

THE ROLE OF GOOD GOVERNANCE AND CITIZENS PARTICIPATION IN THE SUSTENANCE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

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***Abstract:** The paper examined the role of good governance and citizen participation in the sustenance of Local Government System in Nigeria. Despite series of local government reforms in Nigeria, governance at grass root level has failed to bring the desired change. It is revealed that bad governance and non citizen participation in the act of governance has contributed to the failure of the local government. This is attributed to some factors like undue interference of the state in political and financial related matters of the local government, and lack of establishing a training foundation for the development of strong political leadership at the grass root level. This undermines good governance and creates low political participation at local level. The paper adopts a descriptive approach and relied mostly on secondary data. It therefore recommends that because of low level of citizen participation, formal and informal approaches should be adopted to orientate the citizens on the need for active participation in the political system. Also, to review the section of 1999 constitution that created complexity or gap in the inter relationship that exist between the state and local government with regard to financial autonomy and conducting election at the local level. For most states runs the affair of local governments with non elected members thereby alienating citizens from participating in governance. The existing relationship has created bad governance and affected democratic principles of proper representation.*

***Keywords:** Local Government, Good Governance, Citizens Participation, Sustenance, Proper representation*

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INTRODUCTION

Local Government in Nigeria is a product of decentralization and is established by law. It is the bedrock for sustainable rural development in Nigeria. The idea of Local Government is to bring governance closer to the people at the grass roots for participation in governance, service delivery to enhance socio-economic development and good governance. It exists to fill a gap which the national is too remote to fill. (Okoli, 2000:5). Local Government implements the ideals, objectives, programmes and aspirations of the national government at the local level. Local Government cannot operate in a vacuum, therefore the ideology of national Government determines to a large extent the functions of Local Government. Local Government is an integral part of the Nigerian political economy, and as an integral part, citizen participation and good governance should be taken seriously so as to achieve the desired objective of bringing government closer to the people. Good governance and citizen participation play every important role in the sustenance of local administration since it provides a democratic space for participation and facilitates outcomes that enrich the quality of life for residents. Local government is an organ of government to enhance citizen participation and promote good governance in the rural area. There is no accountability and development programmes without citizen participation (Aref and Marof, 2009). Prior to the reform, local government councils were handicapped and lacked the constitutional powers to ensure governance at the local level. The 1976 local government reform brought watershed in local government system thereby unifying the structure and making it bedrock for socio economic development in the rural area. (Agagu, 2004, Ajayi, 2000). From 1976-1979, Local Government was under the leadership of elected chairmen with direct disbursement of revenue from federation account for successful take-off. This ensured participation in governance and financial autonomy of the local councils which at that time addresses some of the challenges mitigating the effectiveness of the local council. The 1999 constitution granted the existence of local government, there was no provision for their term of office but Decree 36 of 1998 states three years term for local government, later the constitution was vitiated by section 7, and local government became an appendage of state government. This provision empowers State governors to run local government level with non-elected officers or care-taker committees (Nkwocha, 2009). The use of non elected officers undermined

good governance and created non citizen participation at the local level which has affected the aspiration, hope and development of the rural populace. Also, the development strategy in Nigeria has been urban oriented and care less for the rural area. Allocation made for the development of rural areas were suffocated by the state in which local government exist. The relationship found between the state and the local government is like the slaves feeding from crumbs that fall from the master's tables. This unhealthy relationship has not paved way for good governance and citizen participation at the local level. More so, it has become a tradition in Nigeria that once an elected governor take an oath of office, the first line of action is to dissolve and reconstitute new local government officials whether elected or appointed. This has created a wide gap in governance sustainability and citizen participation.

Though, local government faces the challenges of poor financial base due to state and local government joint account in which the state control the resources meant for local government, the paper argues that local government cannot achieve the desired objective of sustainable development if good governance and citizen participation is not enthroned. Good governance and citizen participation are cardinal objectives of democratic principles. The paper is structured by briefly looking at the theoretical approaches to the understanding of local government, the historical perspective of local government system in Nigeria, explaining the failure of local Government system in Nigeria, explore the importance of citizen participation in local governance, Conclude and make recommendations for better performance of local government system in Nigeria.

