

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUTONOMY AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL
AREAS IN NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

The cardinal drawing force of this study is to examine local government autonomy and socio-economic development in Nigeria. The paper views local government as that government which is saddled with the core responsibility of engendering transformational changes in the rural areas of Nigeria. Although the local government is lagging far behind as a result of unwarranted interference by other tiers of government on its functioning or activities, thus, the need for local government autonomy for its efficient as well as effective operation. Also, the failure of the interfering tiers of government in Nigeria to meet the socio-economic complexities experiences rapid growth as well as changes in development, gave rise to the need and agitation for local government autonomy as a way of engendering socioeconomic development in rural areas in Nigeria. The paper adopted principally a descriptive method of analysis of the general need for local government autonomy and socio-economic development in Nigeria. This is quite necessary due to the increasing emphasis of rural development of communities and transformation. The findings of the study reveals that financial, political as well as administrative autonomy of the local government areas is desired to empower the local governments succeed in their goal for effective and sustainable transformation of rural areas in Nigeria. Thus, the paper recommended that government should do the needful to grant all the local governments in Nigeria full autonomy to bring about the much desired socioeconomic development of rural areas in Nigeria.

Keywords: Local Government autonomy, socio-economic development, rural transformation, sustainable development

Introduction

The expediency for the creation of local government globally emanates from the desire to facilitate development at the grassroots level. The significance of local government autonomy is a function of its ability to generate a sense of belongingness, safety as well as gratification among its inhabitants. All types of government, administrations, regimes or political systems have so far made sure that this goal is attained. This kind of a strategy for ensuring national administrative development, as well as political efficacy is seen in the concept and practice of local government autonomy. Whatever is the kind of government, local government autonomy is viewed essentially as well as regarded as the gateway to, and guarantor of national socio-economic development of rural areas in the country (Gaubá, 2004).

In the socio-political context in Nigeria, with multiple culture, diversity in languages and differential means as well as needs, the significance of the autonomy of such a tier of government with a view to fostering and engendering the desired national consciousness, unity and relative uniformity as well as preservation of peculiar diversities and the socio-economic development of rural areas cannot over debated or emphasized. Core to the creation of local government, however, is its propensity to facilitate a channel in which government and the people intermix, relate and more rapidly than any other avenues resolve or dissolve issues which may have affected the system. Local government autonomy has been perceived as a panacea for the diverse challenges of the divergent people with different culture (Gaubá, 2014).

As significant as this tier of government has been, its autonomy has been a huge impediment which infringes on its performance as well as function ability in current times. This impediment is hinged on political but undue interference of the higher levels of government such as federal and state governments, coupled with the issue of corruption to embezzlement as well as gross inadequacy of well trained and qualified personnel to bring about the much desired socio-economic development of rural areas.

A local government is simply a semi-autonomous territorial unit created by the constitution or general laws of a state to undertake certain functions within specified or limited geographical location. To Agbakoba (2004), a local government is a political and administrative unit which is empowered by law to administer a specified locality. It involves a philosophical commitment to the idea of community participation and involvement in government at grassroots level which in turn will engender the needed socio-economic development of rural areas.

In Nigeria, local government is created to bring government closer to the people. The conceptualization of local government by the Nigerian Federal Government leaves one with no iota of doubt that it is largely both theoretically sound and service oriented to the people. It speaks of representative councils with substantial control over local affairs for the provision of services and implementation of projects in their areas, to complement the activities of both the state and federal governments in ensuring socio-economic development of rural areas in Nigeria. This conceptualization amply recognizes the desire for local government autonomy as the substantial control of local government is aimed at staff, institutional as well as financial matters, among others in the socioeconomic development of the rural areas.

The desire to catalyze balanced development, maximize citizens' participation, as well as the arousal of government response necessitates the agitation for local government autonomy. The local government serves as a type of political and administrative structure with a view to facilitating decentralization, national integration, efficiency in governance, and a sense of belongingness at the grassroots level. The local government is a unit of administration globally (Agagu, 2014).

Local government autonomy is viewed as the root of socio-economic development in terms of dealing with the people which democracy is hinged on. Hence, local government autonomy is visibly viewed as catalyst for socioeconomic development of rural areas in Nigeria. To this end, this paper seeks to examine local government autonomy and socio-economic development of rural areas in Nigeria. knowing the roles the government needs to play in the development of any society as well as the clear inability of the national and state governments in the task of meeting the needs of the rural areas, local government autonomy is seen essentially to complement the efforts of the states and national government in the task of socio-economic development of rural areas through rural development programmes.

The rural areas to a great extent suffer socio-economic and environmental neglect as well as abandonment, poor and inaccessible, roads, no infrastructural facilities, high rural drift etc. and this make

the subsistence farming productivity of no significance economically due to lack of local government, autonomy which would have enhanced the socio-economic status of the rural people in rural areas in Nigeria.

Methodology

The paper adopts principally a descriptive method of analysis of the general role of local government autonomy and socio-economic development of rural areas as both a policy making and practice measures. This is quite expedient and or necessary due to the increasing emphasis of the development and transformation of rural areas through local government autonomy. There is need for government and policy formulation to grant autonomy to local government as a tier of government to bring about the much desired development needs of the rural areas in Nigeria. The granting of autonomy to local government will engender the need transformation as well as development of the rural areas for enhanced socio-economic wellbeing of rural people in Nigeria.

Literature review

The concept of local government is or has been variously conceptualized in the literature in existence. In the words of Agbakoba (2004), a local government is a political and administrative unit that is empowered by law to administer a specific locality. He stated further that it involves a philosophical commitment to the idea of community participation as well as involvement in the government at the grassroots level which will invariably engender the much vaunted or desired socioeconomic development of the rural areas in Nigeria. One of the most generally agreed as well as acceptable conceptualization of local government is that given by generally agreed as well as acceptable conceptualization of local government is that given by Mawhood (1993). He conceptualized local government as a body separated by law and have local representatives as well as formal power to decide on a range of public matters. He stated that the eight of the local government to make decisions is entrenched by the law and can only be altered by a new legislation. And that the local government have resources which subject to the stated limits, are expended and invested at their will or discretion. Ola and Tonwe (2005), viewed local government as the selection of persons rather than only election to constitute local government.

In the views of Imhanlahimi and Ikeanyibe (forthcoming), local government is defined area as well as a popularly elected democratic council. They went ahead to state that it has formal powers derived from the laws or constitution of the land, to decide on a range of public matters or issues in consultation with other stakeholders, compassing traditional rulers in the rural areas. The formal powers can only be altered by a subsequent legislation or constitutional amendment. The local government has personnel, financial as well as other resources, from whatever as other resources, from whatever sources, that are deployed, expended and invested at its own discretion for the execution of legally or constitutionally assigned and mutually agreed functions for the overt socioeconomic development of the rural areas.

Local government autonomy in the views of Imhanlahimi and Ikeanyibe (2014), is the adequate and relative power given to local government councils to perform their local or constitutional responsibilities or duties optimally. They canvassed for two types of autonomy for local government councils which are absolute and adequate but relative in nature. To Chaturvedi (2006), local government autonomy is concerned with the local body having financial as well as management, autonomy with a view to deciding and determining its own course of action. collaborating the above assertion, Mawhood (1993), views local government autonomy as the relative separation of central as well as local spheres of government on the one hand. On the other hand, be put forward that the central government should only play the function of monitoring the activities of local councils without any intrusion into their domain.

In the views of these authors or scholars, local government autonomy in Nigeria and in the other less developed nations globally, should be relative and not absolute. This autonomy entails absolute separation of responsibilities and powers but relative and adequate autonomy should be granted to enable local government councils perform their functions optimally as well as to also discharge legally or constitutionally assigned, responsibilities satisfactorily, but without under interference or restraint from the state and federal tiers of government. This paper argues for adequate local government autonomy within the ambits of the law or constitution for essence of socioeconomic development of rural areas. Local government

autonomy remains an avenue for promoting socioeconomic development of rural areas based on the yearnings or priorities of the rural dwellers in Nigeria. The concept of development also has numerous definitions in the literature. Some defined development as an act while view it as a process. Development is simply a process which creates growth, progress, positive change or the addition of physical, economic, environmental, social as well as demographic components. To Todaro and Smith (2011), is a multidimensional process involving the reorganization and reorientation of the entire economic and social systems.

In line with the above conceptualization by Todaro, Smith and Ering (2014), views development as a process of improving the quality of all human lives, such improvement may include raising people's living levels (e.g. income, consumption, education, medical services etc.) via relevant economic growth processes. On his part, Ottong (2006), defined development as the act of creating conditions conducive to growth of people's self-esteem through the establishment of social, political as well as economic systems and institutions, which promote human dignity and respect. He stated further that it implies increasing access to better life (improved welfare) and the freedom to choose by enlarging the range of choices available. In the words of Ekong (2003) cited in Ering (2014), development is a process of social change in which the people of a community organize themselves for planning and action, define their common and individual problems, and execute these maximum of reliance upon the resources of the community.

Socio-economic development is the process of social and economic development in a society which is measured with indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), life expectancy, literacy as well as levels of employment (Ering, 2014). It refers to society related economic factors which relate and influence one another. The greatest rationale for the creation of local government globally is essentially to employ it to assume responsibility for the socio-economic development of rural areas directly as well as also contribute indirectly to the development of the country. This development has been viewed from two fundamental vantage positions and or view points: Socio-economic as well as holistic. The socio-economic perspective was hinged on the traditional definition that expressed concerns for social problems such as poverty, inequality and unemployment which must be alleviated to bring about socio-economic development in the rural areas in the country. The second perspective which is more current definition of development was blazed by scholars or authors such as Todaro and Smith (2011), that gave a holistic conceptualization that development is a multidimensional process involving major changes in social structures, popular attitudes and national institutions, as well as the acceleration of economic growth, the reduction of inequality and the eradication of absolute poverty. Development invariably, must represent the entire gamut to change in which the whole social system turned to the divergent basic needs as well as desires of individuals, and social groups found in that system, departs from condition of life extensively perceived as unsatisfactory toward a situation or condition of life regarded as materially as well as spiritually better.

This current or contemporary conceptualization of development is thus holistic, taking into consideration all spheres of life, ranging from political, cultural, social, economic, religious etc. Development as currently defined encompasses the comprehensive development of man as well as his environment in all ramifications in a locality, under a political setting or structure such as a local government, on a participatory as well as sustainable manner. This is better achieved through local government autonomy, which is, on the other hand, sustained by the local government's adequate performance of the above tasks.

Commanding issues in local government autonomy

The significant issues in local government autonomy began to appear in 1976 local government reforms. Prior to 1976, local administration existed rather than local government in the country. Right from the colonial epoch up to 1975, administration at the local level was an appendage of the regional and later state governments. This was irrespective of some reforms by the regional governments at the local level in the 1950s as well as after independence epoch by the state governments up to 1975 (Ola and Tonwe, 2005; and Ikelegbe, 2005).

The commanding issues could be easily appreciated right from the 1976 local government reforms. These commanding issues consists the setting up of representative local government areas, determination of

population size of local government areas, direct allocation of funds to local government areas as well as the review of personnel administration.

The guidelines on the 1976 local government reforms began the autonomy of local government areas when they asserted that “membership” of local government areas should be predominantly elected either by direct or indirect elections from local governments or settings (Nigeria; para. 25). The fledging local government autonomy was driven into the Nigerian constitutions of 1979, 1989 as well as 1999. There is a clause that “the system of local government by democratically elected local government is under this constitution guaranteed” in section 7 of each of the constitutions. The constitution made an extension of this guarantee in section 8 to include the establishment, structure, composition, finance as well as functions of such local governments, by directing the states to enact a law to the above effects. And the state government have been obliging in this direction through the enactment as well as amendment of local government laws right from the year 2000. The significance of democratically elected local governments could only be underemphasized (Aghayere, 2008). The definition of democracy also supports this view. In terms of local government autonomy of the local government areas, democratically elected local government areas simply implies that the councilors would no longer be the candidates of state governments as was the case in the past. It implies further that councilors would be sure to serve out their terms without fear or favour except a councilor acted unlawfully.

