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CORRUPTION IN NIGERIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM: A HINDRANCE TO RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract
Rural development is the process of improving or transforming the socio-cultural, economic, political life of the rural populace. The aim of rural development is to improve the welfare of the rural populace and by extension improve their productivity. More so, every rural development effort is geared towards bringing change that can reduce the gap between the rural and urban sectors in various aspects of life. This expectant change is to be brought about by local government system through which effective local community leaders are elected into offices to drive the rural development. Yet, the local government system has been poised with so many problems. These problems are corruption and mismanagement, lack of adequate manpower, lack of autonomy, inadequate planning, lack of revenue, poor implementation of policies, lack of leadership skills, poor political participation etc. Secondary source of data is used in this work. The paper focused on the causes and sources of corruption in the local government system, and suggested relevant ways forward to curb it. The paper suggests entrenchment of democratic culture and promotion of good governance, transparency and accountability, granting of autonomy and expansion of democratic space etc as a panacea to the problems; without these solutions, rural development of the grassroots will be a mirage.
Keywords: Corruption, Local Government System, Development, Rural Development, System.

Introduction

The reason for the creation of local government anywhere in the world is to bring government nearer to the people in the local areas and to aid development at the rural areas. The establishment of government at the local areas is for it to play vital social, political and economic roles for the overall development of the country. The realization of this importance and with the desire to bring government nearer to the people (most especially people in the rural areas) has prompted the Federal Government of Nigeria to introduce a number of significant reforms to local government system since 1976. The reforms made some fundamental changes in the structure, functions and finances of local government. The 1976 reforms clearly defined the power and functions of local government and made them the third tier of government with enhanced prestige and responsibilities. The purpose of the reforms was to bring about the development of the rural areas.

However, the increased responsibilities of local governments in recent times seem not to be adequately matched by their financial resources. This has grossly manifested in their inability to perform satisfactorily in their new tasks such as the establishment and payment of primary schools, teaching and non-teaching staff, provision of primary health care, building of roads etc. As important as this tier of government has been over 36years of it promulgation, there seem to be hiccups that have impeded its performance and functions in recent times. These problems include the undue interference of federal and state government, bribery and corruption and ill-trained and unqualified personnel to mention but a few.

The Concept of Local Government System

Conceptualizing local government system is not easy; it is difficult to have a universally acceptable definition for this concept in developing and developed countries of the world. A system in this concept can mean a style

of administration or laid down procedures; orderliness of carrying out administration. It can also mean an ordered manner, orderliness by virtue of being methodical and well organized. Thus, local government system means a unified, well patterned and organized body through which administration is carried out in the rural areas for development purposes.

Ovwasa (1995) opined that the meaning attached to local government varies from country to country. However, he says the concept of local government involves a philosophical commitment to democratic participation in the governing process at the grassroot level. This implies legal and administrative decentralization of authority, power and personnel by a higher level of government to a community with a will of its own to performing specific functions as within the wider national framework. According to Agagu (1997), a local government is the grassroot level of administration to meet the peculiar needs of the people in the rural areas. Appadorai (1975), sees local government as government by the popularly elected bodies charged with administrative and executive duties in matters concerning the inhabitants of a particularly district or place.

Local or grassroot government may be defined as government established by law to perform specific functions with defined areas. A complex nation like Nigeria with its many ethnic groups with divergent and diverse culture requires a high degree of decentralization which will be accomplished by creating local government authorities. Looking at the existence and relevance of local government, Ayo (2005) believes that local government is a territorial non-sovereign community possessing the right level of necessary organization to regulate its own affairs. Local government can be viewed as a legal personality with sufficient but limited powers of control over its staff, finances and funds (Amao, 2002).

Ovwasa (2004) defined local government as a subdivision of a nation (unitary country) and state (federal system) which has substantial authority to extract labour and impose tax over its jurisdiction. The council of such local government is constituted by law and membership is either elected or selected. Ovwasa summarized the definitions of local government with the following observations:

1. Local government is created by law.
2. It has a representative government.
3. It is a lower level of government and it has legal powers to impose taxes in its areas of jurisdiction or competence, but with limited autonomy.

Local government in principle deals with grassroot politics that is, keeping law and order, basic sanitation, constructing and maintaining local roads, supplying water, administering local schools, providing skill training and employment for residents etc. However, rural development is the essence of building government on a local level with emphasis on building the economy, strengthening social ties, and developing the non- profit sector. These are aimed at improving the quality of life of the people in the rural communities. But the question on the lips of every Nigeria is; are local government administrators in Nigeria performing their functions? If not, what are the obstacles? Therefore we delve into the obstacles of local government, let us look at the evolution of local government to foster understanding of the salient issues raised in this paper.

