

Local Government as Third Tier of Government: Role, Function and Challenges— A Revisitation

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Introduction

The idea of local government is derived from the concept of decentralization. According to the United Nations, (1962) decentralization, refers to the transfer of authority on a geographic basis whether by deconcentration (i.e. delegation) of authority to field units of the same Department or level of government, or by devolution of authority to local government units or special statutory bodies.

Government could therefore decentralize a really or functionally. But from the definition of the United Nations, one can discern that there are two principal forms of decentralization of powers and functions of government which are by deconcentration and devolution.

Deconcentration involves the delegation of responsibility and authority by the central government to staff of ministries who are situated outside the headquarters. What is emphasised here is the transfer of ultimate authority in decision making from the parent ministry concerned. Agricultural extension workers of the Ministry of Agriculture are typical manifestation of the concept of deconcentration.

The second form of deconcentration is known as devolution. Devolution involves giving legal powers to sub-national units to discharge specified or residual functions on behalf of the central government. It involves the actual transfer of functions and powers rather than a mere delegation, as is the case with deconcentration. Local government is therefore directly an aspect of devolution of

powers and authority. Local government itself is defined by the United Nations (1959), as a Political sub-division of a nation which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local affairs, including the power to impose taxes. The governing body of such an entity is steered or otherwise locally selected.

However, we must note that the breakdown of decentralization into deconcentration and devolution does not necessarily mean either one or the other in a political system. This is because public administration in all countries contain elements of both deconcentration and devolution. Usually, it is not a question of one or the other, but the balance between devolution and deconcentration. Therefore, there is always of that components in any political system. It usually depends on which of them is emphasized.

The Purpose of Local Government

The main purpose of local government is to effectively and efficiently establish and maintain services and utilities in order to cater for the basic needs of the people, majority of who live in the rural areas especially in countries of the South. Local government is therefore expected to be more effective and efficient than the central government in the establishment and maintenance of particular services. This is because there were both administrative and political difficulties for any government that undertake a wide variety of service and utilities from the national headquarters. This usually slows down the speed of decision making and the administration in general.

Clearly, therefore, the centralization of governmental functions leads to hindrances and wasted effort. For example, approval is sought at the highest level of government even for petty purchases and employment of even staff of the lowest cadre. Of course, the difficulties and problems of decentralization are further compounded in a large and complex country like Nigeria. This is because here, you have people living mainly in the rural areas with

a high level of illiteracy. You also have poor communications and transport, especially in the rural areas and a high attachment to different communities. Therefore, it is expected that the devolution of powers to sub-national units of local government helps to decongest government in the headquarters thereby bringing about greater effectiveness and efficiency in administration generally.

Another important purpose of local government is the realization of democratic self-government. Democracy involves two main features of decision making. Firstly, the operation of authoritative decision making whereby the authority to make certain decisions is displaced downward from the remote points near to the top of administrative hierarchies or outwards from central geographical locations, thus bringing the government closer to the people. Secondly democracy involves the devolution of power for direct involvement of elected representatives of the people in authoritative decision making. This means that at least the most important decisions are taken by the elected or nominated body derived from that few population. However, the representative body operate the implementation of policies by the executive. This explains why one of the declared objectives of the local government reforms of 1976 in Nigeria was, "To facilitate the exercise of democratic self government close to the local levels of our society, and to encourage initiatives and leadership potential."

If one compares the two purposes of local government looked at so far i.e. being an instrument of development and that of local democracy, it looks as if the former is more important. For, after all, democracy has meaning only when it has an affinity with the upliftment of the quality of the generality of the people. And the emphasis laid on local government as an instrument for development is based on the premise that small units of government will stimulate grassroots participation in development activities. It is ascertained that within small communities, the people have the initiative, enthusiasm, and concentration of energies to adopt and enrich national policies and make

development plans of the central government more realistic to local needs and local circumstances. To Maddick, (1971),

That national policies must apply is clear enough but how they are fitted into local circumstances, how enriched by the local inventiveness, how supported by local actions, and how brought into a comprehensive plan to meet the detailed needs of every local area is a problem which can be solved by applying local understanding, local knowledge, professional skills, and enthusiasm and initiative through a locally accountable government operating within those policies.

This is why the United Nations, (1962) asserts that there are two agents in the process of change, the people and their government, development essentially results from continued mutual support.

Local government is also used as a mechanism for nation-building in countries with problems of national unity. The system of local government in such countries like Nigeria is therefore designed to stimulate consolidation and reinforcement of national unity and the reduction of centrifugal forces. Governments introduce representative local government as a vehicle for nation building and the people's needs and aspirations are met through the efforts of their local governments, with their own participation and this is considered as contributing towards their identifying with the national government.

