

The Local Government System in Nigeria: Evolving a New Development Paradigm

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Abstract: The ancient Greeks who are credited with being the first to practice democracy identified the 'pursuit of happiness' as one of the major reasons for the establishment of modern governments. They also identified the pursuit of the 'common good' as the responsibility of government at all levels. By their operational structure, Local Governments are conceived to play a decisive role in the lives of ordinary citizens who have little chance of making contact with the State or distant Federal Government tiers of public administration. The success of Nigeria's colonial enterprise was largely predicated on the effectiveness of a functional Native Authority structure that was closest to the people and touched their lives in innumerable ways that guaranteed its relevance. Over time, however, administrative incapacity, military rule and undue civilian political interference combined with other extraneous factors to undermine the capacity of Local Governments in Nigeria to deliver on their core mandate. Self-serving reforms worsened a bad case scenario by rendering this important system of government dependent on State Governments that played politics with it. This paper examines the parlous state of the Local Government system in Nigeria today and proffers some solutions on how the system can return to the gold standards that once made it relevant to the citizens. The recommendations include a clearly defined constitutional framework that should guarantee Local Government autonomy within Nigeria's federal system, complete financial autonomy and professionalising Local Government Service to attract competent personnel with capacity to run the system in an efficient and cost-effective manner.

Key words: Local Government system, New development

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I. INTRODUCTION

*We will strive increasingly to quicken
the public sense of duty; that thus...we
will transmit this city not only not
less, but greater, better, and more
beautiful than it was transmitted
to us.*

Oath of office of Council members in ancient city of Athens

This paper seeks to draw attention to the need for policy makers and administrators to help Local Governments to attain their full potentials in Nigeria's federal system that often operates like a disguised unitary portfolio of pecuniary interests. The objective is to catalyse a paradigm shift that would be mutually beneficial to all stakeholders in the affairs of Local Governments in Nigeria. Local Governments, whether they are in Khana, Port Harcourt City, Uyo, Calabar, Kaduna, Kano, Enugu, Gboko, Kebbi, Lagos, Ibadan, Maiduguri, Daura, Benin or Mubi, generally have the same characteristics and operational structure. They have all drifted away from their core mandate of catering to the pressing needs of the people, to their current 'anything-goes' disposition that ordinary Nigerians are increasingly loudly complaining about today.

There is a general chorus of public concern about the way Local Governments work in Nigeria to fester the pecuniary interest of narrowly-defined groups today. Gone are the days when Local Governments worked in concert with State and Federal Governments to secure the general good in an efficient, transparent and cost-effective manner that are devoid of the crass banalities that rule their profane corridors today. The Chairman and

his Councillors are hardly on ground to strategise on policy conception and implementation. The Chairman is a 'Visiting Professor' as we have in the university system. Fridays are 'pay days', because those are days when revenues allocated or collected are shared according the approved formula by the 'powers and principalities' that control the system from a distance. I notice that some faces are already stiffening up and it would, therefore, be in my own interest to enter the *caveat emptor* at this point.

Before I attempt to pinpoint where the rain began to beat us, as our late countryman, Chinua Achebe once put it in his masterpiece booklet: *The Trouble with Nigeria*, I wish to enter an anticipatory apology for the rest of what I will say here. The 'Eleventh Commandment' warns thus: "Thou shall not take the generosity of thy host for granted", and that is exactly what I am doing by boldly standing here to tell leaders and members of NULGE who invited me to speak that they preside over a prostrate system that is in dire need of remedial measures and a paradigm shift. More so, I hold them partly responsible for what has gone wrong in the system they operate. In case you are already foraging through your *Google* search engine, let me quickly warn that you will not find the 'Eleventh Commandment' in the *Holy Bible* and don't also ask me where I found it. Without waiting to find out if my apology has been accepted, let me now proceed apace with my discourse on the topic assigned to me; **THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM IN NIGERIA: EVOLVING A NEW DEVELOPMENT PARADIGM.**

ORIGINAL CONCEPT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Agbodike *et. al.* describes Local Government as "the substructure upon which the superstructure of the State and Federal Governments are erected." The concept of a third-tier government is better understood in the context of the 1976 Local Government Reforms, which defines it as government at the local level that exercises power through representative councils established by law.

These powers should give the council 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 compliment the activities of the state and federal governments in their areas and to ensure devolution of functions to their councils and through the active participation of the people and traditional institutions (FRN, 1976).

Arnstein submits that in practice, participation in Local Government affairs can develop into three main types, namely; non-participation, degree of tokenism, and degree of citizen participation (1969, p.216-7). In this context, participation simply refers to allowing space for the people to freely "discuss their own (developmental) problems and priorities". Experts in Nigeria's Local Government evolution clearly identify four stages in the operation and progressive decay of the system; namely, colonial rule, period of democratisation, military centralisation and the era of half-hearted reforms (especially 1976, 1979).

