

THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

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Abstract

The central aim or focus of this paper is to highlight the role of local government (being the closest tier of government to the grassroots) in rural development. The paper posits that the Nigerian political arrangement negates the essence of federalism (which is decentralization) by being highly centralized. The fiscal practices grossly skewed in favour of the central government couple with lack of accountability among the governing elites conjoin to thwart efforts at meaningful development in the third tier of governance. The paper is made up of Abstract; Introduction; Conceptual Clarification; Self-help as an issue in rural development; Nexus between local government and Rural Development; Approaches to Rural Development, Conclusion and Recommendations. It concluded that local governments have not been able to play their constitutional roles, let alone making attempts at rural development due in the main to the fact that they have been emasculated by other tiers of government. It suggested the Integrated Rural Development (IRD) approach in view of its comprehensiveness for sustainable rural development. The paper strongly recommended autonomy for local governments. It further canvassed fiscal and political reforms as avenues for strengthening governance in the Nigerian local government system.

Introduction

The interrelationship or complementary nature of these two subjects underscore their relevance and study within the broad discipline of public administration. As Institutions of critical importance, they are respectively the basic political organization, and the socio-economic activity. In view of the critical importance therefore, what affects them determine whether or not Nigeria or other third world nations develop.

Constitutionally, Local government represents the third tier of governmental organization in Nigeria – the others being the Federal and State governments. Frequently, the term “Grassroots administration” is employed as this has the additional advantage of graphically describing the location of this governmental arrangement. In reality, it is not vested with the powers and resources that it deserves. It is also ironical that the Nigerian situation negates the essence of federalism (which is decentralization) by being highly centralized.

Elsewhere, where the ideals and strategies for effective development have been understood the correct way, Local government is the focus of government efforts at promoting development. It becomes obvious overtime that to effectively develop, the people must be adequately mobilized. A purposeful combination of the local (peoples) effort/energies with that of government with the objective of improving socio-economic conditions and encouraging political participation is a key factor in rural development.

It represents the objective expression of the energies of mobilized rural communities in concrete and tangible projects such as roads, clinics, schools, potable water and other communal initiatives that benefit the people.

Conceptual Issues/Clarification

Local Government

Local government (as a body of knowledge and as practice) is encapsulated in a web like all other sub-discipline in the social sciences. There are divergent views on the subject as there are many authors.

Local government in the communal sense means people’s political instrument to participate in resource allocation, distribution and power acquisition. An indepth analysis of this definition ~~converges with the broad objectives of local government, which are political participation, efficient~~
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service delivery and resource mobilization. Political participation concerns the desire to involve local citizens in the management of local affairs. Efficient service delivery, which is closely knitted with the above factor, is to ensure that the basic needs of local citizens are met as speedily and as efficiently as possible. Resource mobilization is to provide a framework within which local resources, both human and material, are effectively mobilized. (Adamolekun, 1983:7)

Ezeani (2006:253) posits that “local government is generally seen as a veritable agent of development and grassroots participation in the democratic process”. Germane to this paper are some of the issues raised as “reasons for the creation of local government thus: “Local Government particularly in developing countries is seen as a veritable instrument for rural development. Consequently, all over the world, local governments have been assigned some functions under the law” (Ezeani, 2006:258). The extent to which local governments have been able to achieve the objective of rural development is the focus of this paper.

Other reasons for the creation of local government identified which are crucial to this paper are ‘to make appropriate services and development activities responsive to local wishes and initiatives by devolving or delegating them to local representative bodies’. “To sensitize and mobilize the various communities in their areas of authority in order to get involved in the overall development of their areas” Ezeani (2006:258). It is highly debatable if local governments in Nigeria have been able to effectively meet these and other lofty goals of their creation.

Ezeani (2004:1) favours the approach by Adamolekun (2002:49) in discussing local government within the purview of decentralization. Decentralisation is typologised into “deconcentration” meaning administrative decentralization or field administration and “devolution” implying democratic decentralization in which there is substantial autonomy to sub-national units (i.e. local governments) with powers and responsibilities to perform specific functions given under the law by the central government. Duru (2001:97) converges with Ezeani (2004) and Adamolekun (2002) on the above approach and conceptualization of local government as devolution.

