

Democratic Governance and the Quest for Sustainable Development at the Local Government Level in Nigeria

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Abstract

A nation wishing to record high level of sustainable development has to embrace democracy, an instrument believes by all to bring governance and sustainable development close to the people. However, despite this belief, much is yet to be established as to the role Democratic governance plays in bringing sustainable development to society and citizen in local government areas in Nigeria. Due to the nature within which the councils are managed the councils could not ensure attainment of Sustainable development goals. This paper seeks to find out the extent to which Democratic governance at the local government level in Nigeria enhances sustainable development. Data for the study was obtained from books, journals and interview of some selected citizens. It was realized that local government councils in Nigeria were subjected to excess control by the state government, besides rendering the councils to undemocratic structures; the funds allocated to the councils were always mismanaged under the State/ local government joints account. This situation made it difficult for the councils to provide the necessary health services and facilities, relevant social infrastructure for sustainable development, educational services and projects, agricultural services, water and sanitation projects and relevant strategies for sustained economic growth and development. The paper recommended that constitutional provisions should not be used by the various state governments in a way to mismanaged the financial resources meant for local governments. State governments should ensure existence of democracy in all the local governments within their domain. Elections in to the offices of the chairman and the council should be conducted regularly.

Key Words: Democratic governance, Sustainable development, Local Government.

Introduction

Local government is created to generate sustainable development at the grassroots level in Nigeria. It is essentially regarded as the path to, and guarantor of national integration, and sustainable development. Strategy for ensuring sustainable development and political efficacy is supposed to be found in the practice of local government in the county. However, knowing the roles local governments needs to play in the development of our society, the councils were also set to complement the efforts of federal and state governments in the development of the grass root level. Local government in Nigeria has been created essentially to compliment the efforts of the states and national governments in the task of sustainable development. Nevertheless, abject poverty and underdevelopment remains apparent features in our local communities. Therefore, there is the need for upholding the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the local government level in Nigeria.

To achieve sustainable development, governance at local government level has to embrace democracy which Roser (2017) views as a political system with institutions that allows citizens to express their political preferences; has constraints on the power of the executive; and a guarantee of civil liberties. Ayoade (1995) also sees democracy as the form of government in which every citizen in a state has political investments of participation and trust. It is a system of government owned by the people whom it governs. Democracy is also marked by continues dialogue and interaction between those who govern and the ruled. This view clearly indicates that democratic governance at the local level in Nigeria should allow people to control and monitor their phase of development. Ake, (2000) argue that democracy is a concept which simply connotes popular power. It is not only about delegated authority or representative governance but about popular expression of power by the people, that popular power is the essence of democracy. Therefore, democratic governance should serve as a catalyst for sustainable development at the local government level in Nigeria.

The influence of State Governments on Democratic Governance at the Local Government level in Nigeria

The problems that impede the performance of local governments in ensuring sustainable development at the grassroot level in Nigeria are largely dependent on two constitutional issues stipulated in the Nigeria (1999) constitution. Firstly, section 7 which relates to the issue of guaranteeing the third tier of government as a democracy. Secondly, section 162 which relates to financial autonomy and power of the local government to carry out its developmental functions as guaranteed in the constitution. The various states governments passed the necessary

enactments to give effect to these constitutional provisions based on their own purpose. These have rather rendered the councils in many states to be zones of non-democratic governance. In this regard, the councils turn to be agencies that are not responsive to the whims and aspirations of the people living in their domain.

This is because democratic principles in the recruitment of leaders are always abused by almost all the states in the country. Election of chairmen and council members are always masterminded by the state governments. In some of the states there is no representation in the management of the councils.

The Fourth Schedule of the Nigeria 1999 constitution details the functions of Local government. Section 162 (5, 6,7, 8) provides for the funding of the local councils through the Federation account.

Paragraph 6 specifically provides —Each State shall maintain a special account to be called —State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA), into which shall be paid all allocations to the local government councils of the State from the Federation Account and from the Government of the

State. The various state governments in Nigeria uses the magnitude of the aforementioned constitutional provisions to mastermind all the affairs of the councils within their domain.

