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CONTENTS

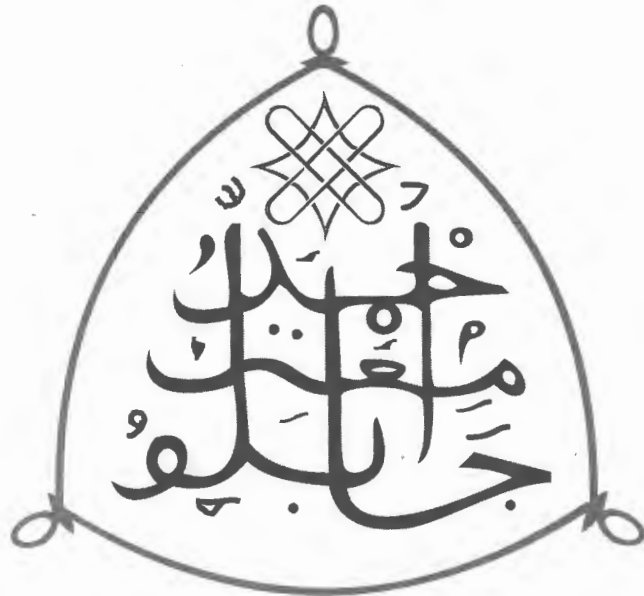
- Public Policy and State Bureaucracy in Post Independence Nigeria: The case of the 1998 Civil Service Reform and its Aftermath. (Abubakar Ali)
- Budget, Economic Growth and Sectorial Performance in Nigeria (1999-2008). (Popoola Abiodun)
- Local Government and the Localism Principle: A Review (Jide Ibietan)
- Devotions or Deconcentration: The Dilemma of Nigeria Local Government System in the 21st Century. (Pius Abang)
- Offences Commonly Committed by Local Government Functionaries in Nigeria. (Idiat F. Akande)

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE LOCALISM PRINCIPLE: A REVIEW

By

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this paper is to highlight that despite the efforts of Successive (central) governments in Nigeria, at strengthening local government administration through the initiation of several reforms, they have not been able to convert the opportunities and their proximity to the local populace into good account through qualitative service delivery. Proceeding from this, they have also not been able to justify their existence as a tier of government due to self-inflicted limitations which this paper explored. The paper is divided into: Abstract; Introduction; Conceptual discourse on local government and localism principle; A review of local government and the localism principle in the light of several reforms; Conclusion and recommendations. The paper observed that reforms must be backed by the right (people-centred) approach to governance and a general attitudinal reorientation on the part of political leadership. The paper canvassed for the autonomy of the local governments, increase in revenue generating efforts of this tier of government and a host of other reforms that can galvanise development in the grassroots.

INTRODUCTION

Local government administration has gone through a number of phases in Nigeria before and after independence. This is with a view to making them truly local to their environment, to achieve effective service delivery to the local populace and to mobilize local energies, initiatives and resources in furtherance of the development objective.

Predicated on the above, six phases are discernible namely: the colonial epoch; First republic (1960-1966); First military phase (1966-1979); Second republic (1979-1983); Second military era (1984-1999); and

Fourth civilian republic (May 29, 1999 to date). This paper takes a special interest in the reforms or aspect of the reforms that deals with local government and the entrenchment of the localism principle as a major thrust of the discourse.

CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE

The concept of Local Government and the Localism Principle will be explained in this section.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Some scholars have identified that local government is a product of decentralized administration (Adamolekun,

2002:49-50 and Ezeani, 2004:1-7). Consequently, they proceeded to discuss the various forms of decentralization as "Deconcentration"; "Delegation"; and "Devolution" Adamolekun (2002:50) added fiscal decentralization which refers "specifically to the transfer of responsibility for budgets and financial decisions from higher to lower levels of government". In view of the fact that this latter type of decentralization constitutes the heart of relationship between central government and sub-national government units, it is mostly discussed under Intergovernmental Fiscal Relations.

Among the type of decentralization mentioned above, the ideal type of local government is usually discussed under devolution which implies granting of powers and responsibilities over specific functions by the central government to local government which in theory operates outside the control of the central government. Devolution connotes democratic decentralization in which the powers granted to local governments are backed by effective resources and a legal personality to operate. The extent to which this condition applies will form a different section of this paper. Deconcentration which implies administrative or bureaucratic decentralization refers to the transfer of management responsibilities and resources to agents of the central government located outside the headquarters at one or more levels. These field offices of the central government are known as field administration.