Proceeding from the above, Ezeani (2004:6) identified the following characteristics of devolution: local government must be granted autonomy and independence and be clearly recognized as a tier of government with little or no direct control by the central government. Local units must have clear and legally recognized geographical boundaries. Local governments must possess corporate status including the power to raise sufficient revenue to perform assigned functions. Devolution involves the need to “develop local governments as institutions”. It also entails reciprocal, mutually benefiting and coordinate relationships between central and local governments.

An examination of the above characteristics in relation to the practice in Nigeria shows that apart from local governments having clear and legally recognized boundaries, the Fourth Schedule of 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Page 150 and 151) spells out the functions of local government. It is a matter of polemics if local governments in Nigeria are raising sufficient revenue to perform assigned function due to the attractions and limitations in the practice of fiscal federalism in Nigeria which over the years had made sub national governments heavily dependent on federal financial handouts, thus relegating and/or out rightly abandoning legal and credible sources of revenue necessary for effective service delivery to the people at the grassroots.

The practice of federalism in Nigeria, the role of the military in Nigerian Public administration system-especially due to its long stay or perpetration in governance with the unitary command structure that the military (militicians) imported into governance conjointly defeat other characteristics of devolution from being tenable in Nigeria. To be sure, the practice of federalism in Nigeria detracts from the letter and spirit of federalism as advocated by K.C. Wheare who is credited with developing the original idea and concise treatise on federalism. The Nigerian practice or system of federalism is defective to the extent that it subordinates tiers of government that are supposed to be “coordinate and independent” to one another, or how do we justify the supervision of local government councils by state governments?. Does federalism have answers to the practice under the Obasanjo (2003-7) civilian administration wherein allocations to Lagos state councils were withheld or in some states where governors tampered with or out rightly diverted funds belonging to local governments.

Akpan in Effiom (2001:87) describes local government “as the breaking down of the country into smaller units or localities for the purpose of administration in which the inhabitants of the different units or localities concerned play a direct and full part through their elected representatives

who exercise powers and undertake functions under the general authority of the state or National Government”.

The reality of the Nigerian electoral practice and governance makes mincemeat of the above definition. It is arguable if “elected representatives” are truly elected by the people. Deriving from this, there is usually a disconnection between the representatives and the masses. As a corollary, people-oriented services and functions that can positively impact on the vast majority of rural/local dwellers are not delivered by the representatives.

The National Guidelines for Reform of Local Government (1976:1) defines local government as:

Government at (the) local level exercised through representative councils established by law to exercise specific powers within defined areas. These powers should give the councils substantial control over local affairs as well as the staff and institutional and financial powers to initiate and direct the provision of services and to determine and implement projects so as to complement the activities of the state and federal governments in their areas and to ensure through active participation of the people and their traditional institutions that local initiatives and responses to local needs and conditions are maximized.

The above definition is not only comprehensive but clearer in content and understanding than the previous ones.

Rural Development

Maboguje (1980:30) opines that:

Rural development is concerned with the improvement of the living rural standards of the low-income people living in the rural area on a self-sustaining basis through transforming the socio-spatial structures of their productive activities. It implies a broad based reorganization and mobilization of the rural masses and resources, so as to enhance the capacity of the rural populace to cope effectively with the daily tasks of their lives and with the changes consequent upon this.

Three features of importance in the above definition are:

- (a) Improving the living standards of the subsistence population through mobilization and allocation of resources to achieve desirable balance over time between the welfare and productive services available to the rural subsistence populations.
- (b) Mass participation aimed at achieving both allocative rationality plus equity with distributive efficiency.
- (c) Making the process self-sustaining: It requires appropriate skills acquisition and development; capacity building; and availability/presence of functional institutions at local, state and federal levels to facilitate optimal use of available resources and the development of the rural areas. Self-sustenance implies grassroots participation in development programmes geared at transforming their lives.

Uma Lele (1975:18) posits that the realization of above objectives hinges on the interaction of the underlisted crucial variables:

- (1) National policies: which include land tenure systems; commodity pricing and marketing systems; wages and interest rate structure.
- (2) Administrative systems impinging on devolution in governmental structures.
- (3) Scope for institutional pluralism: which imply devolution with the distribution of development responsibility among the normal government structures; semi-autonomous governmental institutions and structures, private, commercial and traditional institutions; and elective bodies.