Issues aimed at promoting the autonomy of local governments were also contained in the 1976 local government reforms. These issues ranged from ensuring that local governments can execute all types of functions reasonably economically by possessing a population of between 150,000 and 800,000 limits that may be divergent in exceptional geographically circumstances (Nigeria, 1976; Para. 8). This well conceived policy has not been repealed since then, despite the practice. The reason for the maximum population size policy derives from the general minimum population strength which can support a viable community. With the population size against what had been considered a reasonably supportive population during the less politicized era of the 1970s, we now seem to have what may be referred as cap-in-hand local government areas. They can seldomly depend on their population but on external funding. This implication is that local government autonomy been enormously whittled down.

The Nigerian government seems to have done quite a huge effort to promote local government autonomy in the area of local government finances, without an iota of doubt, for the essence of their development impact in the rural areas. There has an enormous contribution on the part of the government with a view to promoting the financial autonomy of local government areas in two core ways. The first is through direct allocation of finances to the local governments. The second is through constitutional provisions for numerous of their revenue sources as enshrined in for instance, sections 149 as well as 142 of the 1999 constitution.

There is a general notion among scholars and social commentators that local government are not living to expectation with a view to protecting their financial autonomy (Aghayere, 2008; Ikelegbe, 2005; Nchuchukwe, 2003; Imhanlahimi and Ikeanyibe, forthcoming). On the other hand, the local governments have contributed trifling or insignificant amounts between 1993 and 2006 as their internally generated revenue (IGR) to their financial needs. The state governments as an external revenue source have not been quite helpful to the local government areas as their contributions have ranged from 0.3 and 0.9 per cent from 1993 and 2006. More worrisome, as Ola and Tonwe (2005) and Aghayere (2008), have noted, is that the state governments interfere with federal government’s financial allocations to the local governments’ statutory contribution of 10 per cent of their IGR to the local government areas.

Local government autonomy seems weakest in the country in the sphere of personnel administration; and it is one area which is not given consideration in terms of coverage constitutional but rather administrative provision. This perhaps is the rationale why the state governments through their Local Government Service Commissions (LGSCs), throughout the country, affirms monopoly of personnel matters in local government administration. The 1976 guidelines on local government reforms had only asserted mildly that local governments shall have considerable control over local affairs as well as staff. What is obtainable in one state is also applicable in practically all other states with respect to local government personnel especially by virtue of the meetings of the LGSCs across the nation. In like manner, the LGSCs

exchange their annual reports to enable them have an idea of what others are doing. The connivance between the LGSCs and the state governments have put personnel administration basically under their control. Despite the advantages of this option, encompassing uniformity as well as reduced politicization in personnel administration, local government autonomy in the matter is tremendously limited as well as can hinder their development impact in rural areas in the country.

Local government autonomy and socio-economic development of rural areas

Socio-economic development refers to a process of socio and economic development in a social system (society). It is measured with indicators such as Gross Domestic Products (GDP), life expectancy literacy as well as levels of employment. Socio-economic also refers to society related economic factors which relate to and influence one another (Ering, 2014). The delivery of public goods and services at the local level or the grassroots is aimed at moving the standard of living of the people to the next level (Angahar, 2013). Consequently, the efficient and effective provision of basic amenities as well as social infrastructures for the people at the grassroots are key factors to the existence of any government (Balatilo & Ibrahim, 2004).

Akwara and Idu (2013), contends that as agent of rural development, local governments are to utilize funds made available to them by both federal and state governments as well as their internally generated revenue to improve on the lives of the people within their areas of operation through initiation and attracting developmental projects to the local governments such as provision of access roads, water and rural electricity. Apart from being a viable political and administrative organ for the socio-economic governments also act as the training ground for the breeding of grassroots democracy fundamental in national development (Oladunjoye, 2010).

According to United Nations Development Group (2011), local governments are formal institutions, officially mandated to deliver varieties of public goods and services at the grassroots level to engender the most needed socioeconomic development. The assignment of service delivery responsibilities to local government is largely predicated on the principle of subsidiary, which suggests that government functions should be assigned to the lowest level of government which is capable of efficiently undertaking this function. This implies that local government are proximate, and they can be expected to delivery services which correspond to local priorities as well as in ways which genuinely meet local needs. Moreover, local governments are institutionally sustainable. It is these two fundamental attributes of local government – their proximity and institutional viability – which makes it so well suited for autonomy to appropriate pro-poor services to usher in socio-economic development of rural areas.

According to Olabisi (2013), the need for local government autonomy is to allow the local government specific powers to perform array of functions, plan, formulate as well as execute its own policies, programmes and projects, and its own rules and regulations as expected for its local needs. This autonomy encompasses power to control its finance, recruit and discipline its staff. It is predicated on the fact that when local government has power to take decision on its own as regarding its finance and policies, rural areas will have the assurances of socioeconomic development. This is accentuated by the fact that local government is closer to the people and when local government councils have the powers of their own without any overbearing influence from the state, they could implement decisions policies which will enhance the socioeconomic development of rural areas in the country without having to wait for the state which in most cases focus mainly on the state development and neglecting the rural areas. In Nigeria, there obvious cases by observation that the money meant for socioeconomic development of rural areas have been diverted as well as mismanaged by the state governors. He concluded that local government autonomy will make local government councils to have direct access to their finances with which to implement policies and decisions which will promote grassroots socioeconomic development.

Ehiri (2010), argues that inadequacy in the provision of social services such as education, healthcare services, etc. is a product of failure to grant autonomy to local government. He added that local governments have constitutional responsibility for providing essential services within the sphere of jurisdiction but lacks the financial autonomy to do so. This is in line with Imhanlahimi (2008), who contends that local government are legally empowered to exercise authority within the confines of the law or constitution. This is to enable

them discharge legally or constitutionally assigned responsibilities, satisfactorily, but without undue interference or restraint from within or higher authority.

Samihah (2011), on his part states that the responsibility of providing basic essential services and bringing about socioeconomic development has been delegated to local governments as the third tier of government. He went head that the types of social services which a local government may require to provide include housing water, adult and vocational education, rural electricity, feeder roads, and transport primary health facilities and other social services. As a consequence, local governments have to effectively identify and target essential infrastructures as well as social services at any given point in time, neediest areas, have systems in place to track expenditure on projects and be able to determine if the allocation of resources has an impact. The most immediate need thus is to grant local government autonomy so that they may be empowered in gaining an understanding of where the priority areas are and what the local governments are planning to do. It will also give citizens an opportunity to hold local governments accountable for the delivery of social services. Awofeso (2004), contends that local government as the closest government to the people is not totally autonomous. Its autonomy in relation to other tiers of government has been quite complex and sometimes controversial. He argued that the 774 local government areas in the country are contributing nothing to national development especially the area of social services. Nigerian local government system has changed from being an organ of bringing government and dividends of democracy closer to the people to an organ for compensating political acolytes of the ruling parties in the states. This has created serious problem and has continually hindered the socio-economic development of rural areas in the country through their autonomy.

Collaborating the facts above, Branchati (2005), asserts that local government globally are considered as strategic institutions for the provision of basic socio-economic, environment and other services. Their strategic advantage of proximity to the grassroots makes them valuable as well as viable for providing effective and efficient services required by the community. They can and should be engines of growth as well as propellers of socioeconomic development in rural areas in Nigeria.

