

## **GRASSROOT LEADERSHIP AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA:**

### **PERISCOPING THE IMPEDIMENTS AND EXPLORING THE IMPERATIVES**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

It is argued that Nigeria is inundated with rich human and material resources begging to be harvested by purposeful, creative and innovative leadership. Sustainable development that is based on the cultural values of the people and takes a “Bottom-top approach”, holds the key to unlocking the development quagmire the country has found itself since flag of independence. Rather than seek to replicate Western prototype development, empowering the people through Community Based Organizations (CBOs) to make the right choices and change their situation in such a way that each stage of their lives is improving better than the proceeding one is the basis of sustainable development. This can only be realized if the right caliber of leadership is able to harness and utilize available resources for the growth and development at the grassroots level. Within the framework of Basic Needs Approach (BNA), the paper analyzed issues of grassroots leadership and the role it can play in sustainable socio-economic development. Drawing on experiences from developed and developing countries in the globalized era, it concludes that grassroots leadership cannot successfully address challenges of sustainable development unless it embraces best practices cultivated and propagated from within Africa in this globalized era.

**Keywords:** Leadership, Ruralites, Sustainability, Development, Nigeria

## **INTRODUCTION**

Nigeria boasts of some of the richest human and natural resources in the world such as oil and gas and a vibrant population. These resources create potentials which can be harnessed for the benefit of its teeming population. However, for these resources to be harnessed for the growth and development of the country and its people, visionary, exemplary and selfless leaders are needed. All developed countries in the world today have at one time or the other, had leaders who were able to take on challenges of growth and development in their respective countries as issues which must be overcome and did everything within their abilities to ensure that they overcome these challenges in order to pave the way for individuals and groups to actualize their innate potentials and abilities for societal transformation.

One of these challenges which developing countries face is how to create the context for a stable political environment for socio-economic policies and programmes to be carried out. Also there is need to create an enabling environment based on freedom of choice and liberty for the people to pursue their individual and corporate interests. Once this enabling environment is created, it becomes easy for the people to confront and resolve challenges facing them by using resources within their environment to create a condition of life where each stage is progressively better than the preceding one.

Leadership is crucial to realizing any giant stride taken in pursuit of development, anywhere in the world Nigeria is not an exception and is generally believed that development is not the sole responsibility of government. Especially in situations where government fails in its duties to promote development. Development efforts are initiated and carried out by communities at the grassroots level to complement government efforts. There is the feeling among Nigerians that positive leadership remains elusive in the country especially in the area of local administration and management of resources. These two elements are crucial to sustainable development at the community level. Identification and nurturing of positive leadership is key to ensuring sustainable development at the grassroots where the majority of Nigerians live and is seen as the cradle of development in Nigeria.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The paper adopts qualitative research design and descriptive analysis to gain an insight into the nature and character of grassroots leadership in Nigeria and its implication on sustainable development. The paper which is theoretical in nature draws its argument basically from secondary data which include journal publications, textbooks and internet sources. To improve on the reliability and validity of the paper, multiple secondary sources were used to minimize risk of error.

To realize these objectives and for ease of analysis, the paper is pigeon holed into the following five compartments: The first compartment chronicled introduction, statement of the problem and objectives of the paper. The second section examined conceptual and theoretical issues central to the discourse. The third discussed the context of grassroots leadership and sustainable development in Nigeria. The fourth x-rayed the nature of grassroots leadership and sustainable development. The fifth examined grassroots leadership and challenges of sustainable development. The sixth section proffer the way forward in the context of the identified problems; then conclusion.

## **GRASSROOT LEADERSHIP AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

It is customary to begin an academic investigation of this nature by combing the conceptual and theoretical terrains of the subject of analysis. Though, consensus may not be achieved on the validity or otherwise of such enterprise. Nonetheless, it is an exercise worth pursuing if only to sketch the parameters of the subject matter. Leadership can be found in diverse groupings and organizational settings. Some of the variants of leadership include: political leadership, traditional leadership and non-state leadership. Political leadership is defined by Okadigbo (1987) as the decision on social policy and resource allocation as exerted by partisan representatives. Leadership under this variant carries out its activities through party ideology and programme. Non-state leadership does not have the burden of partisan politics but the quest to retrieve the common good for the people of the grassroots. Here, there appear to be a reciprocal norm between follows and leaders in the pursuit and achievement of state objectives.