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Rural development is concerned with the improvement and transformation of social, mental, economic, institutional and environmental conditions of the low income rural dwellers through the

mobilization and rational utilization of their human, natural and institutional resources aimed at enhancing their capacities to cope with the daily tasks of life and the demands of contemporary times (Okoli & Onah, 2002:162).

Similarly, it involves multi-sectoral activities including advancement in agriculture, promotion of rural industrial activities and the establishment of appropriate decentralized structures that fosters mass participation in the development process.

It is however, observable that government policies geared toward rural development in Nigeria have always been to the advantage of few individuals in the privileged class. In addition, the administrative systems surrounding the implementation of rural development programmes do not usually function in the interest of the majority of rural dwellers that such programmes ought to capture or accommodate. This fact is applicable to existing institutions, whether commercial, private or traditional. Okoli (1988:12) asserts further that “all these institutions which are intended to function in the interest of the rural people, invariably promote the interest of a few individuals who control and manipulate them”.

Self Help: An Issue in Rural Development

Self-Help refers to strategies that induce progress in rural societies, all of which do not involve action by governments. (Okoli & Onah, 2002:172).

It could relate to individual with resources implementing project or projects to satisfy the basic needs of a community. It refers to community development through coordinated efforts of the rural people in selecting and executing local, economic and social programmes.

Self-help is democratic, emphasizes bottom-top approach to planning and governance and induces involvement, responsibility, tolerance with local initiative and satisfaction. It could be slow in process but its worthwhile because it is people driven and centred.

The formation of Agricultural cooperative movements and execution of social infrastructural projects explain the major phases discernible in self-help as rural development strategy.

Infrastructural projects approach to self-help is justifiable on ‘felt-needs’, humanitarian and economic grounds; fosters spirit of competition among and between various communities, and the perception of rural populace in equating development with provision of social services/amenities.

In addition to the above, self-help reduces economic burden on government through the mobilization of rural people in providing social amenities for themselves; enhances peace and concord through promotion of social ties; provides a veritable avenue for socio-political participation; reduces rural-urban disparities and it encourages community self-reliance that can facilitate the attainment of core developmental values such as life sustenance and freedom.

Problems of Self-Help

- (i) Lack of dedication, sincerity and commitment to self-help programmes on the part of successive Nigerian governments.
- (ii) As a corollary of the above, there is inadequate support and encouragement for self-help programmes through technical assistance or confidence, aid or assistance. Where and when government is obliged to support and/or encourage, such gesture is highly politicized, and reasons other than merit or genuine needs determine the flow of government support.
- (iii) Poor understanding of the real idea behind the concept of self-help on the part of many top government officials. This explains the excessive concern for the physical aspect of self-help to the detriment of the more permanent tangible results of fostering change of attitude, local self-government and integration of rural citizenry into the main stream of national life through participation.
- (iv) Against the backdrop of poor conceptualization of the self-help philosophy, self-help has not been fully and properly integrated into local development programmes on a continuing basis. Most of the programmes remain ad-hoc, distorted and unco-ordinated due to lack of correct vision or physical and social planning and also, the inability to attract high calibre/competent staff to implement and supervise the projects.
- (v) Self-help strategy has been characterized by duplication and haphazardness due in the main to lack of co-ordination between government and communal efforts and initiatives.

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- (vi) As a result of inadequate (or lack of) knowledgeable leadership in the communities, there are often poor conceptualization, costing and prioritization of projects which no doubt bedevils their execution and success.
- (vii) Owing to government's inability and reluctance to control self-help projects across geographical space, regional inequality has been perpetuated. In other words, there is absence of even distribution of self-help projects as communities embark on them based on their capabilities.

Nexus between Local Government and Rural Development

The local government, being the government nearest to the rural populace, is one of the best institutions for generating motivation and encouraging mobilization for self-help, as well as inducing the much needed wider participation of the local population in the decision-making process at the local level. It is estimated that rural local governments account for about 80 percent of the entire Nigeria population, and it is plausible to argue as pundits do, that the so-called third world is a rural world where any meaningful discussion of rural development really means not only talking of overall national development, but also because it is in the rural areas that the problem of inequitable distribution of resources or a marked lack of purchasing power and of grinding poverty in which the wretched members of society stagnate and stare one in the face with brutal clarity.