Evolution of Local Government System in Nigeria

This history of local government system in Nigeria dates back to colonial days. The name, structure and composition have experienced different changes over the years. During the 1930's and 1950's, for instance, local government was known as chief-in-council and chief-and-council; where traditional rulers were given pride of place in scheme of things. In the 1950's elections were introduced according to the British models in the western and eastern parts of the country with some measure of autonomy in personnel, financial and general administration (Nwabueze, 1982). It was on this premise that the rising tide of progress growth and

development experienced in the local government in these areas was based. The pace of this development was more noticeable in the south than in the North.

During this period, heterogeneity was the hall mark of local government as there was no uniformity in the system and the level of development was remarkably different. The introduction of 1976 reforms by the military administration of General Obasanjo brought about uniformity in the administrative structure of the system. The reforms introduced a multi-purpose single-tier local government system (Ajayi, 2000). Efficient system of native administration had existed in the various parts of Nigeria before the coming of the Europeans (Olatunbosun, 1998). This was the case in the Northern and Western parts of Nigeria where the existing system of traditional administration provided the colonial authorities with the much-needed workable basis for introducing the indirect rule system of governance.

Between 1900 and 1950, the Nigerian, colonial authorities consisted mainly of traditional office holders whose main functions according to Kareen (2005) were to maintain law and order and generally act as agents for the colonial government by providing certain basic services in their respective localities. With the pressure generated by nationalist struggle for democratization and self-rule that emerged in the 1950's, modern local government councils with elected member with increased responsibilities and enhanced financial status. However, the local government councils suffered a decline in status in the 1960s and early 1970s due to their inability to perform their functions up to expectation. Since 1976, a member of reforms has been objective of transforming a local government into separate tier, with clearly defined and enhance responsibility, improved financial status and more development-oriented and viable structural rearrangements. The beginning of the democratization of local government administration with the introduction of non-traditional elected or selected members can be traced back to the 1950s. The elected members constituted about seventy five percent of the council membership. According to Williams (1994), the military government dissolved all the elected members in 1966 and their functions were taken over by councilors, some nominated by respective military governors and some by traditional rulers. By 1975, the number of local government authorities in eight states (excluding the four states in the east and mid-west) was 113 and later increased to 301; in 1988, it rose to 442. Due to more agitation, it increased to 454 in 1989 and 589 in 1991. Following the state creation in 1996 local government is presently 774 including the FCT (Kareem, 2005). No public institution in Nigeria has been subjected to frequent reforms than local government. Almost all successive administrations in Nigeria introduced one administrative change or another Apart from the celebrated 1976 reforms, state government officials have also introduced various manipulations. For example, in Ekiti state, the tenure of elected local government officials was reduced to two years. In the South West except for Lagos, a caretaker committee was introduced in 2003 immediately after the general election. In a similar vein, in June 2007, some state governments dissolved their local councils and appointed caretaker committee to steer the affairs of the council prior to the conduct of elections and the elections will never be done until their tenure elapse. In July 2011, Kogi State government dissolved the elected local government chairmen and directed all the DIGs to take over the affairs. In essence, it has become a norm in Nigeria for an incumbent administration to introduce one change or another in the institution. The driving force for this change is corruption because most of the state governors want to be in charge of local government allocation has not been stable and thus, its future remains bleak, uncertain and insecure.

Purpose for Creating Local Government

1. **Grassroots participation in governance:** One of the major purposes for creating local government in Nigeria is to bring governance closer to the people. Participation by the citizens-in-governance is one of the underlying precepts of democracy and the modern notion of government. This is done through participation in the electoral processes and decision-making in the local communities.

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2. **Administration Convenience:** Local government is created for administrative practicality and suit ability. Local government is used to perform the functions which the federal and state government cannot perform effectively in the rural areas like collection of rates, radio and television license, registration of births, deaths and marriages. Local governments serve as a channel through which policies are communicated and implemented in the rural areas.
3. **Development Purposes:** Local governments are created to bring meaningful development in the rural areas. As agents of rural development, they are to use the funds made available to them by both federal and state government and their internally generated revenue to improve the lives of the people within their areas of operation. Also, they are to initiate and attract developmental projects like provision of access roads, water, rural electricity etc. to the local areas. More so, local governments are to provide sustainable livelihoods through the provision of credit facilities for agriculture, arts, crafts and small-scale business and encourage the formation of cooperative societies and other economic groupings.
4. **Preserve the cultural heritage and common interest of the people:** The creation of local Government is intended to bring people of common cultural heritage and ancestry together as a political unit to further their interest and increase their participation in government business.