The financial autonomy which direct allocation from the Federation Account to the local governments is always undermined. Instances of various deductions and diversions of funds allocated to the local government is a concrete evidence in this regard. State governments have instead used the SJLGA mechanism (or Account) to hold the local government hostage and make it appendages of the State. In practice, the operation of the SJLGA has denied local Governments their financial autonomy (Okafor, 2010). Okafor further points out that the state government is not intended to be a beneficiary of the SJLGA, rather, it is a trustee of the Account. It is required to maintain the Account for the benefit of the local governments by ensuring that the amount allocated for this third tier of government is equitably and fairly shared among the councils, adhering strictly to constitutionally stipulated criteria. However, reports across the country indicate that most state governments are using SJLGA laws contrary to this intention (Okafor, 2010).

Democratic Governance and Sustainable Development at the Local Government level in Nigeria.

Local Government system in Nigeria was created to ensure maximum participation of citizens in the development process, promote balanced development so that the third tier of government will be more responsive to the sustainable developmental aspirations of local communities. This

was a deliberate attempt to inject a decentralized approach towards national integration, sustainable development, efficient and effective governance and creating a sense of belonging at the grassroots. Thus the local government system was designed to be a means for ensuring effective democracy at the grassroots level because it is the level of government closest to the people and by implication it is the most critical in engendering good democratic cultures and values, effective participation in the process of development at the grassroots with the possibility of filtering up to the national level (Bashir and Muhammad, 2012).

Democracy is a necessary ingredient in the local government system. While the local government strives to ensure Sustainable Development, democracy on the other hand, guarantees achievability and possibility of this service delivery and development. It offers a participatory opportunity for citizen in the choice and selection through periodic elections of credible representatives, and confers inestimable avenue' for psychological self-satisfaction and self-fulfillment. This is so that the electorates who participate in the electoral- process eventually leads to the enthronement of a government and the political leadership can therefore lay a claim to the government as theirs, rather than being an imposition. Consequently, the mandate to govern emanates from them, while at the same time, they act as legitimizers of the governmental system. The government is seen as legitimate and therefore, not illegal (Ajayi, 1998). Democracy serves as actual avenue through which the purpose for which the local government is created can be achieved.

The grassroots democracy and governance as an aspect of Nigeria's national polity has been and continued to be problematic. As grassroot governance continues to generate recurring concerns, the problems affecting it since independence have been that of indefinite objective direction, unstable structure, inconsistent functions, inept leadership, corruption, low leadership capacity, apathy and non-participation of local people, uncommitted and non-loyal personnel arrangements, dependent financial sources, coupled with this management and un-conducive or hostile environments due to lack of service delivery and power struggle (Irikana, 2013).

Local government is an indispensable instrument of democracy. It is an avenue for government and the people to reach one another. It is important that people experience direct democracy through the local government system. It gives residents an opportunity to make the government responsive to their own needs and enables people to enhance public responsibility. The local government is essential in any good democratic system. It gives a scope for democratic participation. In the views of Chukwuemeka et al, (2014), local governments are created in order

to encourage participatory democracy and serve as training ground for recruitment of leaders, provide channel of selfgovernment and political education at the grass roots levels.

The concept of sustainable development was described by the 1987 Bruntland Commission Report as —development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. (UNESCO, 2019). A nation wishing to record high level of sustainable development has to embrace democracy, an instrument believes by all to bring governance and development close to the people. However, despite this belief, much is yet to be established as to the role democratic governance plays in bringing sustainable development to society and citizens in local government areas in Nigeria. Due to the nature within which the councils are managed they could not ensure attainment of Sustainable development goals. Ovaga and Ona (1995) argued that, in spite of the fact that the 1976 local government reforms granted greater autonomy, powers and functions to local governments, they still have a long way to go towards the satisfactory performance of their functions in many areas. There are several factors that have brought serious setbacks to Sustainable development at the local government level in the country. One of such is the miss-prioritization of projects capable of accelerating the level of growth and development. All over Nigeria, there had been over concentration of developmental projects in particular communities at the expense of others, , communities with teaching hospitals will still have state hospitals, health centers particularly at the state capita and clinics constructed by the Local government and none may be functioning effectively while rural communities without leaders with political clout will continue to suffer institutional neglect (Toyin et al, 2015)

Other problems that draw back Sustainable development at the local government level relates to the excess control exercised over it by the state government which limits its power in decision making, instability in the source of revenue, quality of leadership etc. Regarding over control of Local government by the state governments in Nigeria, Adeyemi, (2019) highlighted:

While the consistent attempts by the state governments to weaken the local governments in the country is not yet new, the complacency of the federal government and possible complicity in the delay of local government election is disturbing. The state governments all over the country are not interested in conducting elections in the local government councils across the country because the non-conduct of election gave them the absolute control of local government machinery in their respective states. It is sad that the state governments have failed to appreciate the fact that local government is fundamentally an integral part of democracy. They have undermined section 7(1) of 1999 constitution which guarantees democratically local government

council across the country, only few states had witnessed election since 1999. The channels for distributing council funds have also become a bone of contention. When money is allocated to the councils, it does not go directly to the councils. It is deposited in the States/Local government Joint account (JAC). At the JAC committee meeting, the council is a junior partner.

With wide spread speculations that political leaders at the local government levels pursue only their parochial interests instead of projects and programs that will significantly impact on the lives of their subjects. Primary health-care services become difficult to people of local government areas despite the fact they elected the government in office. In specific terms, the activities of donor agencies provide significant percentage of quality health-care services without which the health condition of the local governments would have been in jeopardy. Provision of effective health-care services has been an attribute of sustainable growth and development of societies (Hassan, 2018) Education is one of the necessary ingredients of sustainable development of all communities without which no meaningful growth can be achieved. Despite the veracity of this statement, local governments do not focus on designing and pursuing effective educational policies and programs targeted at breeding skillful personnel that will take up the challenges of future development. It is with dismay that an interview with some of the citizens highlighted that rarely can one spot a program being financed by local government in schools even if it means enrolment drive or training of teachers that will further the achievement of target educational goal. In Nigeria, Education is administered by three branches of government; Primary education is under the largely control of local governments, secondary schools fall to greater extent under the jurisdiction of the state government and higher education is administered by both federal and state governments. The issue of gaps in the institutional capacity to deliver primary education of a sound quality is crucial in the management of primary education in Nigeria. There is need for more social awareness on the recent UBE programme to ensure compliance. The various local governments should also back this up with edicts and bye-laws where necessary as well as formulate clear policies on enrolment of pupils, funding, provision of facilities and quality assurance (Diejomaoh, 2010)

Development as growth

Taking the economic first, the focus of economic policy is fixated on the notion of "growth". But, self-evidently growth is not the same as "development" which is a qualitative concept incorporating ideas of improvement and progress, including cultural as well as economic dimensions. Development in its sustainable sense is suggestive of such ideas as quality of life and well-being. These are difficult concepts to define, let alone realise. For instance, well-being

includes the sense of identity, development and positive self-image of individuals, communities and countries. It is much easier to contemplate the more material, quantifiable and recognisable objective of growth. Indeed, in times of economic hardship and recession the need to achieve growth becomes an obsession, a political imperative. Quality of life and wellbeing though present in political rhetoric become, in practice, gratuitous ideas remote from the harsh reality of retrenchment and recovery of growth. The reality depends on where we live. For example, in subsistence economies well-being might be defined in terms of maintaining, improving and passing on the means of that subsistence, fish stocks, soil quality, forests and so on. In the developed world, where economies are less directly linked to environment the needs of the future are focused more immediately around providing work for the present generation especially the young. It is a similar picture during times of plenty, like the long boom experienced in much of the world economy until it was summarily halted by the banking and credit crisis of 2008.

The emphasis is on maintaining growth satisfying consumer demand for the present and immediate future.

Sustainable development as environmental conservation.

This comfortable assumption must be challenged. It is not that the assumption is necessarily wrong, rather, it is the practice of sustainable development or the lack of it that is the problem. When choices are made there is a tendency to put imminent economic gains before longer term environmental losses. The present is valued more than the future since the reality is experienced rather than envisioned. Discounting seems to be both economically and psychologically sensible. As Giddens puts it, 'People find it hard to give the same level of reality to the future as they do to the present. Thus a small reward offered now will normally be taken in preference to a much larger one offered at some remove' (2009, pp. 2–3). Discounting is more problematic when weighing up disadvantages to the future against advantages to the present. Longer term risks to environments tend to be discounted in favour of more immediate gratification. This is true of big projects, which have a machismo fascination for politicians who want to appear to be doing something visible, big and impressive. Hence the fascination with building new airports, fast railways, container ports, mega power stations, giant shopping malls and so on, all of which plant a heavy ecological footprint into the future.

This brings us to the political dimension of sustainable development. Politics here needs to be seen in its broadest terms, as a process involving collective choices at a variety of levels from the local to the global. And this requirement of collective choice confronts us with another

problem. As Meyer Hillman observes, "It is totally unrealistic to expect many individuals or communities to act unilaterally when others are not doing so. Nor is it realistic to expect sufficient success in the wake of businesses "going it alone" in adopting green practices – any more than it is from individuals doing so" (Hillman 2011, p. 31).

Sustainable Development is ensured with provision of massive social infrastructural facilities such as good and qualitative primary health care centers, health clinics, primary and junior secondary schools, roads, rural water and electricity supplies etcetera. At the local government level in Nigeria, one may still rightly claim that such social infrastructures are not adequately provided. Most areas of the local governments are without good roads, some are without good drinking water, rural electricity, primary schools and the relevant health facilities to mention a few. What seems to matter most to the people of the grassroots is to see tangible results of their taxes, contributions, labour expended and the judicious use of monthly allocation from the federation account to their local governments. However, the enormous benefits that the grassroots stand to derive from a sound and functional local government have not approximated reality (Justine & Ibeto, 2020).

Agricultural production is highly essential in the quest for sustainable development, but to the most dismay, policy focus of local governments in Nigeria is not on agriculture. Local government administered by own citizens ought to diversify particularly into agriculture for growth and Sustainable development to ensue food security within their various jurisdiction. Igbokwe and Nwalieji (2013) postulated that Functions of a Local government council in the area of agriculture in Nigeria include: establishment, maintenance, and regulation of slaughter houses, slab, markets, gardens, parks, and participated in development of agriculture and natural resources, other than exploitation of minerals. However, it is observed that Local government in Nigeria has not perform to expectation, thereby recorded abysmal level of inefficiency and ineffectiveness in terms of agricultural development.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Local Government councils in Nigeria were subjected to excess control by the state governments besides rendering the councils to undemocratic structures; the funds allocated to the councils were always mismanaged under the State local government joint account. This situation made it difficult for the councils to provide the necessary health services and facilities, relevant social infrastructure for sustainable development, educational services and projects, agricultural services, water and sanitation projects and relevant strategies for sustained economic growth and

development. This situation rendered the Local Governments in the state incapable in ensuring attainment of Sustainable Development Goals within their domains.

Based on the foregoing Conclusions, the study recommended that:

1. Although the 1999 Nigeria Constitution provides for State governments control on the structure, composition and financial control of Local Government councils within their domains; such constitutional provisions should not be used by the various state governments in a way to mismanage the financial resources meant for local governments.
2. State governments should ensure existence of democracy in all the local governments within their domains. Elections in to the office of the chairman and the council should be conducted regularly.
3. Local Government councils in Nigeria should embark on Projects and programmes that will go a long way in ensuring Sustainable development in their respective areas.
4. There should be adequate provision of Social infrastructure, Education services, Agricultural services, provision of basic primary health care services, water and sanitation projects and relevant strategies for sustained economic growth and development.
5. Some elements of corruption had over time hinders sustainable development in local government councils in Nigeria, to this, relevant financial discipline should be imposed in the local governments.
6. Finally, there should be due financial process and any body found wanting be dealt with according to the provisions of the relevant Law.

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