Delegation as an extensive form of decentralization amounts to granting authority and managerial responsibility for specific functions to organisations outside the central government structure. These organisations and agencies enjoy varying degrees of autonomy and according to

Ezeani (2004:4), they include special statutory bodies; public corporations; regional planning and Area Development Authorities.

Anele (2008:400) operationalised local government thus:

as a territorially demarcated non-sovereign community, members of which share common interest and feel attached to one another, has legal right and power to sue and could be sued, has governmental machinery for the day-to-day administration of the area, responsible for the development and transformation of its area of jurisdiction, and subordinate to the central government.

He inferred from the definition that a local government has territory, population and government machinery. However, the above definition purports more than that. Implied in the definition are: locality principle; legal personality; subordinate status to the central government; and service delivery geared towards the development and transformation of its area of jurisdiction (locality). To what extent does the third tier of government in Nigeria perceive its roles as developmental and transformational? Attempts would be made to answer this under the section dealing with: Review of local government and Localism Principle.

Local Government is "generally meant to be a system of territorial units with defined boundaries, legal identity, institutional structured powers and duties laid down in general and special statutes and a degree of financial and other autonomy" (Hills, 1974:23). This definition seem to underline the essence of successive local government reforms in Nigeria, and more importantly underscoring the Fourth schedule of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution in which the functions and duties of local governments were clearly spelt out.

However, do they have the type of autonomy (financially and in other areas) as envisioned by Hills (1974), especially against the backdrop of the role of state governments in supervising local government and through statutory allocations in the name of States-Local Governments Joint Accounts under which some state governments defraud their local governments.

Onyeoziri (2005:15-27) attempted to resolve the above puzzle while alluding to the inconsistencies that characterise the logic of federal practice especially in Nigeria where each level/tier of government which is supposed to be coordinate and independent in its sphere become subordinated and this is contrary to the letter and spirit of federalism as advocated by K. C. Wheare who developed the original idea and treatise of federalism. Onyeoziri (2005) corroborated that federalism creates certain liabilities for the integrity of the state which derives from the tension that characterizes the inconsistencies in their logic - the logic of centralization and decentralization. The imperfections in state institutions also create some disability for federal practice. He therefore cautioned on the lacuna in discussing federalism without backing it with "the theory of state" (which is the infrastructure) onto which federalism is grafted. Thus, a mutual reinforcement of the two variables offers a reliable strategy in guaranteeing stable federal arrangements.

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 service delivery and resource mobilization. Political participation concerns the desire to involve local citizens in the management of their

(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)

The National Guidelines for Reform of local government (1976:1) defines local governments 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 appears more comprehensive and clearer in content. It leaves no one in doubt as to the expected place and role of local government in governance and as a veritable agent of development and grassroots participation in the democratic process. In addition, it emphasizes the localism principle in the conduct of affairs and in service delivery at the third tier, which is the focus of the next section of this paper.

True to type, local government must be representative, autonomous to a reasonable degree; must be functional. It must also be technically and economically viable. It has to be representative in the

sense that the policies made by it must reflect the wishes of the people; and to mobilize the local populace for self development. Reference to autonomy here is predicated on policy formulating and implementing ability together with independence on personnel matters of local government. It must be functional to carry out its aims and objectives. Economic viability means ability to generate financial resources internally while technical viability connotes the competence and expertise of its personnel in discharging duties and functions assigned to them. Scholars have argued however that local government's performance on internally generated revenue is poor due to the prevalence of poverty, tax evasion, corruption, fraud and outright diversion of funds among revenue officials and over dependence on statutory allocation (Duru, 2001:104-105; Ezeani, 2006:262-263).

LOCALISM PRINCIPLE: AN EXPLANATION

Localism implies interest in a district; favouring of what is local or of ideas generated or resulting from a locality. This paper therefore operationalises the localism principle in the light of locality of administration, elected membership of a council and rendering of local community oriented services geared towards the positive transformation and development of the locality. It is noteworthy that care is taken by this paper, not to embark on general/blanket reference to local government as rural areas, since some are urban based.