Generally speaking, leadership has three main characteristics; leadership as an attribute of position, characteristic of a person and categories of behaviour. It is in this usage of the concept that leadership is considered key to grassroot development. Some people are gifted in leading others to achieve goals. They bring this to bear on the act of organizing resources to achieve set goals. They therefore, strive to make success out of anything they handle. Non-political leadership is those at the head of organized efforts to bring about the achievement of identified objectives and goals in the areas of health care delivery, poverty reduction, education particularly at the grassroot.

Non-political leadership is found in the non-state sector such as civil society constituents like Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Example of these grassroot community organizations includes Akpuru Nnorie Community Women Association and Nnorie Palm Produce Association all in Ngor Okpala Local Government Area of Imo State. This type of organizations take decisions based on local initiatives and help promote unity, team spirit and social relations as mechanism of conflict resolution and poverty related problems in the rural areas (See for example Dogo, 2005). Political leadership on the other hand is associated with more general issues that may not receive attention before another election year. In many occasions, there are failed expectations at this level.

In Nigeria, the grassroots have a lot of challenges confronting them, ranging from poverty, illiteracy, lack of portable water, good roads, and poor health care delivery system, among others. This is not unrelated to years of rural neglect due partly to the urban bias of government that priorities major cities and urban centers to the detriment of the rural areas. In the light of this, Nigeria today boasts of several grassroots organizations which offer leadership that is grassroot-focused and contribute through popular participations to achieve the much needed Socio-economic and cultural development at the grassroots.

It is expected that corporate approach to development will bring about people-centered development to the grassroot. Development as a concept refers to the ability of people to use their cultural values to improve the lives of the people and their environment. However, this process should not be pursued in a manner that is injurious to future generations In other words, development should be pursued in such a way that takes care of the present needs without hindering the ability of future generations to cater for their own. This means development should be sustainable.

Sustainable development is seen as “development that meets our present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations, 2009). The United Nations identified three elements which should work together to ensure sustainable development. These are economic development, social development and environmental protection (Mekeown, 2002; UN, 2009). Ayeni (2010) argues that these three components must be conceptualized together, planned together and implemented together to achieve the desired results.

Development can only make sense to people when they are involved in the process of decision making through a Bottom-top approach. Popular participation is crucial to development and is seen here as the active involvement of the people in the process of setting goals and making decisions about involvement in the process not just the acceptability of end results which satisfies the need to participate (Ake, 1994). This view on popular participation aligns with the democratic principles of freedom, equality, consent and liberty. Popular participation therefore, is predicated on “the social nature of being and the organic character of society” (ibid).

The non-political variant of leadership is based on the assumed absence or presence of misconduct, corruption and personal interest in the discharge of the common good. In other words, politics in this realm is assumed to be sufficiently ridden of the objectionable features of the civil public realm such as: waste, corruption, violence, and repellent ills of politics. This variant of leadership should bring about selfless, accountable and responsive administration. As Ihunna (2005) persuasively argues:

*This crystallizes the importance of an obligatory system of reciprocal norms between followers and leaders. In this wise, duties and obligations are geared towards achieving commonly identified purposes. To this extent, objective performance is crucial in the quest to retrieve the common good for the people.*

This obligatory system of reciprocal norms which serves as springboard for achieving the common good was largely neglected by post colonial political economies, in much of Africa. Development was equated with economic growth. The dominant economic theory of the 60s and 70s popularized by Walt Rostow, measured growth as a rise in the national income per head (Toyo, 2010). Unfortunately, “the relatively rapid economic growth witnessed by the country from 1973 to the early 80s did not yield visible spread or trickle down effects among the poor and especially those residents in the rural areas” (Alernike and Olumodeji, 2001).

