

LOCAL GOVERNMENT, CORRUPTION AND DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

Tolu Lawal and Abegunde Oladunjoye

ABSTRACT

Local government is created to ensure meaningful development of the grassroots through participatory approach. Democracy therefore serves as veritable avenue through which the purpose for which local government is created can be achieved. But, unfortunately in Nigeria, democracy has not thrived at the grassroots level due to endemic corruption. This study therefore examined critically the effects of corruption on grassroots democracy and development, and concluded that corruption be deterred and punished in the local government system to enhance democratic participation of citizenry and effective service delivery.

Key Words: Local Government, Corruption, Democracy, Grassroots, Development Rural Community, Service Delivery.

INTRODUCTION

The need to catalyze balanced development, maximize citizens' participation, and arouse government responsive necessitates the creation of the local government. The local government serves as a form of political and administrative structure facilitating decentralization, national integration, efficiency in governance, and a sense of belonging at the grassroots. The local government is a unit of administration all over the world (Agagu, 2004). Although it's a universal institution it, however, exists in different forms and in different political systems. Whatever the form of existence, the local government has been essentially regarded as the path to and guarantor of administrative efficiency, effective service delivery, and participatory development (Arowolo, 2005). It is a critical tier of government because of its closeness to the people (Gboyega, 1987). Local government appeals to both the people and government as a feedback institution that relays the opinions and demands of the grassroots to a higher government (Adejo, 2003). Aside from this feedback function, other competing functions of service delivery, promotion of democratization at local level, and mobilization of human resources for grassroots enhancement place the local government in a strategic position for sustainable development.

The local government system has been a major feature of the Nigerian government and politics since colonial rule though, over the years, there have been changes in name, structure, and composition, while the system was operated differently all over the country (Agagu, 2004). It was on this premise that the rising tide of progress, growth, and development experienced in the local government was based.

The 1976 local government reform, carried out by the military administration of General Obasanjo, brought about uniformity in the administrative structure of the system. The reform introduced a multi-purpose, single tier local government system for the whole country (Ajayi, 2000). Since these reforms, successive governments have tinkered with the local government structure with a view of enhancing its capacity for good governance. Fundamentally, the local

government is created to serve the rural communities. The local government is expected to mobilize and harness local resources and ensure their effective utilization, with the support of the state and federal governments.

Unfortunately, the much needed development has continued to elude the rural communities across the nation. It has been rural poverty, rather than rural development. However, the prevalence and pervasiveness of poverty and the underdevelopment at the grassroots level is still connected with the high level of corruption and absence of democratic ethos in the local government system. In view of the above, this paper, therefore, examines the essence of the local government system to rural communities, the virtues and vices of democracy in the local government, the corruption in the local government, the causes and effects, and, finally, suggests ways of making the local government a viable service delivery institution.

THE CONCEPTS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT, CORRUPTION AND DEMOCRACY

The three key terms of our topic demand conceptual clarification and meaningful and purposeful analyses.

CORRUPTION

Corruption, according to Harsh (1993), is a practical problem involving the outright theft, embezzlement of funds or other appropriation of state property, nepotism, and granting of favors to personal acquaintance. It has been argued that corruption involves behaviors which deviate from the moral and constitutional requirements.

Kalu (1991) conceives corruption as the conscious and well planned act by a person or group of persons to appropriate, by unlawful means, the wealth of another person or group of persons. Corruption can also be seen as diversion or resources from the betterment of the community to the gain of individuals at the expense of the community.

Odey (2002) contextualizes corruption in Nigeria as the air which every living person breathes in and out. According to him, nobody makes any effort to breathe in the air; it comes naturally. Corruption, in Nigeria, has become so naturalized that many of us simply become corrupt without making any effort and often even without knowing it.

DEMOCRACY

Diamond, Linz, and Lipset (1989) see democracy as a system of government that meets three essential conditions: one, meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and groups, especially parties for all effective positions of government power at regular intervals, excluding the use of force; two, a highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies, at least through regular and fair election, so that no major (adult) social group is excluded; and three, a high level of civil and political liberties, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom to form or join organization so as to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation (Diamond, et al., 1989).

In a similar vein, Claude Ake (1991) perceives democracy in terms of principles of public accountability, widespread participation, and the consent of governed.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local government is defined as government, by popularly elected bodies, charged with the administration and executive duties in matters concerning the inhabitants of a particular district or place (Appadorai, 1975).