Perhaps, the first question we should ask ourselves is: Why were Local Governments established? The obvious answer is that they were put in place to make the impact of government felt where it matters most—at the rural levels, usually in remote villages and inaccessible hamlets that regard 'government' as a fairy tale told by returnees and visitors from big cities. The existence of Local Governments in urban areas is moot and merely complementary as they operate in the shadow of State Governments that moderate and eclipse their identities. For instance, the Abuja Municipal Council or Port Harcourt City Council can largely be viewed from the prism of the Federal Capital Development Authority (FCDA) and Rivers State Government. That may be why LGAs that operate in big cities are referred to as either *City* or *Municipal Councils*.

By their original conception, Local Governments enable people in rural areas to complain to some near entity about their needs and service failure. According to Abdulhamid and Chima (2015), the Local Government reforms of 1976 and 1979 were aimed at accelerating "development and to enable the local population participate and hold those in power accountable for their governance roles." They recognise, however that a true third tier of government has never taken off in Nigeria as a potent system to mobilise people to participate in local governance of their own affairs. They have been held back by elaborate federal and state conspiratorial bureaucratic obstacles that have had nonsense of their continued existence.

The colonial government established County Councils in some places and ran local communities indirectly through already existing local administration systems in other places to, raise taxes, save cost and gain total control over the local people. There was no pretence by the colonial administrators to democratise or empower Local Governments to plan or deliver development at that critical level of governance. There is near general agreement among experts on the subject that colonial administration of the Local Government system was never meant to deliver these so-called 'democracy dividends' to the people at the grassroots.

THE BEGINNING AND THE CONSTITUTIONAL OBSTACLES

The Native Authority Ordinance of 1916 decreed by the British colonial administration was understandably modelled in such a way to reflect existing native administrative structures across Nigeria. According to Ikeanyibe (2009), the Native Authority Ordinance was the first legal framework that gave teeth to the system of Indirect Rule championed by Lord Frederick Lugard, who claimed to have been empowered with a *Dual Mandate* from the Colonial Office. Now, experts are in agreement that the root of the current identity crisis bedevilling the Local Government system in Nigeria is the lack of a proper constitutional framework that would have clearly delineated its powers and functions in relation to the Federal and State Governments. That is the root of the identity crisis the Local Government system faces right up to this moment.

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria currently makes no direct provision for the Local Government system as the “third tier of government”. As an appendage of State Governments, the Local Government system operates at the whims and caprices of powerful Governors and their mostly rubber-stamp Houses of Assembly. Abdulhamid and Chima point out that no mention is made of Local Government in the Concurrent Legislative List, which further undermines its legitimacy and flexibility to deliver democracy dividends to people at the grassroot level of governance.

Curiously enough, this important tier of governance is only listed in the Fourth Schedule of the 1999 Constitution as administrative units under the iron-grip of State Governments. A previously unintended administrative ‘speed breaker’ known as Ministry of Local Government Affairs further perfected and imposed life jail term for the Local Government system in Nigeria. Some critics say it is a death sentence that is yet to be commuted by a much-anticipated constitutional guarantee of this important tier of government! Mark you; this all-powerful Ministry of Local Government Affairs was originally conceived as a general overseer without regulatory powers over the third tier of government. The Ministry’s twin brother is the suffocating Local Government Service Commission which regulates personnel matters and monitors the operational structure of the Councils from the comfort of the State capital.

In 1976, the Dasuki Reforms report sought to confer financial autonomy to Local Governments; but before the drums were rolled out to celebrate the feat, in came the 1999 Constitution (as amended), which mischievously legislated a “State Joint Local Government Account” (SJLGA) which promptly and finally nullified any hope of such autonomy for the third tier of government. Without constitutional guarantee of their status and clearly-defined financial autonomy, the Local Government system lies prostrate, and as we have seen, it has not made serious impact as the unit of government that is closest to the masses.

HOW THE LGA SYSTEM OPERATES NOW

The administrative ‘climate change’ affected the Local Government system in 1950, when it benefitted from democratic infusion by way of the passage of the *Local Government Ordinance* by the defunct Eastern House of Assembly. This deft move partially assuaged the worries of critics of the system who accused it of lacking democratic credentials and right personnel. The democratic hurricane caught up with the other regions in the years ahead and this welcome development attracted some qualified personnel who helped to run the system in a proper manner only for a short period. With the introduction of a legislative arm, councillors and supervisors, including finance and general purposes outlet, knowledgeable citizens interested in robust debate subscribed to serve in the system. As Sekibo (2016) submits:

Debates in the legislature are carried out in the full public glare. This makes members of the public—including civil society organisations and professional bodies of different fields—take interest and follow-up on the debate process.