Several theoretical approaches can be useful when applied to the issues of grassroots leadership and sustainable development. The Basic Need Approach (BNA) which is one of several centers on the essential needs of the people at the grassroots. Yet, it may not be far-reaching enough because it merely scratches the surface of the existing development objectives and processes. The exigential social conditions of the people of the local level call for expansion of this approach to enable it to tackle local level challenges. The BNA approach to grassroots development should be conceptualized to make the basic needs package more heuristic to retrieve and release the “creative energies and potentials of the (grassroot) masses held down and crippled by centuries of degrading oppression and servitude” (in Alernike and Olumodeji, 2005). An examination of the foregoing suggest it is important to priorities achievable goals of basic human needs in the area of elimination of malnutrition, diseases and attention to the girl child education.

## THE CONTEXT OF GRASSROOT LEADERSHIP AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

Non-political and positive leadership were instruments in the communal style of socio-economic development in the pre-colonial societies in Africa. At this early stage, production of goods and services were for subsistence and there was no appropriation of surplus that came with surplus production and the need to meet demands of the appropriators of surplus (Toyo, 2010). Before this era, Africans had lived in communities where they were able “to direct their energy to collective self-realization through common enterprise by which the community seeks to reproduce itself at increasing higher level of spiritual and material well-being. It was here that people cooperated, sacrificed and worked towards a better society by combating crime, improving health care, building schools” (Ake, 1994).

What could be regarded as authentic development at this point in time were based on the cultural values of the people who were able to release their innate abilities to change their spiritual and material conditions. Also, they cooperated with one another and joined hands to create a better socio-economic condition for the whole of the society. In most African traditional societies, everyone was his/her brother’s keeper. Everyone contributed according to his ability and needs not desires. As the Political Bureau Report (1987) put it:

*Although there was exploitation of the peasants, each polity operated with a basic minimum sense of fairness and justice for each member of the community. Thus, each (community) possessed a moral order that governed affairs. The moral order, predicated on the welfare and well-being of the entire community, enabled pre-colonial Nigerians to cope with crisis, manage conflicts and confronts challenges from within and without.*

The moral climate of this era was expedient for development and corporate existence of the people. On the other hand any system that is based on injustice is prone to incessant crisis and conflict. Thus, the pursuit of the general welfare and well-being of the people was the fulcrum of stability and progress in the socio-economic and political order of this dispensation. Also, political and non-political leadership carried out their duties on the basis of consultation each and consensus among the people within the polity. In other words, the people were actively, involved in governance. Those in position of authority ensured that they do not attract the displeasure of the people. The rules therefore, demanded that there was an intricate balance between power and authority on the one hand and service and accountability on the other (Political Bureau Report (1987).

In the post-colonial era the emergent Nigerian state declared its intention to ensure an egalitarian society where the welfare of the individual will be enhanced through “providing better educational facilities, housing, health facilities, job creation and a rising standard of living for the people as a whole” (William, 1980). These goals and objectives could be said to be well intentioned through the ideological framework within which these developmental goals were pursued was faulty. For example, the mixed economy model of development assumes that growth proceeds distribution thereby justifying the quality as an avenue to the universal goal of development (William, 1980). This model of development has brought social inequality and disempowerment of the people to make qualitative choice about their needs and future.

Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) and globalization as public policy instruments aim at deregulating the economy to make it more efficient and effective. In a globalize system, there is free flow of ideas, knowledge, goods and services. This

makes it easy to deal with issues confronting the people at the community level with more efficiency and effectiveness. However, such efforts have been unable to reduce the growing rate of poverty and current degradation in mineral producing rural communities in Africa. The urban centers also suffer similar faith. In the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria, for example, there has been increased exploitation of renewable and non-renewable resources intensifying in the process degradation of the environment and sources of livelihood of the people. The crises and conflicts these activities spawn, have not only led to loses of lives and properties, but brought social insecurity to the people of the affected areas. The failure of the people to reproduce themselves in their environment as a result to ecological hazards has led to increasing poverty and food insecurity in the affected areas.

## **THE NATURE OF GRASSROOT LEADERSHIP AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Several decades of development planning and their implementations in Nigeria have failed to address the pressing concern for improved welfare and well-being. Also, for many years, grassroot leadership appeared to have ignored their local support base. Such alienation of the mass populace, has robbed the development process of its total support base necessary for genuine development. The old development paradigm therefore, has produced uneven distribution of wealth, power, access to essential resources, as well as increased exploitation in the society. This has made the search for a people centered development paradigm imperative.

In the light of this, there is need to bring back true development to the people of the grassroot. Sustainable development contains three primary factors economic, social and environment (Oyeshola, 2008). Economically, a sustainable system should be able to produce goods and services which would maintain manageable economy development while at the same time ensure sectorial balance of economic activities. Environmentally, a sustainable system should emphasize environmental friendly practices in exploitation of renewable and non-renewable resources. The social angle to it addresses distributional issues, gender equity, adequate provision of social services such as health, education and political accountability, transparency and participation.

Non-political or grassroot leadership has a crucial role to play in the realizations of these goals of sustainable development both at the individual and collective levels. It can mobilize support for programmes and policies which are aimed at resolving challenges posed by the present economic, socio-political and environmental conditions in a globalized system. The goodwill of these leaders alone can help promote efforts at sustainable development. Some CBOs and NGOs provide the resources for running their organizations, in which case they may be operated as personal ventures, in terms of organization. Some CBOs are better structured. Leadership in this context is determined elections or appointment usually for a specified period of time. In some CBOs, criteria are laid down for their leaders while in others; it is based on primordial sentiments.

Finance is critical to the operations of the CBOs and NGOs. The bulk of CBOs finance comes from contributions of members in from of levies, fees, dues, etc. Their branches in diaspora also contribute money and send to CBOs and villages or towns for developmental purposes. Leadership of NGOs tends to be more organized with offices in towns, cities and villages and are heavily donor-driven and donor-dependent. Donor agencies usually lay down criteria for funding to NGOs. This practice in some cases has led to the loss of autonomy in decision-making and the use of resources in carrying out goals of such

organizations. Generally, speaking, funds generated by CBOs and NGOs are used for carrying out development projects like the building of schools, hospitals, housing, digging of bore-holes, etc. Other critical roles played by NGOs/CBOs include: mobilizing people to develop self-confidence in taking local initiative; compliment government efforts at generating new ideas as input for its development plans, empower the people to exercise their rights of popular participation and association and help to promote activities that could lead to production and wealth creation, such as micro-credit, rural employment, etc (Dogo, 2005).

The activities of NGOs and CBOs are supposed to bring about sustainable socio-economic development. The spate of poverty and social inequality in the country shows that not much has been realized through their programmes and projects. Basic social amenities are in short supply at the local such as water, good roads and housing. What factors explain these developments? to these issues we direct our analysis in the next section.

### **GRASSROOT LEADERSHIP AND CHALLENGES OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

There are several factors militating against efforts of grassroots leadership in realizing sustainable development. In this section, we shall examine some of these challenges. In the first place, poverty of leadership remains one of the most daunting challenges of sustainable development in developing countries. Most CBOs and NGOs are run as personal estates by their leaders/founders. Some leaders of these organizations operate without internal democracy. This stifles freedom of choice and initiative in these organizations. Also, most grassroots leaders have a sit-tight mentality which does not allow for new ideas, fresh initiative and innovation. So, rather than concentrate on developmental efforts, some grassroots leaders are busy boot-licking to donors/donor agencies or blackmailing competing NGOs/CBOs leaders in order to be favoured by donor.

Real poverty is still rampant in the country, several studies both within and outside Nigeria has shown the poor state of human welfare and well-being. In spite, of its abundant wealth, Nigeria ranked 40 out 119 developing countries on the global hunger index according to a report released by US-based International Food Policy Research and a German NGO-Agro-Action (Punch 10/11/2006). Similarly, report from the United Nations Development Program Human Development Index, ranked Nigeria 153<sup>th</sup> of 185 countries on quality of life in the world (HDI, 2012). Sub-Saharan Africa can be said to be the bedrock of alarming poverty traps as shown in falling incomes, growing health crises and deteriorating natural environment (Punch 21/9/11).