Localism can also imply that the existence and practices of the grassroots administration are rooted in the collective preferences of the local people. Put differently, for local government to maintain its localness, it must respond adequately to local environmental stimuli by reflecting the

aspirations and yearnings of people in the locality.

It is plausible to argue that localness connotes being representative of locality; authority to allocate substantial resources and administer a range of functions, which benefits a wide spectrum of people in the area.

Ezeani (2006:258) posited that a number of reasons underscore the creation of local governments. Germane to this paper are those reasons which elaborate the localism principle. One of such reasons is to make appropriate services and development activities responsive to local wishes and initiatives by devolving or delegating them to local representative bodies.

Other reasons highlighting this principle are: Local governments are seen as an efficient agent for providing services that are local in character, and in view of its proximity to the people, they can provide certain services far more efficiently than other tiers of government; to assist other tiers of government carry out their functions and policies, especially those areas requiring local knowledge and participation for successful execution; and to sensitize and mobilize the various communities in their areas of authority in order to get involved in the overall development of their areas.

Uphoff and Esman in Ezeani (2004:6) in an attempt to reinforce the relevance of the localism principle in grassroots transformation submitted that "local institutions which are separated and isolated from other levels are likely to be important developmentally". This averment does not seem to approximate the Nigerian situation, especially during this democratic dispensation.

The reality of the Nigerian electoral practice and governance makes a mockery of successive reference to elected local representatives and democracy in the foregoing discourse. 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 the local populace are not usually delivered by the representatives. The next section is devoted to the review on localism principle and the extent to which local governments and successive Nigerian administrations justified the principle.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND LOCALISM PRINCIPLE: A REVIEW

In colonial Nigeria, local government functioned as Native Authority (system) in which the traditional institutions co-habited with the colonialists. In some parts of the country (Northern Nigeria) where indirect rule succeeded, the tradition and customs of the people were duly recognized and the Native Authority/administration was built on it.

The beginning of the first phase of local government in Nigeria found its expression in the 1947 colonial dispatch to colonial governors by the British Secretary of State for Colonies-Greech Jones in this form:

The encouragement of local political interest and the building up of a system of efficient and democratic (later representative) local government is a cardinal feature of the British policy in Africa. It now recognized that the political progress of the territories is dependent on the development of responsibility in local government. That without sound local government, a democratic political system at the centre is not possible, and that, if social services are to be built up and expanded, there must be sufficient organs of local government directly

representative of the people to control and operate them (Jones, 1947:1).

James Guffitts (successor to Greech Jones) recognized the importance of efficient and democratic local government when he affirmed that:

No system can be useful unless it is efficient enough to run the services which the people now require. No system can endure unless it is adequately representative of the people. Efficiency and a representative character are therefore what everybody concerned with local government in Africa must aim at ...An effective system of local government is vital to our whole policy in Africa. Neither economic development, social development nor political development can come to effective fruition without it.

(Gruffitts, 1951).

The foregoing demonstrates open intention on the part of the colonial government on local administration. How truly local or native were the so-called native authorities of the colonial period? It is true to an extent that the Indirect Rule System was built on the traditions of the people, making use of the traditional institutions, but to what extent did these institutions reflect the yearnings of the people? To what extent did the traditional chieftains bear his people in mind when taking actions or conceding certain issues?

There were series of action bothering on unrest, social protests and breakdown of order as a result of rudimentary British administration through local institutions. The Hut-tax war among the Temne-Mende people in Sierra-Leone on account of imposition of taxes, and the Ijaiye War and the 1929 Aba women riots were cases in point.

Several attempts had been made since 1960 with respect to local government administration, but none was as spectacular as the 1976 Local Government Reforms. It was in no way intended to be a new system but a mere change in function, organization, role and control brought about in response to the changing circumstances and needs of the time and overall development of the nation. For example, in order to maintain uniform standard in the size of the councils, a minimum population of 150,000 and maximum of 800,000 people per local government was stipulated by the reform. Although these figures were reviewed downwards to between 1000,000 and 150,000 people including a minimum tax paying population of 20,000 people by the 1983 Committee on Review of Local Government Administration in Nigeria (Nwachukwu, 2000:7).

Obikeze and Obi (2004:131) submitted that the 1976 local government reforms "had a positive impact on the system and set the tone and standard for other reforms of the local government system in Nigeria".

The localism principle as reflected in the 1976 reforms was stated in the preamble to the Guidelines for the reform thus:

the Federal Military Government does not intend to impose any solutions or indeed any structure on the country at the local government level. Nothing in these reforms could be construed to mean an attempt at reducing or abolishing the traditional functions of our Emirs, Obas and Chiefs. On the contrary, the reforms recognize the crucial nature of the position of the traditional authorities and care has been taken to preserve the organic unity of our traditional institutions and societies. (Forward to the Guidelines for 1976 LG Reform, page 1).

The validity of or how operative the above statements were is a subject of another academic research. It has been argued for instance, that neither the 1976 reform nor the 1979 constitutional provisions intended the local government to fully operate as autonomous entity and to remain essentially local to the area of its jurisdiction.

Nonetheless, the 1976 reforms generated much awareness on the status of local governments as government at the grassroots and it sought to elicit general competence which translates to effective utilization of local intelligence as represented by local energies, resources and initiatives. This has the advantage of improving the living standard of the local populace as active participants in the development of their areas. Put differently, individuals were to be encouraged to participate actively in planning and execution of developmental programmes. Neither has the local governments taken advantage of their proximity to the people to impact positively on their lives nor the council officials been able to tap into the grassroots developmentally.

Local government as a legal personality ought to be able to enforce sanctions and control of social affairs including the right to impose taxes. Services rendered to the local populace in return for payment should form the base of local government financing and it means that a great deal of their finance ought to be rooted in local sources. However, Duru (2009:89) submitted that this is not so and suggested alternative sources of revenue apart from provision of social goods which they are not taking advantage of to include, private-public partnership; investment and review/upgrade of existing methods of revenue sourcing and collection.

The second civilian republic (1979-1983) made no significant impact in strengthening the capacity of local governments, and as Obikeze and Obi (2004:132) reported that "this period did not record any remarkable achievement...rather it was a period, the local governments were most neglected, abused, politicized and marginalized in the scheme of things in Nigeria". They posited further that "as a tier of government, it was highly ineffective, unnoticed and made little or no impact on the lives of the people".

The second military era (1984-1999) were not satisfied with the state of local government they met. Consequently in 1984, the Buhari administration in an attempt to revamp the local government system, set up the Ibrahim Dasuki Committee to look into the problems of local government administration and recommend solutions. The committee traced the problems of this tier of government to operational factors arising directly from the behaviour and attitudes of operators of the local government system. These problems explain the inability of the third tier to deliver qualitative services to the local populace. The committee therefore advocated for decentralization of services provided by local government. The committee's recommendations unfortunately could not be implemented, in view of the abrupt termination of this administration by General Ibrahim Babangida in 1985.

The Babangida administration instituted a ten man committee to collate the reports/views of the Dasuki Committee, the Political Bureau and the National Service Scheme for local government employees. A critical study of these documents produced a policy package which attempted to institute some measures of autonomy for grassroots administration in Nigeria. Some of the changes initiated by the reform included: State ministries of local governments were

abolished, and state governments were directed to terminate their joint services with the local governments - this was intended to lessen the acrimony and squabbles that pervaded inter governmental relations; an upward review from ten percent to fifteen percent in 1989, and to twenty percent allocation in 1992 to enable local governments grapple with the tasks of service delivery and grassroots development.

Others include the creation of local government legislative assemblies in furtherance of the doctrine of separation of powers, elected chairmen were empowered to appoint Local Government Secretaries - thus reinforcing the position of chairmen as real chief executives and fully in charge of their respective domains. The practice of remitting local government allocations through the states was stopped and they started getting their allocations directly from the federal government. Local Government Service Commissions were scrapped in January 1992 in order to pave way for autonomy on personnel matters. In addition, resulting from the release of National Scheme of Service for local government employees, promotion and career advancement to Grade Level 15 became possible at that tier of government (Obikeze and Obi, 2004:133-134).

Lack of adequate preparation and induction courses to familiarize local government personnel with the provisions of the reform, and inability to generate adequate revenue required to execute projects have been identified as some of the shortcomings of this reform.

In an attempt to underscore the essence of the reforms, Babangida (1988) had these to say:

It has become apparent that our people are becoming increasingly wary of big and complex government. They are becoming apathetic about government

activities and are crying out that government is becoming increasingly too distant from them... We intend to consolidate the achievements made so far by devolving more responsibilities to the local governments and allowing them some autonomy to function effectively as the third tier of government – which is truly local to the environment.

