

Local Government Administration in Nigeria and the Localist Theory: Exploring the Nexus

Jide Ibietan¹, Peter Ndukwe²

Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to examine the nature and challenges of local government administration in Nigeria using the localist theory as framework of analysis. With a heavy reliance on secondary data and theory to practice approach employed, the paper presented illuminating discourse and underscored the features of the localist theory that could change for good the nature of local government administration in Nigeria. The effective practice of new managerialism; devolved model of governance anchored on qualitative service delivery and reforms package inherent in the theory encapsulating financial buoyancy and stronger local democracy offer tremendous appeal to overcoming the challenges of local government administration in Nigeria. Other suggestions proffered are also capable of repositioning local government councils in Nigeria for effective performance.

Key words: Local; Government; Administration; Localist; Theory; Nexus.

1. Introduction

The place of the local government as the third tier of governance implies that a lot is expected from it, if Nigeria is to attain development. Looking at what obtains generally in the country, not much can be seen as efforts of the local government to move the citizens forward. Local governments in Nigeria have not actualised the four basic purposes for their establishment which include the enhancement of participatory democracy, promotion of local freedom of action or local autonomy, using the entity as an instrument for the enhancement of political integration and national unity and the provision of services for which they are the most efficient provider compared to other levels of government (Bello-Imam, 2007).

The establishment of local governments in Nigeria is predicated on the above purposes. However, from previous studies, it is obvious that a number of factors inhibit the achievement of these objectives. Most critical in this connection are pecuniary distress, inadequate executive capacity, suffocating controls by the state and federal governments due to lack of autonomy, sometimes conflicting directives from higher tiers of government to them, irregular participatory democracy at the level of governance and lack of political will on the part of the elected councilors and chairmen to translate their mandate into reality (Bello-Imam, 2007). One major challenge in the drive for solutions to these problems is that there are unambiguous constitutional functions for Nigerian local governments which are not matched with adequate financial resources, qualified, effective and efficient administrative structure that are expected to translate these articulated but basic purposes for establishing local governments into reality (Bello-Imam, 2007).

Historical Background of Local Government System in Nigeria

Nigeria was formally birthed in 1914 after the amalgamation by the British government who ruled during the colonial era which ended in 1960. However, prior contact with Europeans dates back to the fifteenth century (Idu, 2013). The local government system in Nigeria also came into existence during the colonial period, although, there were different forms of traditional local ruler-ships before then. Britain took

¹Department of Political Science and International Relations, Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria

²Department of Political Science and International Relations, Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria

the first step to establish colonial administration in 1861 (Idu, 2013). The colonial administration that was established was based on Indirect Rule. The Nigerian local government administration has experienced change in name, structure and composition over many years. In the 1930s and 1940s, for instance, local government was known as chief-in-council and chief-and-council, where traditional rulers were given the pride of place in the scheme of things. In the 1950s, election was introduced according to the British model in the western and eastern parts of the country with some measure of autonomy in personnel, financial and general administration (Nwabueze, 1982:20). These changes brought about progress, growth and development in the local governments. The pace of this development was more noticeable in the South than in the North. During that period, heterogeneity was the symbol of local government as there was no uniformity in the system and the level of development was also remarkably different (Ajayi, 2000). With the passing of colonialism in 1960, a post-colonial phase in the evolution of local government emerged. This phase was characterised by a multi-tier local government structure in the Eastern and Western regions where both elected and traditional elements were accommodated (Ukiwo, 2006; Agagu, 2004). According to Gboyega (1987), a national reform of local governments in the country was abjured by the short-lived military regime of Gen. T. AguiyiIronsi, perhaps due to the uproar and dissent that the decision to introduce a unitary system of government generated.

Things changed after the military regime of General Murtala/Obasanjo introduced the local government reforms in 1976 which fostered uniformity in the administrative structure of the local government system. The reforms introduced a constitutionally recognised multi-purpose single-tier local government system (Gboyega, 1983). The reforms also made population a criterion under which a local government could be created. According to Gboyega (1983), this innovation meant that a population of within 150,000 to 800,000 was considered reasonable for a local government area in Nigeria. The aim of this was to create local councils that were statistically representative of the people. The reforms also introduced local government elections for the office of the chairman as the executive head, with councilors supervising the affairs of the councils and constituting the local cabinet. The local government councils also had professional staff who aided the implementation of policies (Local Government Reform Guidelines, 1976). Other reforms were introduced after 1976 and some of the features included the increase in the number of local government from 301 in 1976 to 453 in 1989 and 589 in 1991 by the Babangida administration as well as the introduction of the legislative arm into the local government system (Ajayi, 2000). The Abacha regime also increased the number to 774 local councils that exist today. (Akinsanya, 2004).

It can be noted from the Nigerian political history that the local governments as public institutions have been subjected to various reforms as almost every successive administration introduced one administrative change or the other. Apart from the notable 1976 reforms, state government officials have also influenced these institutions in one way or the other. These changes did not occur without effects as some of them met with social strife. The relocation of some local government headquarters in 1997 led to large scale destruction of lives and property in Ondo, Osun, Delta, Rivers and Cross-River States (Omotosho, 1998:105). In Ondo State, the relocation of the then newly created Akoko South East local government headquarters from Oba Akoko to IsuaAkoko led to the destruction of lives and property. In 1998, the Abubakar administration introduced “sole administrator” system at the grassroots level before elections were conducted in December 1998 for the posts of chairmen and councilors (Akinsanya, 2004).

Prior to the elections of 2003, approximately 500 unconstitutional local government councils were in existence in Nigeria (Sagay, 2001). This generated conflict between the federal government and states that had created local governments as the federal government claimed it would not release funds from the federation account to LGAs that were not constitutionally recognised. While this non-release of funds forced the concerned state governments to dissolve the new LGAs, Lagos State government refused to adhere, risking the non-release of funds for LGAs for several months. Lagos was able to sustain the resistance because it is the only state with the largest non-oil internally generated revenue (Sagay, 2001). Another example was Ekiti state, where the tenure of elected local government officials was reduced to two years, while some retained the three years tenure (Akinsanya, 2004). Also in June 2007, some state governments dissolved their local government councils and appointed caretaker committees to administer the various

councils prior to the conduct of elections. Likewise, the dissolution of local councils in Ekiti State by the administration of Governor Segun Oni in June 2007 generated conflict between the local government chairmen and the Governor (Adoniya, 2010).

Subsequently, the central administrations introduced one change or the other to the local government institution. Local government system in Nigeria has not been stable due to continuous change, inherently causing its lack of focus and direction as a public institution. As one of the architects of the Local Government Reforms of 1976, Obasanjo lamented thus:

Instead of bringing government and development closer to the people, local governments have produced absentee local government chairmen who are only seen at council headquarters when the monthly "Abuja Allocation" arrives and vamoose with their standby jeeps and mobile police escorts after superintending over the sharing of the local government's share of the national cake among the relevant stakeholders (Obasanjo in Sklar, Onwudiwe & Darren, 2006:101).

2. Structure of Nigerian Local Governments

The 1999 constitution of Nigeria recognises the existence of 774 Local Government Areas (LGAs). Each local government area is administered by a Local Government Council consisting of a chairman who is the Chief Executive of the LGA, and other elected members who are referred to as Councilors. Each of the areas is further sub-divided into wards with a minimum of ten and a maximum of fifteen (FRN, 1999). There are two distinctive marks of Nigeria's public administration system that have implications for the country's local governments. One is the federal practice and the other is the presidential system (Osaghae, 2005). As a federal structure, it is a system of government in which power is divided between national and subnational units (federal and State). Local government is habitually regarded as a subordinate rather than autonomous and coordinate tier of government (Awotokun, 2005). In most cases in Nigeria, local governments are superintended by the state government and they fall under their jurisdictional competence. Hence, attempts by successive military governments in Nigeria to reinvent the tradition of local governance in federalism by placing local government under federal control and attempts at granting it autonomy has generated much squabbles and intergovernmental conflicts among the federal, state and local authorities over issues of autonomy and control. The presidential system of government also has crucial implications for local government in Nigeria. The hallmark of the presidential system is the enormous power available to and exercised by the Head of the executive branch of government and the premium placed on the principle of separation of power and checks and balances (Awotokun, 2005). This greatly affects local government administration under such powerful Chief Executives who have powers of fiscal and administrative control including power to create new local councils and dissolve elected bodies (Osaghae, 2005).