However, it is to be realised that no government is guided by a single objective in its quest for a system of local government. Also, there are differences in weight that each government gives to some of these given objectives of local government. Sometimes, it could be based either on the political ideology of the central ruling elite or it could just be a matter of political experience. It is also interesting to note that there may be conflict and contradictions between the objectives of local government. For example, democratic control may require a structure of local government which is inconsistent with efficiency; efforts to establish national

unity may conflict with the promotion of local democratic institutions; a local government structure which is suitable for social and economic development may affect the intensity of democratic participation.

But the conflict and contradictions arising from the quest to achieve the objectives of local government seem to be more with regards to the objectives of realizing efficiency in the administration of services and utilities at the local level and at the same time attaining democracy. The demands of efficiency in administration require larger units of local government to ensure optimal catchment areas of public services. But on the other hand, democracy demands that the size of local government units should be reasonably small to bring the people closer to the government so as to enhance grassroots participation.

In the final analysis, local government is accepted as an instrument for the realization of grassroots participation in politics, national unity, the development of leadership at the local level as a communication channel between the government and the people, and above all, as a mechanism for socio-economic and political change at the focal level of any society. But then, these laudable objectives of local government should not blind us to some of the problems or disadvantages of local government which many times seem to be more glaring than the advantages of having local movement.

The Main Problem Facing Local Government

One of the most glaring problems of local government is the difficulty of reconciling the achievement of a uniform, nation-wide or State Policy with the necessity of realising local autonomy through the local governments. Local government sometimes leads to too narrow or short-sighted management which does not take cognizance of national objectives. For example, in the late 1970s huge sums of money channeled to local governments in Nigeria for the highly desirable educational programme, the

Universal Primary Education (UPE), and for payment of teachers salaries were diverted into the building of guest houses and quarters for chairmen and councilors.

Also, when you have devolution of powers of decision making without central guidance and supervision, it can become harmful and wasteful. For example, when you have widespread financial devolution without adequate central government audit control, as was the case during the Third Republic under the Babangida administration corruption and abuse of office becomes the result. Too much devolution of functions of local governments also leads to unsatisfactory or even non-performance of these functions.

This situation occurs especially when the local governments lack the technical staff and requisite funds with which to execute the functions devolved. This is why the form and degree of devolution to local government must be adopted to circumstances, including the readiness of people to accept and discharge responsibilities.

However, to fully discuss the problems of local government system in Nigeria may require a recourse to its historical evolution in Nigeria which has been trickled elsewhere (Sorkaa, 1976 and Sorkaa 1987). Suffice it to say here that the intention here is to identify and discuss those problems facing local government under certain categories and to offer or suggest possible solutions to such handicaps. These categories are:

- i. Relations between local government and the central (State) and government;
- ii. The staffing of local government;
- iii. Financing local government; and,
- iv. Politics, political leads-ship and local government.

The Relationship between Local Government and the State Government

Local governments are not autonomous units from the State or central government. They are created and derive their powers and

functions for the State or Federal Government. This means therefore that the structure of local government and the degree of its local autonomy, or State control within which it functions is mainly the handwork of the state and the Federal Government. However, the degree of control and autonomy differs from country to country, but most times, it is mainly derivative from the attitude of the central government to local government that exists in a particular country.

But central control does not necessarily mean the reduction of local government initiative, freedom or effectiveness, instead it means its guidance and improvement, as well as providing the necessary guidelines for local government to work within the broad policy of central government. But unfortunately, more often than not, the guidance of local government by the state governments gets transformed into supervision and to control and even sometimes, demands for subservience. But then, if local governments are to play an important role in the development of the grassroots of any society, they must be given important functions and powers to carry them out satisfactorily. For local governments can only attract local communities interest and coordinate development effects of the people at the local community levels if they actually render important services.

However, we have already alluded to the fact that widespread devolution of powers without central guidance and supervision becomes harmful and wasteful. This is especially true of financial devolution without adequate central government audit control. This is why the form and degree of devolution must be in consonance with the readiness of the people to accept and discharge responsibilities. At the same time, there is the need to emphasize the accountability and responsiveness of the top functionaries of local government to go hand in hand with the semi-autonomy given them.

Recently, local governments in Nigeria have been complaining about too much control over their powers of staffing finances and

too many directives coming from the state government. Particularly in some to them has been the removal of some of their funds coming from the Federation account ostensibly to achieve harmony in some of the broad policies of the State affecting local governments. It should be borne in mind however that the extent of the financial control sometimes is mainly a derivation from the nature and character of the existing government structure of command and hierarchy whereby even Military administrators are on military posting and answerable to Abuja for all that they do the same pattern of governance seems to have been extended to the local government system. But as said earlier, central control should not necessarily the reduction in the local government initiative, freedom or effectiveness but guidance and improvement and the creation of enabling environment for local government to work within the broad policy of the State and Federal Governments.

The Staffing of Local Government

There is the need for local government staff to have the requisite qualification, status and experience to be able to interpret decisions and policies and execute same. The salaries, society, promotion prospects, and the responsibility of the staff should be such that can attract and retain sufficiently qualified and efficient personnel.

In the history of the local government system in Nigeria this has hardly been the case. The creations of more states in Nigeria usually leads to siphoning of some of the experienced and qualified staff of local government to the State civil service. The era of party politics also immensely affects the recruitment, discipline and conditions of service of the staff of the local government. During such an era, a staff has to be seen to be a member of the ruling party sometimes to his job.

The Local Government Service Board is expected to employ and discipline staff as well as assure adequate remuneration for them. In Benue State, one frequently hears about lack of a proper

procedure for the appointing of heads of departments of local government to the extent that senior officers end up having their juniors foisted on them as heads of departments. Also, the practice of transferring junior officers in the State civil service to go and head their more senior colleagues within the local government system does not augur well for control and harmony towards the attainment of the stated goals of local government.

In the final analysis, the success or failure of local government depends largely on the availability of qualified staff, on the rapport between the staff and the people, as well as on the ability of such staff to work effectively together plus the support they receive from the state Government.

Financing Local Government

According to the report of the Nations Conference on Local Government held at the Institute of Administration, University of Ife, from April 29 to May 3, 1969, the success or failure and the effective or ineffective of local government must, in the final analysis, depend on the financial resources available to the individual local authorities and the way these resources are utilized. Adequate finances for the local governments to deliver the goods at the local of the society is therefore fundamental to the viability of the local government institutions.

The need arises therefore for local governments to have not just adequate funds to execute development programmes, but to raise a substantial part of these funds from their own internal revenue generation to further ensure that autonomy of local governments. A situation whereby most of local governments in Nigeria rely on 80 percent of their funds from the Federation account is not healthy for the development of local government as a third tier of government. One area of revenue generation which has not been adequately utilized due to certain obvious problems but which promise to be potentially the main source of revenue for local government, is property tax.

The problems of administrating this tax are quite immense, apart from the technical difficulties; those to be taxed are rich and powerful in the society who usually hardly pay tax. There is the urgent need for local governments to seriously explore ways of collecting these taxes and boosting the amount of money available to them to pursue and implement development programmes.

Politics, Political Leadership and Local Government

The crux of the matter centers on why we continue to have these problems facing local government unabated despite their repeated articulation by scholars and practitioners of local government. Actually, the continuity and persistence of the problems of local government necessitate a recourse to the character and nature of the State in Africa in general and the evolution of the local government system in the history of Nigeria in particular. Suffice it to say here that given the much reliance of the colonial powers on the local system as an instrument of oppression, subjugation and exploitation of the colonized, and given also that the inherited colonial economy of Nigeria, has imposed a certain logic and rigidity on the future development of Nigeria, most times, the local government are also used today mainly by the governing class to furnish their interests.

Politics is mainly about the authoritative allocation of resources of the country in order to take care of the basic needs and aspirations of the people. It is therefore the policies of the government, which is an instrument of the State, that determines the ability or inability of its programmes and projects to uplift citizens' social and economic lives. However, of prime importance is the interest of those who are in power; clearly this informs the kind of policies they uphold whether such are in congruence with the expectations of the people in terms of meeting their basic needs or not.

This explains why of immense significance to the poverty of Nigerians in all its ramifications has been the nature of practice of

politics. A characteristic of politics in the Nigerian society generally is that political leaders who inherited political power from the departing colonial powers at the time of independence had political power but not economic power. Hence they established the political culture of too much reliance on political power as the avenue for creating financial empire for most political leaders in office. Much of the failure of political leaders at all levels of government is mainly traceable to this tendency of making political power the means of accumulation of wealth and property.

The struggle for power among the top functionaries of local government, which quite often brings its work to a standstill, is usually mainly a derivative of the quest to corner the resources of the local government through primitive accumulation. Sometimes, the central government's excessive control over the affairs of local governments so as to redirect them to foster private entrepreneurial activities of the central government officials.

Today, generally in Nigeria, the power structure is definitely not in the interest of the local government system. There is still the need for a restructuring of the federal system in Nigeria in order to devolve more powers and functions to the States and local governments, respectively. What we have today in vogue in the local government - central government relationship is local administration and not local government. It is unfortunate that the hitherto existing political and economic structures of the pre and the immediate post-independence years have generally changed in Nigeria into highly centralized values and institutions. This has been mainly the handiwork of the military in power and the intellectual class with the coming of the oil boom.

It is important to stress the fact that within the first 13 years of military rule in Nigeria, the federal system became a unitary system in federal disguise (Olowo, 1993). Resources, the basis of power, became highly centralized in the federal executive. For example, in 1960 the regional governments expenditure put together constituted about 90 percent of the total expenditure of the

Federation. But in 1990, State governments spent only 20.5 percent, local governments 9.9 percent and the Federal Government, 70.6 percent. What is more, the various constitutions that have been created have given buoyant revenue to the Federal Government at the expense of State and local governments. Also, the commanding heights of the economy remain under the exclusive control and management of the Federal Government.

Furthermore, in 1975, the public service in Nigeria was reformed. This reform exercise administratively subjugated all institutions to the Federal Civil Service. The key officers of the federal civil service now became super permanent secretaries. Local governments were reformed in 1976 nationwide, a reform initiated for the first time by the Federal Government. The reforms in practice, to all intents and purposes effectively brought local governments even more firmly under the State and Federal Government control.

The dire effect of this centralization tendency has been the creation of a dependency syndrome by the States and local governments on the Federal Government. But most important of all, this centralization and dependency on oil revenues led to an undermining of the State and local governments in two main areas. Firstly, it weakened the need for internal revenue generation and accountability. For oil became responsible for more than 80 percent of total public resources. Secondly, the centralization of resources at the centre has led to the powerful pressure that is geared towards sharing the nation's resources rather than production and internal revenue generation.

However, despite this picture of centralization painted and its attendant consequences, we have already emphasized that widespread devolution of powers without central guidance supervision becomes harmful and wasteful. This pertains mainly to financial devolution without adequate State government audit control. Obviously, there is a high incidence of unethical behaviour and corruption in the local government system. In fact, the

corruption and general unethical behaviour in the local government is more glaring than other levels of government because of its closeness to the people. It means therefore that despite the limited ongoing within local government to the extent that the Chairman's new dress is noticed by many in the local government.

Corruption and unethical behaviour has eaten deep into the fabric of the local government system thereby warranting greater surveillance and control by the State government. Most top functionaries of local government are not always objective. Administrative work is often personalized; rules are not always taken seriously and sometimes, even discarded completely.

Significantly, there is therefore a high incidence of corrupt use of office, lack of integrity and the unlawful appropriation of public funds, especially internally generated revenue, for personal aggrandizement. This is the situation that the state governments usually point to as warranting greater control and the corresponding loss of autonomy by the local government.

Clearly one of the most crucial problems facing the local government system in Nigeria generally is therefore how to strike a balance between the achievement of a uniform State wide policy and at the same time realize local autonomy through local governance. Next is therefore a brief look at how these problems can be overcome.

The most important direction of the future of the local government system in Nigeria should be to return to the situation before the successive military regimes in Nigeria. This involves the decentralization of resources and powers within a truly federal system. But the autonomy of local government and the way these resources are used. The power of a local government should depend on the availability of adequate finances to cater for the basic needs of the people. This calls for local governments to have a substantial part of their funds from their own internal revenue generation to ensure their own autonomy. The situation that exists today

whereby most of the local governments rely on 80 percent of their funds from the Federation account is not healthy for the development of local government as a third tier of government.

There is the need to tap new areas of revenue generation for the local governments. One of these which promise to be most lucrative is property rating. It has problems of implementation but when these are overcome, it may come to be the main source of revenue for local government. But a more serious problem facing the financing of local governments is the manner in which the finances so generated are spent. There is definitely room for improvement in the financial management of the local government system. Without sound financial management in the system, the state government would have no choice but to exercise greater control over the affairs of the local governments.

But the main solution to the over centralization of power and resources in the relationship among the three tier system of government in Nigeria in the final analysis lies with an introduction of a democratic system of government both at the grassroots and the centre. This would entail governance that is derivative of the people's needs and aspirations through their elected representatives. A look at the general quality of the present elected representatives of the people in the persons of chairmen and councilors shows a marked difference from what used to be the situation. The experience and educational qualification of the people who are to man the local government system has gone up. One hopes that the ethical standard and are to man the local government system has gone up. One hopes that the ethical standard and sense of discipline and accountability will also show in the manner in which public affairs are managed. This is the way to achieve a new structure of power that would devolve more powers and responsibility to the local governments. A corrupt, decadent and irresponsible political leadership cannot bring about a viable system of local government.

Finally, the quality of the political leadership is basic to the creation of a new power structure that devolves more powers and functions to the local governments in Nigeria. There is definitely light at the end of the tunnel given that the quality of the present local government top functionaries in terms of character, qualifications and experiences is high. With the coming to power of a civilian democratic government in May 1999, there is definitely going to be a positive change in the power structure in Nigeria towards greater decentralization of powers and responsibility to the sub-national units of States and especially the local government system. The expectations of Nigerians from the Obasanjo government are very high deriving from the failure of the successive military regimes in Nigeria, in this regard, I believe that the incoming civilian government will not fail us; but we need to work towards its attainment. May it come to pass.

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