The Hurdles of Local Government in Nigeria

The problems of local government in Nigeria have been documented. These include corruption and mismanagement, financial constraints, inadequate planning, poor implementation of policies, inadequate manpower, poor revenue, lack of autonomy, lack of participation by the people and inter-government conflict (Ademolekan, 1983; Orewa, 1991).

Corruption and Mismanagement of Resources

Most local government leaders or officials enter into offices through corrupt means. The state governments select and impose them on the masses instead of through election. This has made them to become stooges to the state government and dance to their tones. The officials are used as embezzlement tools and mismanagement agents. The money that is earmarked for development purposes in the rural areas are siphoned and misappropriated by state government in connivance with the local government care takers or sole administrators. This has made the aim of local government creation to bringing development to rural areas to be impeded.

Lack of autonomy: local governments in Nigeria were created as third tier system of government with full autonomy to carry out their functions. But state governments through their various local government reforms have denied them autonomy. This act is born out corruption because the state governments want to be in possession of their federal allocation which is converted into private use by state governors. With this, local governments are left with nothing to carry out their developmental programmes and projects in the rural areas.

Financial Constraints: local governments have many rich developmental programmes for execution but they lack the financial muscle to carry them out. The economic and financial profile of the local governments in Nigeria is very poor compared to the developmental projects they are expected to carry out despite the increase in the total amount of funds made available to them since early 1990s. The situation here is connected to and encouraged by high rate of mismanagement and embezzlement of these funds. The corrupt officials of these councils divert money meant for projects to their personal purses.

Inadequate Manpower: Inadequacy of trained and skilled administrative, technical and professional personnel renders local governments in Nigeria ineffective and inefficient in performance of their constitutional rights. Reasons include the low image of local government in the professionals; questionable,

subjective and sentimental manners of recruitment and fear of retrenchment which has derailed their psychological balance and affected their efficiency and output. Again, state governors use appointment into local governments to settle their political machineries and associates. A times, they appoint uneducated persons that are neither trained nor skilled into offices that require trained personnel. Recently, the State governments in Nigeria appointed stark illiterates as part of caretaker committee members at L.G. A's simply because they are party loyalists that deserve to be compensated without recourse to their ability to deliver.

Lack of continuity by succeeding governments: One of the problems facing local governments nationwide is the lack of continuity of government programmes and projects by succeeding governments. This disruption leads to economic waste as well as the retrogression of development. Projects are done not according to or as demanded by the people but in tune with the selfish ends of the political leadership in collaboration with the senior bureaucrats at the local government level of administration. Priorities are being misplaced.

Ways to Tackle Corruption in the local government system

Local governments have demonstrated incompetence despite the basic rationale behind their creation; to meet the needs of the people at the grassroots. This is grossly caused by corruption in the system. It is therefore desirable to suggest ways through which local governments can come out from this indolence and doldrums.

First, local government as a third-tier government should not be scrapped or charged to local administration; it should be strengthened and democratized instead. Officials of the local government should always be elected and not appointed.

Second, local government should have full autonomy. This will allow and guarantee its survival and provide it with remedies for the problems highlighted above. Total autonomy will stop unnecessary interference from State government and give it independence to work in order to bring about development in rural areas.

Third, there is need to put mechanism in place to promote transparency and accountability at all levels of governance. Statutory allocation of local government councils should be reviewed upward and inward, for the improvement of Internally Generated Revenue (IGR) and for self-financial reliance. In addition, allocations should be promptly released straight into the local government accounts from the Federation Account to avoid delay in executing council developmental projects and hijack by State government.

Fourth, Government should place a high premium on the participation of the people in all governance and development issues. Workers in local governments should be adequately motivated in order to prepare them for the task of service delivery. The motivation can be achieved through salary increment, prompt payment of salaries, promotions, trainings etc.

Finally, the electorate should be educated and enlightened of the danger inherent in money politics. They should endeavour to vote for people with proven integrity and impeccable character rather than compromising the future and that of generations unborn. It is believed that strict observance of suggestion in this paper can curb corruption in the local government system and help in lifting local councils from their relegated position as tools of manipulation to the status of instruments of change and development at the grassroots level.

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