Theoretical orientation

The theory that informs the discussion of local government autonomy and socioeconomic development of rural areas is the general systems theory. The proponent most associated with this theory is Easton (1965), who views the political system as a set of interrelated and reciprocally regulated patterns of actions as well as orientation, pattern which cluster together in equilibrium and that have certain needs of maintenance and survival. It is a phenomenon of whatever type, including physical, biological, social, political etc. which is an organized whole with identifiable, interrelated structures delineating it from the environment (super system) in which it is located and with which it interacts, processing the inputs from it into outputs for it.

The general systems theory seeks to argue that every system, including political system, has subsystems that make up the entire system. They are assigned functions and provided with enabling empowerment, including resources, appropriate authority, etc. to enable them discharge their responsibilities optimally. Where this is the case, there is said to be homeostasis (stability) in the political system. On the other hand, instability reigns in the political system where the contrary is the case and the subsystems and the entire system are also unable to function optimally.

Input and output analysis of a political system is very significant. A political system is said to obtain its inputs (demands, supports, liberty or autonomy, cooperation, criticisms, resources, information, direct labour etc.) from the environment. These inputs are what the subsystems employ to discharge their responsibilities, so that the political system can send out its outputs into the environment and obtain further inputs for its operations.

Applying this theory of the systems analysis to the local government system, the local government system in the country constitutes the sub-systems. They must be well handled in terms of being given adequate autonomy so they can contribute to the socioeconomic development of the rural areas in the country which will appropriately guarantee the optimality of the whole (country) political system, as well as its homeostasis. If the reverse is the case, that is, if the local government system do not have the required

autonomy to operate, then the much vaunted socioeconomic development of the rural areas in the country cannot be achieved.

Thus, local government autonomy should aim at:

- i) Decongesting government at the centre, thereby freeing national leaders from onerous details and unnecessary involvement in local issues.
- ii) Increasing peoples comprehension as well as economic development;
- iii) Making programmes to foster social and economic betterment
- iv) Training people in the art of government,
- v) Strengthening unity and cohesion

This requirement would imply the reduction of concentrated power at the centre. The local level will be involved in implementing socioeconomic programmes which attempt to reconstruct the infrastructure necessary for an approved way of life. The consideration is that local government given its autonomy is in a better position than the national government to stimulate initiatives as well as inculcate the feeling of national consciousness and encourages drive and experimentation in the local people. The argument is that the role of the local government through its autonomy should be such that promotes better life, improve means of livelihood, socially as well as economically and a means to a better share in the national wealth.

Conclusion and recommendations

This paper examined local government autonomy and socioeconomic development of rural areas in Nigeria. For effective as well as quick move towards local government autonomy in Nigeria, a multi-pronged approach requiring a combination of factors needs to be adopted. To this end, significance should be laid on, inter-alia, creating in people's mind a positive attitude to accept as well as abide with local government autonomy and discouraging practices which will favour inordinate usurpation of powers of local government by state governments in the country, particularly those that are adversative to democratic principles such as non—condition local government elections, the utilization of undemocratic leaders or party faithful to govern the local councils and delay in remitting monthly allocation to councils.

The paper concluded that autonomy of local councils has a fundamental role to play in the socioeconomic development of rural areas in Nigeria. This implies that the socioeconomic development of the rural areas in terms of provision of basic necessities of life and social services depends to a great extent on the level of autonomy enjoyed by local governments and thus be given priority by the higher tiers of government to enhance the socioeconomic wellbeing of the rural populace through service delivery. Hence, the paper recommended that:

- i) Joint state-local account should be expunged from the constitution with a view to enabling the allocation of funds directly to the local governments.
- ii) There should be political autonomy of local government councils specified in the constitution to be solely through democratic elections.
- iii) Local governments should be empowered as well as allowed to make decisions and implement policies and programme rather than being exacerbated by state government who decides what local governments could do.
- iv) Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) and other related agencies should serve as watch dogs to checkmate the excesses of local government chairmen.

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