Agbodike, *et al.* (2014) argue that “in a democratic local government system, people’s participation in the governmental affairs brings about better politics which impact positively on the lives of the people. Thus, where democracy is practised in the Local Government system, it opens up the political space for different individuals and groups to contribute to community development and human self-fulfilment.”

As time rolled by, however, unnecessary rivalries and muscle-flexing between the regions and federal government combined with other factors to erode the powers of the LGAs to the detriment of the intended beneficiaries of the system—the rural people.

The era of military rule (especially 1970—1999) witnessed suffocating central control of Local Governments in Nigeria. Not known for their tolerance of multiplicity of opinions, viewpoints and alternative ways of doing things, the military boxed everything into its dehydrating regimented command system without apologies. In the spirit of ‘immediate effect’ and not used to constitutional niceties, the men in uniform appointed mostly their preferred cronies, friends and family members to head the Local Government system as either ‘Sole Administrators’ or ‘Caretaker Chairmen’. These hand-picked appointees usually functioned under

no-nonsense State Military ‘Governors’ or ‘Administrators’ accountable only to their masters in Lagos, and later Abuja.

Under such regimented iron-grip of the system by the military, LGAs had very little or nothing for the target audiences in terms of quality service delivery. They, rather, became conveyor-belts for extended patronage to loyal cronies and friends. In addition, monies allocated to or internally generated by the Local Governments were simply frittered away on poorly thought-through white elephant projects and phantom schemes that delivered neither verifiable returns nor intrinsic value to stakeholders—especially in the neglected rural areas.

ENTER THE POLITICAL CLASS

If the military class did incalculable damage to the evolutionary development of the Local Government system, the advent of civil rule was akin to a swarm of locust invasion. It must be pointed out here that with all their institutional deficiencies, the military did not allow people without capacity to oversee the system. Between 1979 and 1985, and 1999 till date, the Local Government system has been haemorrhaging and continue to haemorrhage under successive civilian governments. Apart from total control of Local Government allocations under the objectionable State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA), the civilian era marked a radical departure from accountability and transparency in the system. Monthly allocations are deducted from source by voracious State Governments, while whatever remains are expended on settling local ‘godfathers’ and ‘godmothers’ who usually claim credit for recommending the Council Chairman to His Excellency for appointment, which is not a mean feat in Nigeria’s shark-infested political waters, where cronies are impatiently waiting in the wings to be “carried along.”

Not only do State Governors appoint their cronies to sensitive positions; they have taken the absurdity several notches higher by appointing known criminal elements and renegades to the position of Chairmen, Councillors and Supervisors with evident *hauteur*! Barely literate experts in the management of violence get lucrative appointments as reward for their *services* during elections and other special assignments. Such intellectually crippled personnel obviously lack the philosophical foundation for grassroots governance and the public decorum expected of public officers.

As it stands today, the Local Government system has totally veered off from its core mandate of catering to the needs of the local people. The bad news is that there is likely not going to be any reprieve in sight as the scenario keeps worsening by the day with each wrong-headed intervention from state and federal levels. What has sadly emerged is that politicians are evidently more interested in using the Local Government system to fester their own strategic election calculations and will do anything that would sculpture the third tier of government after their own image. It is practically impossible and impermissible for the Governor of a State to allow any form of autonomy for the Local Government system.

The solid evidence could be found in a recently proposed constitutional amendment meant to extricate the Local Government system from the iron-grip of the State Governments across the country. Notice how each State House of Assembly voted down the contentious bill on the instruction the Governor, who in practical terms, is the real power behind the House. His Imperial Excellency appoints ‘Caretaker Committee Chairmen’ who must do his bidding at all times. To ‘carry everybody along’, the Governor dissolves the ‘Committees’ at his earliest convenience with a new set of rules on how they must satisfy his wishes and desires. Extended patronage and unbridled corruption undermine the effectiveness of the third-tier to deliver service to the people. The masses are missing in action in this self-serving equation at the Local Government levels of governance.

There is no participatory approach to governance at the local level because the Local Government is regarded as an extension of the State Government and central legislation from Abuja. The Local Government becomes merely a conveyor-belt for disbursing federal allocations at the end of the month and no more! Half-hearted attempts at decentralisation of powers has further undermined the capacity of Local Governments to deliver on their core mandate as envisaged by the founding fathers. With less emasculation, political interference and cronyism, Local Governments can accomplish far more than they are doing at the moment. The list of malfeasance that undermine the capacity of the Local Government to deliver is far longer than what can be put down on paper. The last section of this paper is dedicated to finding solutions to the myriad of problems identified above.

IN SEARCH OF NEW DEVELOPMENTAL PARADIGMS

According to Widaningsih (2005), the new planning paradigm was declared by the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNSHS) 1994 in Nairobi. He further submits that the declaration recognises that new development planning should consider community participation, involvement of all interest groups, horizontal and vertical coordination, sustainability, financial feasibility, and interaction of physical and economic planning. The declaration recognises “the community as the main agent of development because it is the community that is directly impacted upon by development planning.”