Agagu (1997) conceives the local government as a government at the grassroots level of administration meant for meeting peculiar needs of the people. In his analysis, he viewed local government as a level of government which is supposed to have its greatest impact on the people of the grassroots.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It has become a universal phenomenon in social sciences for facts to be investigated or examined precisely within a framework, rather than in an isolated manner. According to Goode and Hatt (1952), theoretical orientation functions, mainly by bridging the range of facts, are to be investigated. Furthermore, in an empirical theoretical base, it is necessary to develop a sound theory, which is capable of explaining the wide concepts and relationships in the study. The importance of theoretical framework in a study also lies in the fact that social science research is theory based and its operations are guided by relevant principles of human behavior (Goode & Hatt, 1952). However, this paper seeks to understand the role of local government in a democracy. It is essentially a study of the impact of the local government's contribution to the grassroots development. Based on this, the paper will be situated within the ambit of the decentralization theory. Although there are other theories that can also be used in this paper, such as development theory, structural functionalism, local state theory, and pluralist theory, the fact that democracy and development must be decentralized to achieve its purpose makes the decentralization theory more suitable and appropriate for this study.

The theory of decentralization explains the transfer of authority and responsibility for public functions from the central government to the subordinate or quasi-independent government organizations and/or the private sector (Rondinelli, 1981; Heywood, 1997; Bonnal, n.d.). It is concerned with how functions and responsibilities are given to different institutions from the central government for better and effective performances.

In the literature, two major forms of decentralization are discerned; namely, deconcentration and devolution (Olowu, 1995). The former alludes to the transfer of state responsibilities and resources from the center to the periphery, within the same administrative system. It indicates an internal form of delegation of responsibilities among officials of the organization. On the other hand, devolution entails the transfer of specified responsibilities and resources to the community, who are usually represented by their own lay or elected (i.e. non-appointed) officials. Adedeji (2000) argued that in reality, devolution and deconcentration are not mutually exclusive. When implementing decentralization programs, a balance of these elements is usually sought.

In the wake of widespread disappointment with the centralized state structure and the ongoing democratization process, the transfer of some power and resources from the central to the local governments and organizations has been advocated (Enemu, 1999). Many donor agencies and international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, see decentralization as a means of creating an enabling environment for development and promoting accountability. For most African governments, however, decentralization is now viewed as a strategy for mobilizing local resources and an initiative for national development. Since it has become evident that federal or state governments, alone, cannot guarantee development in the local areas, it then becomes imperative for the power, authority, and responsibility to be transferred from the central or state government to the local government for the purpose of enhancing development in the rural areas. This is important because of the remoteness of the federal government to the rural people. It is believed that decentralization would make the local governments more competent in the management of their own affairs.

As Bonnal (n.d) rightly observed:

Decentralization has kept its promise as far as the strengthening of democracy at the national level is concerned, as well as the central government's commitment in favour of rural development. It has thus contributed toward moving away from the bias toward urban areas in matters of development; to better management of the coordination of integrated rural development projects, and ensuring their sustainability. Decentralization has also reduced poverty which results from regional disparities, in paying more attention to the attendant socio-economic factors, in facilitating the gradual increase in development efforts and the promotion of cooperation between the government and NGOs, while increasing transparency, accountability and the response capacity of institutions.

Decentralization is an initiative to support the grassroots development. It is motivated by the need to improve service delivery to large populations and put in place meaningful structure to provide good governance at the local level.

Heywood (1997) argued that decentralization, as a framework for rural development, could be explained using four broad variables: participation, responsiveness, legitimacy, and liberty. According to him, participation entails the suitability and effectiveness of the local or regional government in providing opportunities for citizens to participate in the political life of their community. The benefit of widening the scope of political participation includes the fact that it helps to create a better educated and a more informed citizenry. Responsiveness involves the closeness of the peripheral institutions to the people and their sensitivity to peoples needs. This both strengthens democratic accountability and ensures that the government responds not merely to the overall interests of society, but also to the specific needs of particular communities. Legitimacy explains the manner in which the physical distance from government affects the acceptability or rightness of its decision. Decisions made at a "local" level are more likely to be seen as intelligible and, therefore, legitimate. Liberty is protected by decentralization through the dispersion of government power, thereby creating a network of checks and balances. Peripheral bodies check the central government, as well as each other.

The local government in Nigeria is a form of devolution, being a type of decentralization. As a form of devolution, local government involves the legal, conferring of powers to discharge specified residual functions upon formally constituted authorities, either in exclusive or concurrent capacity (Okunade, 1988). The local government in Nigeria is widely acknowledged as a viable instrument for rural development and for the delivery of social services to the people. It is believed that this level of government is strategically placed to fulfill the above functions because of the proximity to the rural people, which enhances its ability to easily articulate and aggregate the demands of the people. The 1976 local government reform, in particular, was aimed at decentralizing of some significant functions of the state government at local levels in order to harness local resources for refined development.