As lofty and worthy of applaud as these official statements may sound, the dismal performance of the local governments reveal (up till this moment) that they have not been able to justify their existence by delivering the much needed socio-economic services and dividends of democracy to the populace. There is a convergence of opinion by Adamolekun (2009) and Utomi (2009) on this. Utomi (2009:24) reported that "...with nothing to show for it (huge revenue allocations to local governments) but the misery of those people whose lives were supposed to be improved by such revenue flows...".

On the 18th of June 2003, former President Olusegun Obasanjo announced to the nation, the aftermath of his consultation with the National Council of State to set up a Technical Committee headed initially by the Etsu Nupe, Sanda Ndayako (who died on duty) and was replaced by Mallam Liman Ciroma to among other things:

- Review the performance of local governments within the last four years and consider the desirability or otherwise of retaining the local government as the third tier of government, in that regard, consider among other options, the adoption of a modified version of the pre-1976 local government system.
- Examine the problem of inefficiency and high cost of government with a

view to reducing cost and wastage at the three tiers of government.

The committee submitted its report on 23rd November, 2003 noting that "the federal, state and local governments have failed in meeting the aspirations of the people" (Obikeze and Obi, 2004:137). Other recommendations include granting of "third tier status" to local governments and a shift from presidentialism to parliamentary system at that level, retention of the 774 constitutionally recognized local government councils and the abolishing of the State-Local Government Joint Accounts.

It is doubtful if there had been changes in the performance of local governments as the third tier government in Nigeria since the report was submitted. To be sure, Adamolekun (2009:19) posited that "since the return to civilian rule in 1999...the LGs are widely perceived as failed institutions". He corroborated that "in virtually all of Nigeria, the Local Government System is largely seen as a conduit for the mindless plunder of resources otherwise available to that tier of administration for worthwhile development of the grassroots". This summary verdict on the performance of local governments between 1999 and 2007, Adamolekun (2009) added was provided by one of the 774 local governments in March 2007.

Additionally, it has been observed that the federal and state governments have in different harmful ways undermined the autonomy of local government. A combination of the foregoing issues and averments is capable of fueling a clamour for local self-governance structures that are closer to the local populace, and can respond positively to their developmental needs and aspirations. In all, the localism principle has

not been put to effective use for grassroots transformation due to self-inflicted limitations by the operators of the local government system in Nigeria as reflected in this discourse.

CONCLUSION

Going by the history of local government and its reforms in Nigeria, it is observable that attempts have been made by successive central administrations to make that tier of government operate or assume its local character in principle, and not strictly in practice. This informs why there have been a lot of changes in nomenclature ranging from "Native Authority" to "Local Authority", abolition of chief-in-council in which local government service board took its place; abolition of provincial system of administration and the enlargement of local authority council with more elected representatives.

A change in approach to governance and general attitudinal reorientation could have formed the basis of grassroots administration and political leadership in Nigeria. When these becomes the thrust of reforms (and not just changes in names), then the foundation for genuine transformation and purposeful development would have been laid in the local government system (particularly) and in Nigeria generally.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) This paper strongly advocates autonomy for local governments in such a way and manner that enhances their performance of constitutional and ancillary roles.
- 2) Local governments should strive to raise and maintain revenue that would enable them deliver projects

and services that guarantee quality living at the grassroots.

- 3) As a corollary, local governments should be more people-centred in approach. A considerable degree of local discretion should pervade in the conduct of affairs at this level, such that necessary collaboration/partnership with communities in their domains can facilitate the developmental process.
- 4) There is the need for coherent and understandable set of ideas and specific guide to action (policy). If this is well rooted in the preferences of the people, it carries along not only the local representatives but the entire populace.
- 5) The paper recommends a further review of the revenue allocation formula with improved revenues to local governments as the closest tie of government to the people (rural and urban).
- 6) 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.
- 7) 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 are transformational.
- 8) The Anti-graft war should be pursued with vigour and without selection. This has the potency of exposing corrupt public office holders and ensuring that justice is

not only done, but seen to be upheld, thus serving as deterrent to potential offenders. This can assist in redressing the phenomena of resource mismanagement and corruption in the local government system.

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