Theoretical Approaches to the Understanding of Local Government

The importance and vitality of local government always remained in focus due to essential phase of procedure of democratization and the local participation in the process of decision making. According to Mawhood (1993), three distinct reasons are put forward in order to create the awareness about the vitality of local government such as; training platforms so that masses are politically educated, training foundation for the development of strong political leadership and ensuring that accountability of government is maintained. In the context of approach, Olowu (1988:12), states that there are two advances to define the local governments in aspect of comparative

studies, under the central government, all those national structures are regarded as central government. In the second approach, the specifics and particular characteristics that determines local government in more circumspect manner. These distinguished features mainly focus on five following aspects: (i) legal personality (ii) localness (iii) effective participation by citizens (iv) extensive budgetary and employing self sufficiency in regard to bounded control from central authority and (v) particular powers to execute a variety of functions.

However, the influence of democratic participation school has impacted so much on local government with regard to involvement of local populace role on the act of governance. John Stuart Mills in his work on utilitarianism, liberty and representative claimed that the good form of government is representative government because it prompted liberty, equity and fraternity, made men to look beyond their immediate interest and recognized the just demand of other men, promote political education, participation and communication. Furthermore, he asserts that local government is a prime element of democracy irrespective of the services it provides. Government is truly representative when all types of people can take part. The local government level offers the closest to widespread consultation and participation. It functions to bring about democracy and to provide opportunities for political participation to the citizenry as well as educate and socialize them politically. In the same vein, Panter (1953, maintained that participation is vital to democracy since it is the community that people appreciate and tolerate each other's view and learn the art of practical politics. Local government has become the training grounds for political elites or higher level of government. From the efficiency services approach, the main purpose of local government is to provide services to the local people. Arguing in the same vein, Sharpe (1970) provided a very strong case for local governments on the grounds that it was the most efficient agent for providing those services that are essentially local. In this respect, he noted that:

Whereas the value of local government as a bulwark of liberty or at least as a hand-maiden of democracy has been recognized, its role as agency for providing services has evoked no comparable enthusiasm. (Sharpe,1970:168)

He further argued that the efficient performance of these services is so compelling that if local government does not exist, something else would have to be created in its place, meaning the institution is indispensable. The main functional responsibility of local government therefore is to efficiently carry out local duties allocated to it, at the highest efficiency rate. However, the proponents of efficient service model such as William Machenzie argued that all is well even if there is less democratic participation in the governance process as long as the local or grassroots people get efficient services from the local government. In the view of Adeyemo (2011), the development model holds the position that local government, particularly in the developing world are effective agents for improving the means of living socially and economically. As well, local government constitutes reliable basis for the local or grassroots people to get a better share in the national wealth. Specifically, the development functions of the local government include nation building, social, economic and manpower resource development.

Historical Perspective of Local Government System in Nigeria

Local administration at the grass root level in Nigeria had always been in operation since time immemorial among the various people found in Nigeria, even before the colonial masters set their feet on the soil of Nigeria (Awofeso,2004:14). Put differently, it is not debatable that the history of local government system in Nigeria is older than the advent of the erstwhile colonial masters. Colonialism, however, helped to widen the course of history of Nigeria administration systems as it contributed significantly to the evolution of modern local government in the country. Prior to colonization, there were in existence in most African enclaves, local administrative machineries founded upon traditional institutions (Agbakoba and Ogbonna,2004). This was noticeable in Hausa Fulani, Ibo and Yoruba political system. These systems were neither centralized nor not centralized according to their political structure and cultural enclaves. The local government administrative system during the colonial era started with the introduction of indirect rule by Lord Lugard. The idea behind the introduction of indirect rule was to preserve the authority of the local rulers, local institutions, traditions and habits rather than attempt to impose totally new and unfamiliar ideas from outside (Ola and Tonwe,2003). The local Government ordinance of 1950 democratized the Native Administration in the sense that about eight percent of the councilors were elected in the

Eastern Region. The law took effect in the West in 1952. Before the local government reform of 1976, local government system in Nigeria was more or less non-functional. The reform of 1976 was aimed at making local government an effective third tier of government in Nigeria. It is set about making local government financially independent with an allocated specific functions and ensuring good governance through elected representatives. The autonomy was further emphasized in the 1979 constitution. The reform has in similarity the British pattern of local government which was initiated in the 1950s. The major difference between the new reform of 1976 and that of 1950 was the guarantee in the constitution of statutory allocation of 10% of the consolidated fund to local government. Provision was also made for local government to generate their own internal revenue. The question is why has local government remained like a retarded child in Nigeria inspite series of reforms to ensure effective performance of the system? With regard to this, so many unresolved issues have been identified such as;

- I. Absence of citizen participation which created a democratic space
- II. Undue interference of state government undermined local government and good governance
- III. Some provisions of 1999 constitution impeded good governance at local level like not determining the tenure of political office holders at the local level and not providing adequate political autonomy for local Government in Nigeria. These effects make state governments to determine the nature, content and direction of local Government elections and other political activities. With regard to this, Nico (2008) argued that local Government cannot determine the contours of their performance targets, the purpose of undemocratic local government undermined good governance thereby making them mere appendages of state.

Explaining the failure of the Local Government System in Nigeria

For many years, local Government statutory role has not addressed the challenges facing the rural areas. This is because Local Government allocation has been hijacked by various state governments due to absolute absence of a truly local government in our democratic system. According to section 7

sub section (1) of the 1999 constitution of the federal Republic of Nigeria as amended, allows for an elected administration in the local government councils but in practice, some councils in Nigeria are either directly or indirectly administered by appointed chairmen and caretaker committees. Those with elected officials and administration have their finances under control of the state government. This affects service delivery and effective performance of local government at every locals. As a result of this umbilical cord tied to the apron of the state, you hardly seen or found development across the 774 local government councils in Nigeria. Also, for many years, State governors do not ascribe to the independence of local Government. As a result of this, most of the state governors have done all within their power to ensure the emasculation of the councils so that they can use and manipulate their federal allocations just as the like. This has affected governance at the local level as well impede development.

However, one instrument that gave the governors such undeserved power of total control of local Government councils is the unconstitutional operation of State and local Government Joint Account. Once this umbilical cord is broken, the council chairmen can be better position to develop their areas of jurisdiction and ensure good governance at the local level. Also electoral process which would have been the best way of selecting executive chairmen for local councils is mostly replaced by care taker appointees who are directly appointed by the state executive governors. At times, if election is been conducted, the outcome of the election would always reflect the wishes of the ruling party. It is in Nigeria that opposition hardly wins seats at the local level. This has implication on democratic participation and governance at the local level. Apart from poor governance and non citizen participation in the act of governance, poor development strategy at the grass root level has been identified as a major constraint to local government system in Nigeria. The rural areas of the country have been neglected in the allocation of the country's resources. The development strategy of Nigeria has been urban oriented. Attention has focused on the urban centres, to the neglect of the rural areas where about 70% of the population live. No viable cottage industries were sited at the rural level thereby causing migration of youths to the urban centres in search of jobs. Agriculture in which some 65% of the labor force is mainly people from the rural areas are neglected. A cursory look at the country's development plans since independence (1962-68,1970-

75,1975–80 and 1980–85) shows a complete neglect and underdevelopment of the rural area. This development strategy has certain consequences which affect local government system such as;

- (a) The precarious financial situation makes it impossible for local government to attract high level manpower since local government staff were always known to be owed backlogged of salaries. Also, there is little or no prospect for career development in the local government service.
- (b) Due to weak rules and laws, state governments violate constitutional provisions with impunity in their dealing with local government units. Most local government executive officers were therefore administered by appointees of the state governors. They therefore become an instrument of political patronage.
- (c) Because of the attitude of the federal and state government officials towards the local government units, its statutory allocations are either reduced arbitrarily by the federal government or in most cases confiscated by the state government.

Importance of Citizen Participation in Local Governance

Governance has been a constant obstacle for countries trying to bring about the political, economic and social changes desired for their development. Across different countries, bad governance hampered even development and as well make institution ineffective and ineffectual in service delivery. Bad governance on the part of government, private sectors and individuals affects development initiatives at various level be it federal, state and at the third tier level. This has implication on decision making, budgeting and implementation processes. Good governance as a concept means that processes and institutions produce results that meet the needs of society while making the best use of resources at their disposal. Good governance ensures consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive, participatory and adherence to rule of law. It assures that corruption is minimized, the views of minorities are taken into account and that the voices of the most vulnerable in the society are heard in decision making. The political stability and development of any political system is a function of the awareness and positive involvement of the citizens in civic and political matters. This is the reason why Appadorai

(2004) posited that democracy demands from the common man a certain level of ability and character, rational conduct and active participation in the government. Citizen participation in local governance involves ordinary citizens assessing their own needs and participating in local project planning and budget monitoring. Citizen participation requires trust, belief and wholeness trust in their co-participants, belief that participation can make a difference and feeling socially included. To ensure strong participation of citizens in local governance, citizens need to understand and want to exercise their right to participate in political issues. Engaging citizens in local governance improves accountability and the ability of local authorities to solve problems, creates more inclusive and cohesive communities, and increases the number and quality of initiatives made by communities. One of the major reasons for establishing local government is to bring government to the local communities so that the local people can participate fully in the process of governance, in order to provide essential local services and thus speed up the pace of social, economic and political development (Amujiri, 2012). Following this fundamental purpose of local government, the guidelines on the 1976 local government reforms makes community participation imperative on local government. The principle objectives of the reform as provided by the guidelines were to;

- I. Make appropriate services and development activities responsive to local wishes and initiative by devolving and delegating them to local representative bodies.
- II. Facilitate the exercise of democratic self government close to the local of our society and to encourage initiative and leadership potential.
- III. Mobilize human and material resources through the involvement of members of the public in their local development
- IV. Provide a two-way channel of communication between local communities and government (both state and federal)

Consequently, nations have been battling for the establishment of viable local government that will bring both government and development nearer to the people. The establishment of Nigerian local government system was with good intentions. Their major aim was for this third level of government to positively affect the lives of the people at the grassroots. But the system,

unfortunately has been hijacked by politicians and senior bureaucrats for personal enrichment. The appointment of care takers to manage the affairs of local councils without elected representatives by the people is a miscarriage of democratic principles. It does not enthrone good governance and promote citizen participation on issues affecting their political lives. Agba (2013), succinctly argued that the provision of basic social services such as education, health, maintenance of roads and other public utilities within the jurisdiction of most local government in the country is a myth and mirage. It has been argued that there is a general problem of accountability at the local government level in the use of public resources that are transferred from higher tiers of government, and about which local citizens may not be well informed. Thus, the need for citizen participation in governance at local level cannot be overemphasized. It creates room for sense of belonging among local populace with regard to governance and serves as a viable instrument to service delivery.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The idea of local government creation is to bring governance and development at the grassroots. Citizen participation and good governance is needed to achieve this transformation drive. The case of local government in Nigeria has grossly undermined effective grass root participation in politics and delivery of dividends of democracy to the people. This has great implication on good governance. Non citizens participation on issues that affect their political lives, state government undue interference and its control of the financial resources meant for local government, and some provisions in the 1999 constitution contributed immensely to local government underdevelopment and bad governance in Nigeria. Thus, the paper recommend as follows:

- I. There should be a review of the constitution with regard to that section that empowered the state to control the local government. Issues of local government in relation to financial autonomy and independent on electoral matters should be clearly spelt out without contradiction.
- II. There is low level of political participation among the Nigerian citizens especially at the local government level. Both formal and informal approaches should be adopted to orientate the citizens on the need for

active participation in the political system. This could be done through mass political enlightenment either on media and civil association programmes.

- III. Local governments should have direct and unfettered access to statutory allocations from the federation account and their share of internally generated revenue.
- IV. The practice of appointing a care taker to administer the affairs of the local council should be treated with much criticism. This impedes on good governance and also alienates the people from participating in an election to elect candidates of their choice. Issues with regard to accountability and responsive would be missing since the person appointed is solely choosing by the governor and not the people.
- V. The Independent National Electoral Commission should be saddled with responsibility to handle council election just the way it handle all other polls in the country. This would reduce election irregularities been witnessed at State Independent Electoral Body been controlled by the State Governors. This would rekindle the hope and promote political participation at the local level.

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