3. Research Setting: The Nature and Challenges of Local Government Administration in Nigeria

Local government is the system of political decentralisation in which the power base of decision making is, to a great extent, not national but local. Within this system, functions are locally and directly executed by elected officials who have direct control over local affairs. It constitutes the most critical level of government at which the momentum to sustain national development can be created. To some countries in the third world, it is the only semblance of authority known beyond the traditional institution (Bello-Imam, 1996:2). A local government council is an institution whose operations address the needs and aspirations of the citizenry and also extends the administrative and political control to the community (Wanjohi, in Khalil, 2011:3).

According to Lawal (in Khalil, 2011:4), local government is that tier of government closest to the people and which is vested with certain powers to exercise control over the affairs of people in its domain. A local government council is expected to play the role of promoting the democratic ideals of a society and coordinating development programmes at the local level. It is also expected to serve as the basis of socio-economic development in the locality.

According to Appadorai (1975:287), local government is defined as government by popularly elected bodies charged with administration and executive duties in matters concerning the inhabitants of a particular district or place. The need to catalyses table development, boost citizens' involvement, and stimulate government responsiveness compels the conception of local governments (Lawal and Oladunjoye, 2010:1). The local government assists as a form of political and governmental edifice aiding decentralisation, national integration, competence in governance, and a sense of belonging at the grassroots. The local government is a unit of government all over the world (Agagu, 2004).

Local government is a worldwide institution, but it exists in diverse forms and in diverse political systems. Whatsoever the form of existence, the local government has been fundamentally viewed as the path to and guarantor of administrative competence, effective service delivery, and participatory development (Arowolo, 2005). A school of thought sees it as a perilous tier of government due to its nearness to the people (Gboyega, 1978). Local government appeals to both the people and government as a feedback mechanism that transmits the ideas and demands of the grassroots to a superior tier of government (Adejo, 2003).

The local government organ has been a key feature of the Nigerian government and politics since colonial rule, although over the years, there have been variations in name, structure, and composition, while the organisation was operated differently in diverse parts of the country (Agagu, 2004).

The 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria specifically establishes local government administration as the third tier of government. According to Awotokun (2001:46) the main functions of a local government as stipulated in the fourth schedule of the 1999 constitution are as follows:

- a.** The consideration and the making of recommendations to a state commission on economic planning or any similar body on:
 - i. The economic development of the state population in so far as the areas of authority of the council and of the state are affected;
 - ii. Proposal made by the said commission or body;
- b.** Collection of rates, radio and television licenses;
- c.** Establishment and maintenance of cemeteries, burial grounds and homes for the destitute infirm;
- d.** Licensing of bicycles, trucks (other than mechanically propelled trucks), canoes, wheel barrows and carts;
- e.** Establishment, maintenance and regulation of slaughter houses, slaughter slabs, markets, motor parks and public conveniences;
- f.** Construction and maintenance of roads, streets, street lightings, drains and other public highways, parks, gardens, open spaces, or such public facilities as may be prescribed from time to time by the House of Assembly of a state;
- g.** Naming of roads and streets and numbering of houses;
- h.** Provision and maintenance of public convenience, refuse disposal;
- i.** Registration of all births, deaths and marriages;
- j.** Assessment of privately owned houses or tenements for the purpose of levying such rates as may be prescribed by the House of Assembly of a state;
- k.** Control and regulation of:
 - i. Out-door advertising and boarding;
 - ii. Movement and keeping of pets of all description;
 - iii. Shops and Kiosks;

- iv. Restaurants, bakeries and other places for sale of food to the public;
- v. Laundries; and
- vi. Licensing, regulation and control of sale of liquor.

Also, the functions of a local government council shall include participation of such council in the government of a state as regards, the following matters:

- a. The provision and maintenance of primary adult and vocational education;
- b. The development of agriculture and natural resources, other than the exploitation of minerals;
- c. The provision and maintenance of health services; and
- d. Such other functions as may be conferred on a local government council by the House of Assembly of the state.

The military administration of General Murtala/Obasanjo carried out a local government reform in 1976 which conveyed uniformity with the managerial system. The reform ushered in a multi-purpose, single tier local government system for the entire country (Ajayi, 2000). The local government still exists in practice as the third tier of government; many years after the reforms were implemented. Despite this, various administrations that have ruled have tried to modify it in one way or another in an attempt to improve efficiency at the third tier. One of the main purposes for its existence is to engage people at the grassroots in political participation and to exploit the local resources for the utilisation and benefit of the local areas with support from the federal government.

Notwithstanding the enormous changes that have been made as well as the diverse reforms that were implemented to ensure that the local government becomes an effective tool for development at the grassroots as well as becoming a tool for service delivery for people in the various communities, local government has been seen by some as a failure. It has failed in numerous ways to carry out its various duties and to fulfill the main purposes for which it was created. The failure of the local government however, can be seen to be a direct effect of the corruption that has engulfed Nigeria and the lack of autonomy, especially in discharging the constitutionally assigned roles and responsibilities.

Maddick (in Idike, 1996) underscored the importance of a meaningful/positive role for local government in economic and political process thus:

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

The above further underscores the important roles which the local government is expected to play if any meaningful development is to be achieved in a nation. Predicated on this, it can be inferred that the current dismal state of affairs in Nigeria is due to the incompetence and failings in the delivery of constitutional functions of the local governments.

Adedeji (in Khalil, 2011:6) blames the ineffectiveness of local government administration on the following reasons: lack of mission or lack of comprehensive functional role; lack of proper structure (i.e. the role of local governments in the development process is not known); lack of autonomy; low quality of staff; and low funding. He further averred that these problems lead the local governments into a vicious circle of poverty, with inadequate funding circumscribing powers/functions, which result in the employment of low skilled and poorly paid staff.

4. Theoretical Framework

The task before this paper is to interrogate the effectiveness of Local Government administration in Nigeria using the Localist theory. In other words, what is the connection between governance at the grassroots and a theory that entrenches local autonomy and preferences? This may seem rhetorical, but the reform initiatives inherent in this theory portend robust grassroots administration with capacity for sustainability.

Localism describes a range of political philosophies which prioritise the local. Generally, localism supports local production and consumption of goods, local control of government, and promotion of local history, local culture and local identity. Localism can be contrasted with regionalism and centralised government, with its opposite being found in the unitary state (Wikipedia, 2013:1). Localism can also refer to a systematic approach to organising a national government so that local autonomy is retained rather than following the usual pattern of government and political power becoming centralised over time.

The localist perspective like the traditional public administration has developed a forceful case for autonomous elected local authorities (Ezeani, 2004). Jones and Stewart (cited in Stoker, in Ezeani, 2004:46) who are strong proponents of the localist perspective established a strong defence for the local government on the following grounds. First, local government is grounded in the belief that there is value in the spread of power and the involvement of many decision makers in many different localities. Diffusion of power is a fundamental value and local authorities as elected bodies 'can represent the dispersion of legitimate political power in the society. Second, there is strength in diversity of response. Needs vary from locality to locality, as do wishes and concerns; local government allows these differences to be accommodated. Diversity is also important because it provides scope of learning. Local authorities can learn from each other's different patterns of provisions, experimenting and pioneering (Stoker in Ezeani, 2004:46)

In the 20th century, localism drew heavily from the writings of Leopold Kohr; E.F. Schumacher; Wendell Berry; Alexis de Tocqueville and Kirkpatrick Sale, among others. More generally, localism draws on a wide range of movements and concerns, and it proposes that by re-localising democratic and economic relationships to the local level, social, economic and environmental problems will be more defineable and solutions more easily created. Localism has received numerous contributions by various scholars and political activists who subscribe to the idea of democratising the local entities, empowering the local government resourcefully and giving them the capacity to execute their duties which will affect development from the various localities outwardly to the entire nation (Wikipedia, 2013).

In his great treatise on Democracy in America, Tocqueville analysed the system of local government in early nineteenth century America in great details and with a considerable degree of admiration. Long before it became known as the principle of subsidiarity, Tocqueville wrote:

In order to understand the consequences of this division, it is necessary to make a short distinction between the affairs of the Government. There are some objects which are national by their very nature, that is to say, which affect the nation as a body, and can only be entrusted to the man or the assembly of men who most completely represent the entire nation. Amongst these may be reckoned war and diplomacy. There are other objects which are provincial by their very nature, that is to say, which only affect certain localities, and which can only be properly treated in that locality. Such, for instance, is the budget of a municipality. Lastly, there are certain objects of a mixed nature, which are national inasmuch as they affect all the citizens who compose the nation, and which are provincial inasmuch as it is not necessary that the nation itself should provide for them all. Such are the rights which regulate the civil and political condition of the citizens. No society can exist without civil and political rights. These rights therefore interest all the citizens alike; but it is not always necessary to the existence and the prosperity of the nation that these rights should be uniform, nor, consequently, that they should be regulated by the central authority. (Tocqueville in Hartwich, 2013: 12)

He emphasised the value of local rules and local autonomy. Such local diversity is a source of strength for America and other nations, and not a weakness that needed to be overcome, he argued (Hartwich, 2013: 12)

Localism advocates a major reform of local government. Among the reforms suggested by Jones and Stewart (in Ezeani, 2004) are: the introduction of a local income tax; a move to institute proportional representation in local elections. The localists also advocate the adoption of a new management style. The characteristics of the new management involve a commitment of openness, learning and innovation. A new management style is required if the challenge of socio-economic change is to be met (Ezeani, 2004:47).

The theory of localism is one which supports a devolved model of government that is focused on the delivery of better services to citizens, stronger democracy and ensuring that the right incentives for balanced economic growth are in place. Localism is aligned with the goal of achieving local democracy, empowering community and national development (Malcom, in Hartwich, 2013). One of the main goals of the localism theory is to create effective “subsidiaries” at the local levels that can handle the responsibility of governance as well as the provision of social services. The tenets of localism go against the centralisation of power at a federal level of government, arguing on the view that development will be achieved when local entities are prioritised due to their closeness to the people. The relevance of this theory to Nigeria lies in the understanding that for development to occur, the local entities must be prioritised and empowered with efficient manpower and material resources which are required for adequate development of the localities.

Support has been given to the notion of devolution and a fundamental shift of power to councils, communities, neighborhoods and individuals. Empowered local people coming together to take more responsibilities for their community through local councils is a tried, tested and trusted model of grassroots neighborhood action. This is real localism (Chater, 2010). Prioritising the effectiveness of these local councils under the local government system in Nigeria will bring about community development in the various parts of the country.

Neill (2010) opined that if you want people to feel like they have a stake in the future of their communities, that they are really connected to what is going on, then you give people closer to their homes a real say over what happens there, and the power to make a difference. This is what localism is all about, which amounts to trusting them to decide their own fate.

The theory of localism is based on prioritising local entities and encouraging local creativity, innovation and support which will help channel the efforts of the local people towards community development. Power should be given to local people to form trusts that will make it simpler for them to build new homes or other forms of development initiatives/efforts that their community wants. The community’s right to build will give any community which intends to benefit from development the right to proceed without a specific planning application as long as they can meet various minimum criteria such as demonstrating strong local approval (Neill, 2010).

Blears (2010) also argued that for localism to thrive, there is the need for local councils with strong leadership and a clear vision, a willingness to listen and be prepared to work with others as a team, respect for ordinary people and accountability to communities that they serve. The challenge in Nigeria however, is that local government lacks clear vision and direction as well as strong leadership to navigate their planned efforts towards achieving community development. Betts (2010) further opined that to see local authorities and local democracy as key to accountable localism is not to argue that councils should or must do everything. The priority lies in combined efforts, services and utilising assets, not all of which are the direct responsibility of local councils. However, councils are uniquely placed to develop the necessary strategic approach and take the lead in bringing various organisations together because they have the democratic legitimacy of having been elected by their communities. This is not the case in the Nigerian setting as local governments are continually being subdued by state governments due to their lack of autonomy. For localism to work, there has to be legitimate political leadership at the top. Localism needs air to breathe, space to expand and flexibility to innovate. This is air, space and flexibility in a political framework that allows it (localism) to flourish (McCartney, 2010).

As a form of devolution, local government comprises the legal, convening of powers to execute indicated residual tasks upon legally organised authorities, either in exclusive or concurrent capability (Okunade, 1988). The local government in Nigeria is broadly considered as a significant apparatus for

community development and for the delivery of social services to the people. It is assumed that this level of government is purposefully placed to achieve the above functions due to its nearness to the community dwellers, which boosts its capacity to easily articulate the demands of the people – however, the local governments in Nigeria have not been able to achieve this in practice. The 1976 local government reform was specifically directed at concentrating some important functions of the state government at local levels so as to harness local assets for development. The purpose and sincere application of this theory to grassroots administration can alter for good the current dismal performance of this tier of government and stands as an effective tool to advance study on the role local government plays in community development in Nigeria.

5. Application of Theory

This theory is very applicable to the practice of local government in Nigeria's democratic setting. The major challenge however is that local government does not have complete autonomy to act as agents of development at the local level. The localism theory seeks to devolve power from the federal government and decentralise authority and resources so as to empower the local governments as well as the community dwellers on the importance of the roles both parties need to play in order to develop the communities through self-help efforts in Nigeria. This poses another challenge as the Nigerian system concentrates all its powers in the federal government, diminishing the powers which the local entities have to act independently in the development of the various communities. Localism goes against the centralisation of power at the federal level. Local governments are the closest to the people; hence it is the tier of governments that can fully engage in development programmes that will impact the lives of people directly. For localism to work effectively and be productive in Nigeria, the local governments must be properly empowered functionally and possess full autonomy so as to initiate and implement community development programmes. There is also the need for the local governments to set clearly defined goals, guided by strong vision, qualified local leaders who can properly manage the affairs of the local entities. There is also the need for empowerment of the local governments, to create necessary subsidiaries needed for executing programmes within the various communities.

From the localist perspective, it is understood that the development of a nation is not necessarily a matter of top-bottom approach, that is from the federal government to the local entities. Hence, this theory helps us understand the need to prioritise local activities and initiatives by creating enabling framework that supports bottom-top approach to development.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper examined the nature and challenges of local government administration using the localist theory as framework of analysis. Local government being the third tier of government in Nigeria is the closest to the citizens and for Nigeria to achieve the development it seeks, the pivotal role of local government cannot be overemphasized. Due to the high population of the country, it is difficult for the federal and state governments to impact on the lives of the rural populace directly, therefore, it is the responsibility of the local government to formulate policies and implement programmes that would be of direct benefit to the people and to also act as a mechanism for community development. The extent to which a community performs economically, politically and socially depends in many ways on the creativity, innovation, boldness, and vision of its administrators. For Nigeria to develop, there is the need to begin this development from the grassroots in a bottom-top approach and for all these communities to achieve even development, there is the pressing need for the local government to set realistic goals, driven by visions and backed by continuous diligent efforts.

The theory to practice approach of this paper makes it quite significant, as it unearths practical steps and ways to achieving community development as prelude or precursor to national development. It is trite to reiterate that local government as a product of decentralisation must be autonomous (in personnel, resources, finance) and administratively independent to translate constitutional functions and responsibilities to

effective service delivery with trickle-down effects on the rural populace. The extent to which local governments can do these, mobilise the local people and resources for coordinated self-help initiatives and execution, underscore the pace of development at the grassroots. These have been demonstrated in this paper, and the following are suggestions to effectively position local governments in Nigeria for improved operations:

- There is the compelling need for constitutional reforms that would detach local government councils from the umbilical cord of state governments. The starting point is a radical review of relevant sections like 162(5) of the 1999 constitution which provides for States-LG Joint Accounts.
- As a corollary and in compliance with the letter and spirit of federalism as advocated by K.C. Wheare, greater autonomy is canvassed and this should manifest in direct receipt of monthly allocations from the federation account.
- The local government councils should invigorate their revenue generation efforts.
- Active and constant sensitization cum mobilisation of the rural populace for community development initiatives and execution is recommended.

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