The global economic order has not favoured countries of the South because it is based on unequal economic relations which have left countries in Africa perpetual dependence on advanced economies. Balance of trade and payment have always been unfavourable to developing countries because of the structure of the world economic order. Also, the current global economic meltdown is a product of the crises inherent in the capitalist system that thrives on appropriation of surplus value. Effort at resolving this global economic crisis has seen “the unprecedented ascendancy of neo-liberalism as the driving force behind global and regional economic development (Saravanamuttu, 2001). Yet, neo-liberalism has not been able to bring about sustained development particularly at the grassroots in most developing areas. The promise of globalization in the 1990s did

not quite translate into economic growth and development in Nigeria. Even the East-Asian which experienced initial growth and development countries were not left out of the backlashes of globalization. As has been noted:

*These broad economic and financial development of globalization in 1990s have provided the context, if not the competences, for the spectacular events of 1997 and 1998 which have come to be called East-Asia 's financial "crisis", "turmoil and meltdown" (Saravanamuttu, 2001).*

While the global economic 'meltdown' can be felt in virtually all countries of the world, not all countries have the ability to attenuate its effects. While countries like Malaysia and Singapore, for instance, have been able to mitigate its effects, others like Nigeria have seen the intensification of poverty, hunger, violence and infrastructural decay.

Paucity of funds has been a major challenge a leadership role in sustenance of grassroot development. The failing state in Africa lacks the political will and financial strength to promote grassroot development. With dwindling resources of the state, CBOs and NGOs have had to look outward for funds either from their members in the Diaspora or external aid from donor agencies. However, external sourcing of funds by grassroot leadership has dealt a big blow to their autonomy as informal organizations and brings to question the genuineness of their objective.

This development has two not unrelated consequences. In the first place, most programmes carried out by the NGOs leaders at the grassroot are not indigenous in nature. They are fashioned after the example of the advanced societies. The socio-cultural demands of Africans are similar to that of the more advanced economies. These leaders arrogate to themselves the right to speak for the people of the grassroots rather than allow them determine what they want and how they want them.

Followed from the above point, is the issue of originality of the work of most CBOs and NGOs. This could be as a result of the external orientation of most of their programmes which lead to failure to harness the rich socio-cultural and economic potentials of the grassroot. Naturally, the people feel alienated from what is supposed to benefit them.

Consequently, most NGOs/CBOs and their leaders could be said to be "uncritically following paths prescribed by foreign theories and precepts" (Dogo, 2005). All these challenges have impacted negatively on leadership abilities to pursue sustainable development.

## **GRASSROOTS LEADERSHIP AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE WAY FORWARD**

We have identified challenges facing grassroot leadership in its efforts to promote sustainable development. As enormous as these challenges may look, they are not insurmountable. In this section of the discourse, we examine some remedial steps which could be taken to promote sustainable socio-economic and cultural development through the instrumentality of grassroot leadership.

The political culture of any country determines what its leaders do in their various positions. Some elements in our political culture include: intolerance, violent conflict, ethnicity and religious fanaticism, etc. This has been largely due to years of military/authoritarian rule. However, the situation is gradually changing and patience is required for leadership to begin to



harvest the vast potentials in the land to enable them pursue sustainable development. Therefore, rather than seek to co-opt CBOs or undermine their activities and actions, government should aim at tapping from their closeness to the people to promote its developmental efforts particularly at the grassroots levels.

Also, the old development paradigm in Nigeria and other countries in Africa has given way to process that empowers the people to make choices and carry out bottom-top approach to development. As Ake (2000) puts it, such development paradigm aims at

*Making the people the end and means of development by this approach, development ceases to be what the government and international development agencies do for the ordinary people, but what the ordinary people do for themselves. It becomes their possession, their hired experience, not a received experience. In so far as they possess development and become its end, the content of development can be potentials, their progressive empowerment and self-realization.*

It is this people-centric approach that can bring about sustainable socio-economic development. This will encourage “local commitment and acknowledged benefit to pay the price of continuation of project activities” (Olawoye, 2008). Donor-driven projects can suffer neglect once funds from donors dry up. Thus, there is the need to design extension services that can improve the income of local population to enable them contribute financially to projects.

It is important to stress the imperative to increase the level of peoples’ participation in decision-making, project design and development, implementation and evaluation (Olawoye, 2008). Popular participation should be able to promote local ownership of project, thereby mitigate the effect of foreign oriented programmes and give a sense of ownership, maintenance and care for facilities. Local intervention projects should involve all sectors of the grassroots population to avoid their alienation from the development process.

Furthermore, environmentally friendly activities should be emphasized when addressing the concerns of the grassroots population. Their leadership should promote and encourage Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) before projects are carried out to reduce, if not eliminate, cases of environment degradation and other ecological hazards which hinder the pursuit of sustainable development at the grassroots. While leadership at the grassroots may be willing to bring about development in the society, their efforts should not further endanger the people by carrying out programmes which are injurious to the people’s welfare and well being.

Grassroot leaders need basic infrastructures to facilitate their work such as regular electric power supply and good roads. But basic infrastructures are in very bad shape in Nigeria, roads, water supply, schools, electric power supply among others are in a parlous state. All these should be improved upon in order to facilitate the work of grassroots leadership in bringing about sustainable development. Also, information or database on the grassroots challenges in Nigeria, need to be improved upon to avail grassroots leadership with adequate background information to work on at any given point in time.

It is important that the evolving democratic dispensation in the country should be sustained because we cannot improve the Nigerian economy unless we get our politics right. Political stability is critical to grassroots development. Also, the democratic system is best for bringing out competent and legitimate leaders which can get the people to promote development activities.

It also, makes leaders to be transparent and accountable to the people. All these are necessary ingredients for sustainable development at the grassroot.

Poverty is the principal obstacle to sustainable development in developing societies. It would seem that Nigerians are in a vicious cycle of poverty. The majority of Nigerians live below the poverty line of less than one dollar per day. Malnutrition, hunger, disease, poor health facilities and illiteracy among others, are common phenomena in Africa. It is in recognition of this situation that successive governments in Nigeria have policies to attenuate the effect of this socio-economic scourge. But it would seem that much still have to be done to reduce the debilitating effects of poverty in the country. In this regard, women, children and other vulnerable groups have to be given greater attention in efforts to reduce poverty in order to achieve sustainable social-economic development.

Positive leadership is needed to bring together resources to effect change in the society. Certain elements have to be mixed up in this kind of leadership for it to be productivity. Burns (1978) posits that:

*The premise of this leadership is that whatever the separate interest persons might hold, they are presently or potentially found in the pursuit of higher goals, the realization of which is stated by the achievement of significant change that represent the collective or pooled interest of the leaders and followers.*

What this means is that leadership should be selfless and visionary, ready to subordinate their personal interests for group interest. Both material and human resources cannot be put into productivity use on their own, unless they are combined effectively by leadership to achieve grassroot development. Unless this is done to reflect the modern needs in today's globalized era, development may remain far-fetched. Such trends demand the appropriation of international best practices based on the right of law and transparency in governance.

## **CONCLUSION**

Sustainable development is an all-encompassing phenomenon that makes it a hazardous task to accomplish. Grassroot leadership has enormous difficulties on its hands in its attempt to pursue this very important activity in the lives of the people and the entire society. How they should carry out activities aimed at sustainable development varies from one grassroot community to another. The most common and long lasting are through CBOs. This approach to community development predated colonial rule and is still very useful to the people of the modern times. Their types and activities vary but they aim at providing basic services to the people. At a broader level, NGOs present bigger platforms for confronting challenges of sustainable socio-economic development.

The leadership of these various organizations is either selected or elected. Yet, they share certain common characteristics like selfishness, inclination towards external funding and relatively untrained staffs. These characteristics hinder the ability of local level leaders to deliver socio-economic developmental policies, programs and projects to the people. These among others account for the slow pace of social-economic development at the grassroot in Nigeria. In the light of these challenges, several remedial steps were suggested. They include: sustainable democracy, greater popular participation in decision

making, reduction of poverty, provision of basic infrastructural amenities, among others. Once these steps are carried out, sustained development through grassroots leadership would be realized.

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