This framework will, therefore, enhance scientific understanding and stands as an operational tool to further assess the role of the local government in the democratic government.

THE ESSENCE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM TO RURAL COMMUNITIES

The local government is essentially created as a viable political and administrative organ for the transformation of all communities and for delivery of essential services to the citizens. The primary purpose of the local government and the basis for its existence is to create a mass development impetus to the grassroots transformation (Adeyemo, 1995).

Importantly, the local government is also to act as the training ground for a higher level of administration and for the inculcation of the philosophy of people-oriented development. Its capacity is to act as training ground for breeding the

grassroots democracy and act as a catalyst for national development, which cannot be over emphasized (Adeyemo, 1995).

It, therefore, provides political education that ensures direct participation at the grassroots level in the issues that directly affect their lives. The closeness of local administration to the people affords them the opportunity to meet with their local representative, one on one, and present their problems for possible and immediate solutions. This may not be possible at the other level of governments because of the distance and administrative bottlenecks. Essentially, the local government is saddled with the responsibility of guaranteeing the political, social, and economic development of its area and its people (Enero, Oladoyin, & Elumilade, 2004)

DEMOCRACY IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT: VIRTUES AND VICES.

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

The electorate is also a veritable check on political leaders. Besides the usual checks and balances by the parliament on the executive, the entire elected personnel of government, in all the branches of government, have to account for their tenure at the next election. The desirability of another election to government of the individual political office-seekers and the political party will be subject to satisfactory performance vis-à-vis the political promises made to the people as embodied in the respective parties' manifestoes at the previous election. The accomplishment of the political promises to the electorate will definitely earn the ruling party and the political leaders seeking a renewed mandate to be returned to power. Consequently, the fear of being removed from office will definitely make the elected leaders attain a reasonable level of good performance when in power with the hope for another chance. The electorate can, therefore, not be taken for granted, while their continued support can only be guaranteed through good governance. In this way, the elected leaders are duly accountable to the electors (Ajayi, 1998).

Democracy similarly guarantees the citizenry happiness and the rule of law. The governing political party has a social welfare program contained in its manifesto, which are meant to enhance human development and people's social well being. Unlike the undemocratic government, which has no manifestos and, therefore, no committed agenda for human development and happiness, the entire populace, in a democratic environment, enjoys equality of opportunities before the law.

Democracy, therefore, serves as a veritable avenue through which the purpose, for which the local government is created, can be achieved. Centralization, as an elusion to the grassroots development, accedes to local government as a gigantic role in any responsible political system. All over the world, no nation can successfully cope with giantism.

A nation, like Nigeria, therefore, cannot but be decentralized for effective governance and administration. Essentially, local government is an indispensable instrument of democracy. It is an avenue for government and the people to reach each other.

It is important that people experience direct democracy through the local government system. It gives residents an opportunity to make the government responsive to their own needs and enables people to enhance public responsibility. The local government is essential in any good democratic system. It gives a scope for democratic participation.

VICES OF DEMOCRACY IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Democracy has not thrived at the grassroots level. The local government, rather than projecting democratic ideals in the rural setting, has been an instrument of oppression and wealth accumulation in the hand of the unscrupulous politicians. It has suddenly become a breeding ground for undemocratic parties. Public accountability, the consent of the governed, widespread participation, and consultation, as principles of democracy, are conspicuously absent in the local government system. This is still connected with the stunted growth of democracy in Nigeria, as a whole. The manifestations of its retardation can be perceived in the collapse of two earlier republics: 1960-1966 and 1979-1983. Human development and the promotion of the citizen's happiness, which are important goals of democracy, are absent in the country.

The absence of democracy in the local government system paves way for poverty due to the lack of democratic ideals. This absence of democratic ideals is caused by the nature of Nigeria politics. Politics in Nigeria is widely seen as a means of becoming affluent. It is seen as a short-cut to wealth. Besides, every contestant is also determined to rig the elections in his own favor. And, where rigging is made impossible, violence, arson, kidnapping, and murder of opponents are introduced into the electoral game. Electoral competition, then, becomes a "do-or-die" affair, as witnessed in the general elections of 1964, 1979, 1983, 2003, and 2007. All these tend to undermine the confidence the people, especially at the grassroots level, in the democratic practice as a means of ensuring popular happiness and grassroots development.

CORRUPTION IN THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM: CAUSES AND EFFECTS

One of the fundamental problems of contemporary Nigeria is corruption. It has thrived, progressed, and flourished unabated in Nigeria. Corruption has been institutionalized to the point of accepting it as part of our system. Albeit, corruption is ubiquitous; it is found all over the world, but the degree of its manifestation varies from system to system.