To guarantee the satisfaction of basic social needs, therefore, local responsibility and co-operation must be encouraged and that can best be developed through the participation of the local citizenry, not only in the affairs of their local government, but also in their own community affairs. It is important to observe that the existence of the third tier system of government in Nigeria should at least, halt the deteriorating living conditions in the rural areas of this country. An effective local government will be better disposed than the state or federal governments not only to stem the grim reality of the "rising tide of rural poverty", but also better placed to evoke the spirit of "local co-operation", thereby being more able to galvanize and mobilize the support of local citizenry in participating in all the programmes that may affect them.

Approaches to Rural Development:

Basic Resource Approach

Adopted during Colonial administration, the approach assumed that development is a function of the existence, magnitude and quality of natural resources. Hence the exploitation and development of the natural resources automatically create large investment capital and increases economic activities which facilitate employment and income generation.

It also posits that areas endowed with basic natural resources should expectedly grow faster than less endowed areas and also hasten the process of rural development. This argument is however faulted on the premise that there are areas abundantly endowed with basic natural resources which have continued to stagnate especially in Nigeria. This however adds the dimension of availability of competent labour force and committed leadership which are sine qua non for achieving sustainable rural development and economic development through this approach.

Growth Centre Approach

It is an offshoot and an extension of the Basic Resource Approach. Growth centres correspond to colonial urban centres/townships. They are centres to which goods, services and ideas flow. The argument here is that growth does not occur everywhere at the same time. They start at growth poles and the intensification of economic activities from this growth centre creates expansion and linkage effects to the hinterland.

The spread effect of food production for rural and urban industrial markets, raw materials for industries, employment opportunities for any surplus rural labour force, agricultural mechanization can facilitate rural development. Hence the approach advocates that in planning rural development programmes, growth centres should be deliberately and strategically created to speed up and even out ~~development~~ development across a wider space, but the backwash effect of migrating rural labour and finance to urban centres should be avoided in order to allow for trickling down or diffusion effect of development.

Export-Led Growth Approach

This is a colonial administration initiative built around producing cash crops for exports. It is expected that through this approach, the rural areas will be opened up and linked through infrastructural facilities. The logic in this approach is that the opening into world markets resulting from international demand for products of the developing economies will eventually galvanise resource utilization and capacity building of the hitherto dormant and under-utilised resources and potentials. This explains the development of various ports, railways, roads across the length and breadth of Nigeria.

Through this approach, it is expected that personal incomes, employment and government revenues will increase.

Diffusion Model

The approach assumes that there are differences in agricultural practices and that these differences account for the success or otherwise of farmers.

The thrust of the model is that innovations to farmers require re-orientation and habituation made possible through communication and other support services. Farmers need to be educated on the application of modern techniques, equipment, improved seeds and inputs. Farmers appreciate these modern innovations in terms of its concept, application and gains when they are practically exposed to same.

The approach emphasizes the need for administrative framework in ensuring availability and timely delivery of new inputs to farmers. It also underscores the existence of credit facilities in tackling funds problem or inadequacy in adapting to innovations.

The role of Demonstration/Experimental farms, agricultural extension agents/officers, and credit facilities to farmers and research institutions in encouraging local adaptive methods cannot be overemphasized in this approach to rural development.

Basic Needs Approach

It assumes that the rural population requires certain basic human facilities which are essentially social in character. Such facilities include hygienic water supply, functional health facilities and institutions, access roads, electricity, decent housing, good and qualitative education, communication facilities.

As a concept, this approach seeks to relate development to the socio-cultural and economic realities of the rural populace. It seeks to identify practical socio-economic and cultural constraints to the welfare and development of the rural people and formulating/executing plans to eliminate these constraints.

It is a more contemporary approach to rural development as manifested in government's preference for it through the establishment of ADPS, RBRDAS, DFRRI. Through these various programmes, government has applied the principles embedded in this approach in its determination or efforts in realizing reasonable development in rural areas on a continuing basis.

Integrated Rural Development

The underlying argument in this approach is that previous attempts/approaches to rural development failed due to lack of integration. In reaction to the deficiencies associated with single-project approach to rural development, the integrated rural development approach became inevitable. It is multi-sectoral, multi-project approach to rural development in which agriculture, infrastructure and industry support and reinforce one another.

IRD sees rural development in its totality. It is a programme that captures and recognizes the essence of all human and material factors relevant to rural development as well as their positive and negative potentials in rural development goals and implementation. The approach attempts to resolve some policy contradictions and conceptual problems (paradox) of the past and previous approaches which yielded little or no results.

IRD assumes that rural development produces positive results and it is desirable; success at rural development is measurable and measured in terms of maximum material goodness; and enhanced material goodness is equal to increased quality of life.

A meaningful rural development programme must involve multiple objectives, be multi-sectoral and must integrate organisations and institutions to achieve the fullest realization of the benefits of efforts and investment in the programme.

Note the vital role of integrating objectives, policies and programmes. The role of Non-Governmental Organisations and Community Based Organisations must be harmonised. Bottom-top approach to rural development must be emphasized to achieve results using this approach to rural development.

Sectoral Integration:- The need to link agriculture to industry, education, health, infrastructure in order to achieve results and rural development goals and comprehensive/balanced development is of utmost significance.

Organisational Integration:- It entails collaboration and coordination of various institutional or Natural groups involved in rural development such as Governmental units and agencies, Non-governmental associations e.g. social clubs, improvement unions, Quasi-governmental bodies for example, NDE, Cooperative and Agricultural Banks.

Using the holistic approach, the collective roles of all stakeholders and actors in rural development is explicable in the light of organizational systems approach. The need for coordination and interdependence among all levels and tiers of government cannot be over emphasized. The activities of NGOs, CBOs, MNCs, private and public organisations or agencies, social clubs, religious and charitable organisations come into focus and must be effectively harmonised to achieved goals/objectives in implementing rural development programmes for sustainable results.

The systems approach provides solution to the problems of overlapping jurisdiction and conflicts resulting from the concurrent functions of rural development among tiers and levels of government as well as those of the non-governmental agencies. Being basically concerned with problems of relationships, structure and interdependence, systems theory can successfully remedy most of these conflicts and jurisdictional overlaps.

Conclusion

The paper attempted to identify the role or place of local government in rural development from the perspective of being the closest tier of government to the people. It is obvious from the arrangement and federal practice in Nigeria that local governments are emasculated and have not been effectively positioned to place its constitutional roles, let alone play the roles it should in rural development. Self-help as an issue in rural development and the various approaches to rural development were discussed.

Local Government is the focus of government efforts at promoting development. To effectively develop, the people's efforts must be adequately mobilized. A Purposeful combination of local (peoples) efforts and energies with that of government with the objective of improving socio-economic conditions and encouraging political participation are key factors in rural development. Rural Development as a strategy is designed to improve the economic and social life of the rural people. The core issues in rural development include self-help; attention to needs (felt and latent); integrated community for development; mobilization of human and material resources which could facilitate the provision of social amenities and infrastructures. The organizational environment for enhancing rural development remains the local government.

Recommendations

- (1) This paper strongly advocates autonomy for local governments in such a way and manner that enhances its performance of constitutional and ancillary roles.
- (2) Local governments should strive to raise and maintain revenue that would enable her deliver projects and services that guarantee quality living to the grassroots. This has the potency of reducing the incidence of rural-urban drift.
- (3) As a corollary, local governments should be more people-centred in approach, such that necessary collaboration/partnership with communities in its domain can facilitate the process of rural development.

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- (4) The paper recommends a further review of the revenue allocation formula with improved revenues to local governments as the closest tier of government to the people (rural and urban).

- (5) There is an urgent need for realistic political reforms that can decongest the federal government and whittle down the exclusive list in favour of the local governments.
- (6) As an adjunct to the above, necessary electoral reforms is canvassed as a matter of urgency to redress the disconnection between the representatives at the local government councils and the masses. Credible elections will ensure that council representatives and executives are truly elected people who can deliver people-oriented services and programmes that aid rural development.
- (7) Local governments should play pro-active roles in engaging the services of agricultural extension officers and agents in teaching and dispersing modern farming methods to the farmers. This has the advantage of inculcating the necessary adaptive methods in farming with improved yield which guarantees food sufficiency and reliance.
- (8) The institutions and natural groups that can facilitate the attainment of the objectives of rural development such as cooperative movements, local/town improvement unions, National Directorate of Employment, Cooperative and Agricultural Banks should be strengthened and linked in a positive manner in order to galvanise rural development in a sustainable manner.

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