic Problems

Besides political problems, a number of economic-related problems also bedevil local government administration in Nigeria. The first in this regard is lack of adequate funding. This problem arises basically due to two factors. The first is the inability of most local government councils to generate fund internally. Secondly, there is inadequate fund from the

Federation Account. As a result of inadequate funding most local government authorities are constrained from executing development projects. The bulk of their revenue is used for recurrent expenditure.

The next problem is lack of project feasibility studies. Effective execution of project is a function of good feasibility studies. This provides the framework as well as the road-map for the attainment of targeted goals. Most local governments in the country embark on projects without good feasibility studies. This explains why most projects are abandoned after huge amounts of money have been expended on them.

Lack of authentic as well as comprehensive statistics militate against effective implementation of projects and programmes in local government. Some programmes require adequate information with respect to the number of beneficiaries. For instance, child immunization, scholarship/bursary award and school furniture require that the local government council is acutely aware of the number of the beneficiaries. If this statistics is either inadequate or faulty, this correspondingly results in poor implementation of programmes.

Lack of proper monitoring of projects is another crucial economic problem affecting local government councils in Nigeria. Effective monitoring and supervision of projects are imperative if the desired result is to be achieved. Regrettably, the fundamental aspect is lacking in Nigeria. It is not uncommon to see a situation where a local government council awards contracts involving huge capital without monitoring with a view to ascertaining whether or not the contractor has executed the job. This negligence has resulted in some unscrupulous contractors bolting away with the council's fund without executing the contract.

High inflation rate and rapid growth of population are important economic problems to be examined. The twin problem has rendered economic forecasting ineffective (Egonmwan and Ibodje, 2001:61). In the absence of accurate projection; it is well-nigh impossible to formulate and implement result-oriented programmes that would touch the lives of the citizens.

Scarcity of experienced personnel is the last but not the least economic problem that affects local government administration in Nigeria. Shortage of manpower especially the skillful ones has militated against the smooth implementation of some essential projects in local government areas.

Socio-Cultural Problems

The first problem in this regard is the land tenure system. In some parts of the country the land is owned by families. Notwithstanding the Land Use Decree of 1973, land is often fragmented among members of the family. This practice precludes the utilization of large portions of land by local government councils for developmental purposes.

The second problem is ethnicity. This has manifested itself in various forms and shades. The inordinate desire of one particular ethnic group, in a multi-ethnic local government, to dominate others, in most instances has resulted in political crisis and instability. In addition, the uneven distribution of political offices as well as development projects tends to exacerbate political tension and in the process stimulate political instability.

Rural-urban drift is another crucial socio-cultural problem that affects local government administration in Nigeria. As a result of inadequate infrastructural facilities such as; good road network, electricity, pipe-

borne water, telecommunication network and recreational facilities most local government areas are unattractive to the youths. This, coupled with lack of employment opportunities has led to rural - urban migration. This problem often affect the level of agricultural production in the rural areas.

In recent years, youth restiveness and its attendant destructive capacity has constituted one of the most serious socio-cultural problems confronting local government administration in Nigeria. In some instances youths protest against marginalisation, non-payment of scholarship /bursary allowances and even non-performance of their elected chairmen and councillors. Most of these agitations and protests are violent in nature and may disrupt smooth functioning of local government administration.

Given the myriad of problems that affect local government administration in Nigeria, what is the way forward? How can local government, as the third tier of government, be structured so as to effectively grapple with the enormous task of grassroots development?

Challenges of Local Government Administration In Nigeria

It is a truism that local government is created to initiate and implement development projects that are capable of transforming the lives of rural dwellers. To achieve this objective, it is imperative that the administrators of local government convert various obstacles to rural development into stepping stones. To this end, the problem of corruption and extravagant spending of council funds should be halted. It is thus a challenge that the administrators of local government display high level of probity and accountability in the way council funds are spent. If available funds are managed judiciously such that only desirable projects

are implemented, this will go a long way to boosting the quality of life in rural areas.

Another crucial challenge that confronts local government administration is how to fashion out an aggressive revenue generation formula. This challenge is borne out of the fact that most local government councils in the country depend solely on Federal allocation. The implication of this is that if there is any short-fall with respect to Federal allocation then no development programme would be implemented. To stay afloat, local government councils should be self-reliant and be able to expand their sources fund for development.

Elimination of political instability which tends to affect the level of development is another central challenge. It is a known fact that this vice apart from discouraging investors also leads to the destruction of the few existing infrastructures that are capable of facilitating development at the grassroots level (Obikeze and Anthony, 2004:198). In most instances political instability is stimulated due to intolerance, abuse of power, marginalization of certain ethnic groups, unhealthy rivalry and political differences. The antidote to this problem is good governance and the observance of the rule of law.

In today's world human capacity is seen as a major prerequisite for development. But unfortunately, most local governments lack skilled personnel who are capable of acting as facilitators of development. It is therefore a challenge that local governments should either recruit or train their staff with a view to initiating and implementing development programmes and projects. This challenge is very obvious bearing in mind that development cannot take place in a vacuum but requires human capital to bring it to reality.

Again, lack of project feasibility studies has in the past foiled effective implementation of local

government development programmes. This in part accounts for the abandonment and discontinuity of projects. It is thus a challenge that local government councils fashion out formula for carrying out a reliable feasibility study before embarking on any development project and programme. This could be done by contracting the services of credible consultants. The cost-benefit analysis must be understood before embarking on development programmes. When this is done it will go a long way in forestalling the spate of project discontinuity and abandonment.

Another challenge to the third tier of government is joining hands with peasant farmers to boost food production at the grassroots level. It is very embarrassing that regardless of the availability of abundant natural resources, Nigeria is still a major food importer. Local government councils can do this by either setting up their own model farms or extending credit facilities to peasant farmers. It can also boost food production by giving peasant farmers agricultural inputs at subsidized rates. If this is done it will go a long way in boosting the level of food production.

Adaptation of traditional institutions to modern local structure is a challenge to local government in Nigeria. Constitutionally, traditional rulers have no meaningful role to play in local government administration. It is expected that for the sake of political stability, local government councils should evolve means of integrating traditional rulers into the mainstream of grassroots administration. For instance, they may be assigned advisory role and should be integrated into rule adjudication process in their domains. In this way, the unhealthy rivalry between traditional rulers and elected council officials would be reduced.

Conclusion

This chapter examines the problems and challenges of local government administration in Nigeria. It notes that the major problems that afflict local government administration in Nigeria are political, economic and socio-cultural in nature. Cumulatively, these problems have prevented the local government from acting as an agent of development in rural areas. Thus, they pose a serious challenge to the transformation of the rural communities with a view to improving the living standard of rural dwellers. On the basis of the observation, it was posited that for local government to serve as a vehicle for rural development, the following challenges should be confronted: improvement of the revenue base of the councils, reducing the rate of corruption as well as political instability, boosting of food production, initiation of feasibility studies and adapting traditional institutions to modern local government structure.

Development is a desirable goal. With it, not only the primitive ways of life would be changed but also and most importantly, the society would be transformed in all its ramifications. The end result is likely to be improved infrastructural facilities as well as higher standard of living. Local government is best situated to initiate development programmes at the grassroots level. Because of the perceived role of the local government in respect of rural transformation, we conclude that all the problems that are currently afflicting local government system should be tackled. When this is done, the contour and complexity of our rural areas would be changed for the better.

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