Corruption is the greatest bane of local government administration in Nigeria. At the grassroots level, corruption has been canonically accommodated, entertained, and celebrated within the system. In the local government setting, corruption is misnomerly labeled and euphemistically referred to as "*EGUNJE*" (a slogan which means "illegal offer" in Nigeria). Regrettably, democracy, which is assumed to be the antidote to corruption, is not well practiced at the grassroots level. Consequently, the level of apathy, cynicism, and poverty is high among the rural dwellers.

Kolawole (2006) laments this situation when he opines that "in spite of the establishment of the Independent Corrupt Practices and other related Offences Commission (ICPC), corruption still thrives in our society". In his analysis, Kolawole was of the view that the lack of funds was no more a constraint on local government performance, but a mismanagement and misappropriation of the funds accruable to it (Kolawole, 2006).

CAUSES OF CORRUPTION

There are little things in describing what happens without discussing why it happens in that particular way. Based on the above, causes of corruption are analyzed below.

Absence of democracy and good governance gives way to corruption. Also, poverty is an inducement to corruption at the grassroots level. Many of the representatives in the councils are jobless. They go into politics to make money, rather than to serve their people. Apart from poverty, itself, the fear of poverty is another good factor. People are afraid of going back to poverty after the completion of their tenure or after retirement, as the case may be, as a result, the tendency to steal public money, for posterity consumption becomes so high in them.

Corruption also flourishes under weak leadership and government. When political or administrative leadership cannot effectively control people under him, corruption becomes imminent due to the fact that most of the public money meant for the public project will be diverted to the private purse as a result of lapse and gulfs in the system. Low wages and salaries, as well as greed, also breed corruption.

Problem of accountability- here is no effective accountability in the system. People are not held accountable and responsible for their actions or inactions. There is no strict adherence to the rules.

The local government system in the country is characterized by ethical perversion and moral depravity. The masses are not carried along in the execution and implementation of projects. Projects are done on papers without recourse to inspection and probity.

The effects of corruption on democracy in the local government system are as follows:

One, destruction of democratic values occurs, corruption tends to destroy democratic ethos in the local government system. All the values of democracy, such as responsiveness, accountability, participation, and human development, are either subdued neglected or ignored where corruption thrives.

Two, development is hindered in a regime of corruption. Rather than utilizing the available resources for the uplift and development of the council, it is diverted to private use. This attitude cannot guarantee any meaningful development and that wise, local, or grassroots development becomes unrealistic.

Three, rule of law is also subverted and replaced by muscle power. In order to successfully steal government resources, the officials in the local government system undermine the rules and regulations that guide their activities and ensure that whatever is stolen by them, cannot be traced or tracked within their tenure in office. This has serious implication for service delivery as developmental projects may be abandoned without any necessary action. Also, in this ugly capacity, contracts are bound to be inflated, bribes and kickbacks are bound to be taken, and contracts are also bound to be awarded to nonexistent companies (i.e. companies that exist on paper alone).

Four, manpower development and capacity building becomes sluggish and discouraged in the arena of corruption. The Chief Executive of the council is not thinking about the need to train and re-train the staffers, but how to corner the money meant for manpower development and capacity building into his own pocket for selfish purpose. The effect of corruption in the local government system is enormous in the sense that democratic values are destroyed and development is hindered. Muscle power replaces the rule of law and manpower development and capacity building becomes sluggish and discouraged.

THE WAY FORWARD

In this paper we have demonstrated the essence of local government to rural communities, virtues of democracy to grassroots residents, and corruption as a bane to rural development and grassroots participation. In view of the above, the following recommendations are put forth. The local government officials should be equipped with better education and training and a sound orientation about value systems and democratic cultures. Thus, they are required to be truly democratic administrators, real service providers, efficient decision makers, and dynamic grassroots transformers.

They should, also, endeavor to imbibe real democratic practice in order to promote value systems and democratic ethos at the grassroots level. The local government should provide special mechanisms for active and maximal participation of local residents in local government affairs. People should be allowed to participate in the initiation and implementation of the project in the local government system.

Accountability and transparency must be encouraged and promoted in the local government system so as to attain good governance for effective development at the grassroots level. Corruption must be deterred and punished in the local government system to enhance efficient and effective service delivery at the grassroots level.