Ikeanyibe, *et al.* (2017), refer to paradigm as stages of development that focus on new ways of achieving personal or organisational goals. Paradigm represents a shift in the management orientation of an institution with a view to better service delivery. From what has been itemised above, it is self-evident that the Local Government system in Nigeria is in dire need of a new paradigm shift if it is to make any meaningful impact in the lives of its intended beneficiaries. It is a situational irony that a system that was conceived to deliver development to rural people and urban municipal services has become so alienated from them to the extent that many people are calling for it to be scrapped altogether.

The remedy lies in opening the Local Government system to citizen participation that would generate a new network of governance. After all, it is only the beneficiaries of community development efforts that can 'negotiate shared understanding of ultimate programme goals.' The ability to get things done at the local levels of governance does not necessarily depend on a powerful regional or central authority that is far removed from the centre of action. Wholesale reforms and the political will to implement same is the only way to save the Local Government system from its parlous state. Civil Society groups and Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) should get fully involved in monitoring and holding operators of Local Governments to both constant scrutiny and account.

Local communities and local authorities can no longer continue to co-exist in a mutually exclusive relationship that breeds alienation and suspicion. Under the new paradigm, Local Governments must be made to accommodate and prioritise community needs, while drastically cutting down the unnecessary bureaucratic bottlenecks that bog down the system. The local communities must be allowed some political and administrative space to set their own priorities in the spirit of participatory grassroots democracy.

The Federal and State Governments must allow Local Governments enhanced operational space to design and manage their own developmental priorities based on community needs. Local Government leaders must identify and incorporate community and opinion leaders onto a veritable platform to make input in the planning of development. After all, it is a moot point that "People's participation in governmental affairs brings about better politics which impact positively on the lives of the people."

As Agbodike *et al.* (2014) declare:

...to achieve social change and general economic growth requires...spreading efforts so that local communities and individuals can participate to bring under ideal conditions, energy, enthusiasm and most important of all local development... activities local authorities provide the opportunity for local people to participate in local decision and local schemes within the general national policies, and to act above all, as local centres of initiative and activity conducive to development.

Shah and Shah (2005) submit that reforming the institutions of local governance requires agreement on three basic principles, namely; responsive, responsible and accountable governance, which they refer to as "citizen-centred governance" meant to involve all stakeholders in the system. At the centre of this new paradigm are what Afuda (2017) identify autonomy, state-local government joint account and service conditions, as areas that require urgent reforms to remove the third tier of government from life support and the intensive care unit. Local Governments cannot perform their functions in an effective manner if they continue to exist as extensions of State Governments as contained in the 1999 Constitution (as amended). They must be constitutionally guaranteed as federating units of the Federal Republic of Nigeria with in-built institutional mechanisms for self-regulation, transparency and accountability.

I am in total agreement with Akpan Ekpe, author of the scholarly paper *Inter governmental Relations in Nigeria: Concepts, Prospects and problems*, in his submission that policy makers should adopt appropriate cooperative bargaining (IGR), which allows the three levels of government to share powers and responsibilities that allow each tier comparative autonomy in their operational structure.

Beyond these, on their own, Local Governments must devise creative and innovative ways to generate some of their own revenue, without always waiting for allocations from the federation account. This should go side-by-side with fiscal discipline by Local Government authorities (Olojede, I., Banji, F. and Fatile, J. (2011).

From the foregoing, we can surmise that Local Governments in Nigeria have been stagnated by resistance to change or reluctance to embrace new paradigms in their policy making process. As Fukuyama (2012) declares:

...political decay occurs when political systems fail to adjust to changing circumstances. There is something like

the law of the conservation of institutions. Human beings are rule-following animals by nature; they are born to conform to the social norms they see around them and they entrench those rules with often transcendent meanings and values. When the surrounding environment changes and new challenges arise, there is often a disjunction between existing institutions and present needs. Those institutions are supported by legions of entrenched stakeholders who oppose any fundamental change.

That is exactly what is happening to Local Governments in Nigeria today—resistance to change due to entrenched stakeholder interest at all levels. In the final analysis, Local Governments in Nigeria must submit to a new paradigm shift that would lead to institutional change that would, in turn, bring them at par with global best practice in other parts of the world where they deliver on their core mandate to the local communities. Centralised political power translates to alienation of the people from the third tier of government that was originally conceived to cater for their interest. That must change for the third tier of government to live up to its name in the context of this discussion. Finally, there must be strategic planning, attitudinal change and consequent management to allow the system deliver on its mandate; not before the substructures and superstructures are fully in place at the Local Government level of governance.

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