

## **LOCAL GOVERNMENT, DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**

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### **Abstract**

Among the motives for creating Local Governments is to promote democracy and bring government closer to the grassroots communities. Several efforts have been made to improve grassroots development, however studies shows the contrary, grassroots people in Nigeria are the most downtrodden citizens and with difficult access to infrastructural facilities. While there are several studies on Local Government and Development, we know little about how Democracy in Nigeria improves grassroots development. The study utilizes secondary source of data. Findings of the study indicate that though democracy has been entrenched in Nigeria, but the perceived benefits of democracy are yet to be seen at the grassroots level due to mismanagement, corruption and inadequate autonomy. The study recommended the need to enhance LG autonomy, transparency and accountability in the management of public funds.

Key words: Democracy, Development, Local Government

### **Introduction**

In recent years, there have increasing interest on democracy at the local level. This interest is perhaps due to the increasing rural urban migration, challenges of crime, unemployment and high standard of living in the urban centres, coupled with inadequate social services in the rural communities. These changing circumstances have led to review the situation at the grassroots communities in the developing world, and raised a question of how such societies can be governed better as well as how other towns and communities can cope

with these new pressures. Great number of scholars has convictions that this emerging situation is due to the form of governance of those societies.

In essence, many scholars assume and expect that democracy is the only alternative for development. This line of argument has aroused out of the conviction that democracy provides basic requirements for good governance and development (Ardo, 2000:2). Further argued, decentralization enhances democracy and development at the grassroots level. Hypothetically, local government would efficiently provide services to grassroots communities better than other tiers of government. This perceived benefit has led to more than 70 countries (mostly new democracies of the developing worlds) in various parts of the world to start the process of implementing political and administrative reforms aimed at decentralizing and strengthening local governance (IDEA, 2012).

However, In Nigeria in spite of the decentralization of local responsibilities to Local Government, majority of the local populace are yet to benefit by the *dividend of democracy*. Nigeria is the fourth world largest democracy with a population of over 160 million and world sixth largest oil supplier and blessed with economic potentials, but majority of the Nigerian population are rural dwellers with little or no access to basic infrastructural facilities. Local Governments which are constitutionally placed to provide basic infrastructural facilities to the grassroots communities have been performing below expectation despite several efforts and reform measures to improve their performance. In the past, the usual excuses by the LGs in Nigeria were lack of autonomy and inadequate funding. Hence, with the previous LG reforms and the increase in LGs revenue share from the federation statutory allocation, the expectation of many people is that such excuses supposed to have been resolved, yet basic services are still inadequate. This inadequacy of basic services at the grassroots level has led to social and economic pressures in urban centres such as increasing human migration,

crimes, unemployment etc. In fact, the value and depth of democratic life particularly at the grassroots level is generally perceived to be inadequate. In essence, the dividends of the democratic experiment have yet to be directly felt by many Nigerians, other than the ceremonial casting of a ballot (Adebisi, 2012). These challenging conditions have called for a review of the ways to curb this and rethinking of better ways of governing local communities. The author assumes that sustainable development can be assured if local governments are empowered to participate in the development of their own communities and vested with adequate autonomy and resources to perform their constitutional responsibilities. It is based on this study intend to examine the contributions of democracy to development at the local level.

### **Scope of the Study**

The scope of the study is limited to this democratic dispensation (i.e. from 1999- 2015). The choice of the period is due to increasing Local Government funding from the federation account. The study concentrates on LGs due to their importance in actualization of democracy and a government closer to grassroots communities. The period also corresponds to uninterrupted democratic dispensation.

### **Methodology**

The study utilizes secondary source of data. Materials for the study were gathered from journal publications and other unpublished materials.

### **Conceptualization**

#### **Concept of Development**

Development like many concepts in social sciences has no single definition. For instance, Sen (2008) defined development as “collective activities by any human

society directed at reducing the totality of perceived obstacles to a higher standard of living; Thus maximizing the quality of lives of its citizens". Similarly, Seer (1963:3) in his conception observed that:

The questions to ask about country's development are therefore; what has been happening to poverty? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to inequality? If all the three of these have declined from high levels than beyond doubt this has a period of development for the country concerned. If one or two of these central problems have been growing worse, especially if the entire three have, it would be strange to call the result "Development" even if per capita income doubled.

This means that development is a process of progressive and qualitative movement from inability to ability, from incapability to capability (Kauzya, 2005).

### **Concept of Local Government**

Definition of Local Government has attracted several conceptions. Some scholars made emphasis on the position upon which LG is placed in a federal system. While others stressed on legal point of view as well as their constitutional responsibilities. For instance, Olowu (1988: 12) observed that, there existed two basic approaches among scholars to the definition of Local Government. The first one usually adopted in comparative studies, i.e. to consider all sub national central government as Local Government. The second approach is to identify LGs with following definite features: legal entity, powers to perform specific functions, allotted budget and control over its staff, effective citizen participation and localness. Similarly, Local Government may be seen as "a segment of a constituent state or region of a nation state", established by law to provide public services and regulate public affairs within its area of its jurisdiction. Further added "It is a government under the responsibility of the local people and in the interest of the local population by local representative bodies" (Ikelegba, 2005). This means that Local Government must be territorially demarcated as also part of the higher tier of government of the federation with some level of autonomy and power to execute certain

functions. While Agagu (2010) conceptualizes Local Government as a government at the grass root level created to fulfil particular needs of the local people. This conception agrees with Ajayi's (2000) view who further defines local government as "a territorial non sovereign community possessing the legal right and the necessary organ to regulates its own affairs, which presupposes the existence of a local authority with the power to act independently both external control as well as the participation of the local community in the administration of its own affairs through representation".

From the definitions above, the following can be deduced:

- (i) LG is a territorial entity with power regulate its own affairs
- (ii) LG is a sub division of a nation state
- (iii) LG has power to perform certain functions or responsibilities
- (iv) LG represent local people and affairs and govern by local representatives
- (v) LG is a none sovereign body but has power to act independently
- (vi) LG is created by law.

## **Democracy**

The word democracy is derived from two Greek words: Demos (the people) and Kratos (rule) which implies people's rule. In actual sense means rights of the citizens of the Greek city states to participate directly in an act of governance. Though there is no universally accepted notion as to exact meaning of local democracy (Beetham, 1996). But Democracy can be conceived to characterized with periodic or regular elections, smooth change of power through popular suffrage, right of political opponents and minorities to express their views and influence in the decision making, existence, respect and protection of fundamental human rights (i.e. political, economic and social rights), local or community participation in taking decision of their own affairs.

### **Theoretical framework: Theory of Local Government**

This section concentrates on theoretical framework on the justification for the existence of Local Governments. .i.e. articulating the functional responsibilities that Local Governments are supposed to perform. In this regard, Adeyemo, (2010) identified three schools of thoughts, they are:

- i. The Democratic participatory school
- ii. The Efficiency services school and;
- iii. The Developmental school

#### **(i) The Democratic School**

Advocates of democratic school of thought(Mill, 1964; Mechanize, 1964; Alex-de-Tocqueville, David Bulfer; Keith Lucas, and James Bryce) hold that, Local Government function to bring about democracy and to afford opportunities for political participation among the citizens as well as to educate and socialize him politically i.e. Local Government exists primarily as political institution with the responsibilities of fostering representative and participatory democracy at the local level (Ola, 1984; Adeyemo 2010). In this conception, LGs essentially emerged to perform the sensitization function in the art of politics. {Mackenzie (1964) as cited in Gboyenga (2007)}. However, the point is not that local government always provides a training ground for the higher levels of government. However, a tendency exists in many democracies for a good number of parliamentarians, whether at state or national level, have benefited from a political education at the local government levels. The core of the argument of the democratic participatory school is that local government must continue to be a buttress of democracy. To do this, it must continue to inculcate these ideals of democracy and participation (Ola, 1984). This means that local government serves as training ground for future leaders who will subsequently move to State and federal levels. For this

reason local government has been described as “nursery of democracy”. From the above we can deduce the following principles of the Democratic participatory theory:

- a) LG primarily exists to promote democracy through people’s participation at the grassroots level.
- b) LG performs the functions of socializing and educating people politically
- c) LG serves as a training ground for future politician (Jamo, 2016).

**(ii) The Efficiency Services School**

In reaction to democratic participatory school of thought, several scholars have criticized this view, stating that what is central and more important to LG functionality is that propounded by the efficiency services school is that the essential function of LG is not the bringing about democracy or creating a base for political participation. Rather they argued, “LG exists to provide services, and it must be judged...by its success in creating services up to a standard measured by a national inspectorate. LG because of its closeness to an area can provide certain services more efficiently than the central government. These services should be allocated to it and should form the main functions (Mackenzie, 1954 as cited in Ola 1984). Supporting this view, Sharpe (1970) as cited in Ola(1984), suggested that, the efficient performance of these services are so compelling that, if local government did not exist, something that would have to be created in its place. LG because of its closeness to an area, Local Government can provide certain services far more efficiently than central or state government. These services should therefore be allocated to Local Government.

From the foregoing, the following principles could be noted:

- a) The Efficiency Services School is a reaction to democratic school of thought

- b) LG exists to provide basic essential services and as such, it will be judged on the scale of efficiency on how best these services are provided.
- c) because of its closeness to the people of an area, LG can provide certain services far more efficiently than both the federal and the state governments (Jamo, 2016)

### **(iii) The Developmental School**

The developmental school on the other hand emphasized on how Local Governments in the developing countries could be ‘an effective agent for better life, an improved means of a better living, socially and economically, and a means to better share in the national wealth’ (Adeyemo, 2010). This school is of the view that the primary essence of creation of LGs (especially in the developing countries) is to bring about development at the grassroots level by provision of social services and improving the standard of living of the grassroots communities. From the above we can deduce the following:

- a) LGs were basically created to provide accelerate development at the grass root levels
- b) LG can serve as an effective tool for improving better life (Jamo, 2016).

Supporting the above positions Adeyemo (2010) noted that the 1976 Local Government reforms categorically identified specific objectives of the Local Governments and sum up the ideas of the above schools of thought as follows:

- i. Activities by devolving or delegating them to local representatives’ bodies
- ii. To facilitate the exercise of democratic self-government closet to the LG levels of our society, and to encourage the initiatives and leadership potentials
- iii. To mobilize human and material resources through the involvement of the members of the public in their local development; and



- iv. To provide two channels of communication between local communities and government (both states and federal) (local government reform 1976).

### **Democracy, Local Government and Development**

Evidence proved that the classical liberal democratic theory is often unrealistic considering the contemporary conditions and problems. On the other hand, concrete democracy is dynamic and evolutionary (Whalen, 1960). Many people would agree with this notion due to nearly absence of democratic representation at the local level of most democracies of the developing worlds. This has raised a question whether or not democracy and decentralization stimulate development. In this regard, Duncan et al, (2009:30) observes that there is a clear connection between political and economic change. Though there is limited hard evidence on the direction of causality, and the basic mechanisms through which politics affect development. But quantitative analysis validates a strong correlation between levels of income and aspects of good governance, such as market capitalism and liberal democracy (William et al. 2009). This argument was further supported by Olarinmoye (2010) who noted that direct relationship exists between participation (democracy), social and economic development. The study further established that greater the level of participation of the lower tiers of government in revenue allocation process, the greater the level of socio economic development. It is therefore argued that, participation is one of the aspects of democracy. It includes the involvement of people not only in choosing political representatives but included and empowered in the process decisions making process in the various levels of government and layers of the society (Rivera-Batiz 2002, 135). Further argued that participation is necessary ingredient for both economic and social development (Stigliz 2002, 164-167; Rivera-Batiz 2002: 139). In this view, local

participation is necessary for democracy to be effective. It also appears that, the rational for democracy is to wider participation not only at the centre but at the local level.

Local Governments were therefore primarily created to serve the needs of the local communities and to ensure balanced development, encourage citizen's participation, and responsiveness. In this regard, Local Government serves as an important form of political and administrative structure that assist in facilitating decentralization, national integration, efficiency in governance, and a sense of belonging at the grassroots (Agagu, 2004 in Olufemi, 2013). It has also been popularized that local government is one of the very important aspect of the process of democratization and means for strengthening mass participation in the decision-making process. Further contended that, any political system that does not have a system of local government can be considered as undemocratic and incomplete (Mawhood, 1993; Wraith, 1964). Similarly, Nsubuga ( n.d) observes that effective democracy at the local level has the tendency to reduce poverty, improves service provision and development. Further argued, decentralization and local governance offer greater promise in improving people's wellbeing than the highly centralized approaches to development. To this extent, democracy ensures the rule of law, justice, and popular participation in decision-making, transparency and accountability in the expending of public resources. Local government is therefore an instrument for achieving these principles at the grassroots level. Most importantly, Local Government promotes democracy by involving the grassroots communities, who constitute the majority of the society in discoursing and implanting decision on matters that affect them. Local Government thus provides a better means of achieving sustainable development through prudent management of resources, accountability, transparency, efficient allocation of public resources and wider citizens' participation. Although Local Government globally differ in size and

structure and operate under different arrangements depending on the system of government in different nations (Oladimeji et al, 2015). But the main purpose for which it was created is virtually the same everywhere. Local Government has been essentially regarded as a better means of administrative efficiency, effective service delivery and participatory development (Arowolo, 2005 as cited in Olufemi, 2013). This collaborates with the view that Local Government primarily existed to bring about development at the grassroots level (Ajayi, 2004; Ola, 2004; Kolawole, 2003). This means that, Local Government is placed in a strategic position and responsible for the provision of services, promotion of democratization at local level, and mobilization of human and material resources of the grassroots communities so as to enhance their living standard and ensure sustainable development. It is also widely believe that democracy primarily serves as one of the potent tool through which the purpose for which local government is created can be achieved. In contrast, Olufemi (2013) further noted that, in Nigeria democracy has not yet prospered at the grassroots level due to endemic corruption. In essence, the prevalence and pervasiveness of poverty and the underdevelopment at the grassroots level has correlation with the high level of corruption and absence of democratic ethos in the local government system. This corroborates with Oruonye (2013) study which shows that joint account system, persistence interference and dissolution of local council officials by the state government have contributed immensely to the failure of grassroots democracy in the country. These to a large extent have incapacitated the local government council in Nigeria to effectively deliver services to the rural dwellers. Instead, it has encouraged corruption in the administration of the Nigerian Local Government. But Wilson (2013) observed that the various reforms before 1976 only encouraged local administration, and not local government. Although the 1976 reforms and 1979 constitution placed local government as a third

tier of government in Nigeria, but LGs were not granted adequate autonomous political powers. Hence, the reforms have not encouraged effective democratic governance at the local government due to the unequal relationship between the local government and other tiers of government in Nigeria.

It is therefore important to note that, democracy is not end to itself; accountability is consequently one of the essential components of the democratic government. Hence, Local government is better means for enhancing accountability by subjecting government closer to local communities. This to large extent reduces suspicion by the local communities and increase wider participation at the grass roots level (Holm, 1989).

### **Findings of the study, Conclusion and Recommendations**

It has been argued that Local government is one of the essential features of democratic state, and that “no political system is considered complete and democratic if it does not have a system of local government”. Hence, Local Government primarily existed to provide services to grassroots communities and to represent and involve citizens in determining specific local demands and how to achieve such local demands.

It has also been argued that local people are in better position to understand and address their problems better than other people. Again, people are more prone to resist impositions from above. Therefore Local Government provides chance for local people to decide on who should govern them at the local level. To this extent, local government is a means for encouraging grassroots participation, ensures local autonomy and sense of belonging.

Hence, citizens’ participation is crucial for democracy and development. However, where citizens take part in deciding who get what when and how in their own local

communities, harmony and development prevails. In essence, success is more assured when citizens participate in the planning, execution, utilization and assessment of social services planned to advance their standard of living.

The study also found that, one of the fundamental expectations in democratic societies is that an individual is placed on others to justly pursue the common goals of the majority. Local Government which is essentially the closest government closer to the grassroots communities is deliberately there for placed in better position to actualize local representation and demands and further enhance grassroots development.

The study also found that, though democracy is entrenched in Nigeria, however it is often incomplete at the grassroots level. In essence, the quality and depth of democratic life is generally perceived to be inadequate, due to the fact that the benefits or the dividend of the democratic experiment have yet to be directly felt by many Nigerians. Instead, the grassroots communities are being neglected; emphases are more on states and national level. Many rural dwellers are still wallowing in poverty and unable to access basic social services. As such life in such areas became difficult and miserable.

## **Conclusion**

The need for the creation of local government areas stems from the need to facilitate development at the grass root. In this regard local government is positioned to serve local demands in better and efficient manner more than any level of government due to their closeness to local people. In spite of this important position upon which LG is placed in the Nigerian constitution as an agent of development, LGs have not been effectively performing their constitutional responsibilities under the present democratic dispensation. This has resulted in difficulty in shortages of infrastructural facilities in the grassroots communities. The study therefore concludes that for democracy and

development to be effectively entrenched in Nigeria, LGs must be enhanced since they constitute the bulk of the majority of the Nigerian people.

### **Recommendations**

- (i) There is need to improve accountability at all levels of government. This to great extent would improve prudence at the local level.
- (ii) There is need to improve citizen participation in policy formulation, planning and budgeting processes at the local level.
- (iii) Citizens should be allowed access to information especially on expenditures and services delivery.

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