REFERENCES

- Adedeji, A. (2000). Renewal of the Search for Systems of Local Governance that can serve the common Good. In: Adedeji, A. & Bamidele, A. (eds). *People Centred Democracy in Nigeria? The Search for Alternative Systems of Governance at the Grassroots*, Ibadan, Heinemann Educational Books Nigeria Plc.
- Adejo, O. (2003). Local Government and the 1999 Constitution. In: Kwanashie, M. (ed). *Politics and Political Power Relation in Nigeria*. Zaria: Dat and Partners.
- Adeyemo, D.O. (1995). Sustaining Democracy in Nigerian Local Government: the Role of Legislatures. In: Akindele, S. & Ajila, C. (eds). *Contemporary Issues in the Social Sciences*. Ile Ife
- Agagu, A. (2004). Continuity and Change in Local Government Administration and the Politics of Underdevelopment. In: Agagu, A. & Ola, R. (eds). *Development Agenda of Nigeria State*. Ibadan: Fiag Publishers.
- Agagu, A.A. (1997). Local Government. Kolawole (ed). (1997) *Readings in Political Science*. Ibadan: Dekaal Publishers.
- Ajayi, K. (2000). Justification and Theories of Local Government. In: Ajayi .K. (ed). *Theory and Practice of Local Government Ado-Ekiti*. Department of Political Science, University of Ado-Ekiti.
- Ajayi, K. (1998). Problems of Democracy and Electoral Politics in Nigeria. In: Kolawole (ed). *Issues in Nigerian Government and Politics*. Ibadan: Dekaal Publishers.
- Appadoria, A. (1975). *The Substance of Politics*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Arowolo, D. (2005). Local Government Administration in Nigeria: An Insider View. In: Owolabi, D. & Aladegbola, A. (eds). *Local Government Studies*. Akure: Excels Production.
- Bonal, J. (n.d). A History of Decentralization. Retrieved from: http://www.cresin.org/decentralization/English/General/history_fao.html.

- Claude, A. (1991). Rethinking African Democracy. In: Mimiko. (1999). Enhancing Democratic Consolidation in a Presidential System of Government: The Role of the Political Class. In: Mimiko, D., Akanbi, A., & Popoola, M. (eds). (1999). Democracy and Public Administration in Nigeria. Akure: ABM Services Ltd.
- Diamond .L. Linz . J. and Lipset .S. (eds). (1989). Democracy in Developing Countries: Volume 2. Boulder Lynne Reinner Publishers.
- Enero, J., Oladoyin, A., & Elumilade, A. (2004). Accountability and Transparency in Revenue Generation: The Case of Local Government in Nigeria. In: International Review of Politics and Development, 2(2), Backcock University, 1-13.
- Enemuo, F. (1999). Decentralization and Local Government: Models, Principals and Purpose. In: Anifowose, R. & Enemuo, F. (eds). Elements of Politics. Lagos: Mathuose Press Ltd.
- Gboyega, A. (1987). Political Values and Local Government in Nigeria. Ibadan: Malthouse Press Ltd.
- Goode, W. & Hatt, P. (1952). Methods in Social Research. Singapore: McGraw Hill Book Company Inc.
- Harsh, H.C. (1993). Accumulators and Democrats: Challenging State Corruption. In: Heywood, A. (1997). Politics. London: Macmillan Press Ltd. *African Journal of Modern African Studies*, 31(1), 31-48.
- Kalu, U. (ed). (1991). Perspectives on Corruption and other Economic Crimes in Nigeria. Lagos: Fabog Nigeria Enterprises.
- Kolawole, D. (2006). A Paper delivered at the event marking the Local Government day in Ondo state, Nigeria. May 26.
- Odey, O.J. (2002). Democracy, Our Lofty Dreams and Crazy Ambitions. Enugu: Snap Press Ltd.
- Okunade, A. (1988). Local Government in Nigeria – A myth: The Way Out. In: Oyeyipo O., Ayoade A., Kwanashie A., Mohammed A.. (eds). Leading Issues in Territorial Decentralization in Nigeria and France. Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaira.
- Olowu, D. (1995). The Failure of Current Decentralisation programmes in Africa. In: Wunsch, S. & Olowu, D. (eds). *The Failure of centralized State. Institutions and Self-Governance in African*. Sanfracisco Institute for Contemporary Studies, 74.
- Rondinelli, D. (1981). Government Decentralization in Comparative Perspective: Theory and Practice in Developing Countries. In: *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 47, 137.
- Sehinde, B. (2008). Need for a Review of Statutory Roles of Local Government for Effective Service. In: *Journal of contemporary Politics*, (1), University of Ado-Ekiti, 102.

ABOUT AUTHORS:

Tolu Lawal (M.sc), Doctoral Student, Department of Political Science, University of Ibadan, Ibadan

Abegunde Oladunjoye (Ph.D), Lecturer, Department of Political Science, University of Ado Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria.