



Strengthening Local Government Councils for Effective Community Development Programming in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper is on strengthening local government councils for effective community development programming in Nigeria. The importance of local government in the development of rural communities cannot be overemphasized. The paper discusses on the concept, importance and functions of local government as well as the problems hindering local government councils from effectively carrying out their statutory responsibility of developing the rural communities and making life for rural dwellers more livable. Finally, the paper suggests how local government councils could be strengthened to overcome these challenges in order to deliver on its responsibilities effectively

Keywords: Local government, community development, programming problems and strengthening.

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INTRODUCTION

The essence of government as an institution is to enable man lives a successful and happy life. Government which is the body within an organization that has the authority to make and the power to enforce laws, regulations or rules or the machinery established by the state to organized, manage its affairs and administer its functions and duties is designed to promote better living conditions for man.

Undoubtedly, government is not only essential for the survival and betterment of the citizens but it is the most potent, influential and veritable ingredient of a nation or state. No state in modern history can survive without a form of government. Absence of government will result in anarchism and a war of all against all.

Political writers averred that governments are created by the people in order to provide for the collective needs such as security from crime, poverty, illiteracy that cannot be properly satisfied by using purely individual's resources. Therefore, governments exist for the purpose of serving the needs and wishes of the people.

Governments exist at various levels or tiers. In Nigeria and many other countries, government is in three levels or tiers namely; federal, state and local government. The federal or central government represent the whole and act on behalf of all. The state authority presides over the various states within the country while the local government takes charge of the rural communities or people at the grassroots.

Local government operates at the base level or rudimentary level of society. No other level of government is closer to the people than the local government. Local government which statutory responsibilities include the provision of health centres/facilities, feeder roads, pipe-borne water, electricity, classroom blocks, town halls, preservation of local environmental resources, establishment of small scale industries in the local communities as well as mobilization of the local people in the development processes among others is cardinal in community development.

It is in realization of the over-whelming importance of local government in the development of rural communities that Nigeria has a total of seven hundred and seventy four (774) local government councils. To carry out its statutory responsibilities about 20.60 percent of the statutory allocation is given to the local government councils in Nigeria from the federation account. In addition to the statutory allocation, local government councils also generate revenues through taxes, fines, grants, loans as well as ten (10) percent of the state internally generated revenue among others.

Since after independence, a lot of reforms and re-organization have been carried out by successive government in Nigeria all geared toward making local government more effective in their service delivery. Despite all the reforms and the huge statutory allocation to the local government councils in the country, local government councils seem to have failed in carrying out their statutory responsibilities as the third tier of government saddled with the responsibility of developing the rural communities.

A survey conducted by Afro Barometer (2008) on public opinion and local government in Nigeria shows clearly that local government councils have failed in the performance of their primary responsibilities. It is worrisome to observe that most local government councils in Nigeria do not even have a befitting secretariat as most local government administrators (political and top management) lives in the cities abandoning their jobs to the detriment of the rural populace which they are supposed to serve.

Furthermore, Etigbamo (2012) averred that the provision of basic amenities such as electricity, pipe-borne water, feeder roads, low-cost housing among others are grossly lacking as local government councils seem to be highly incapacitated in the provision of these basic amenities. Hence local government councils in Nigeria are not doing enough to improve the living conditions of the rural populace as corruption, mismanagement and embezzlement of local government funds has plagued the council system leaving the communities in deplorable situation.

From north to south, east to west the story is the same. Local government councils in Nigeria are not effectively delivering on their mandate of developing the rural communities, thus the imperativeness of this paper. Therefore, this paper will x-ray how local government councils could be strengthened to enable them contribute meaningfully to community development in Nigeria.

The Concept of Community Development

Different scholars, practitioners and organizations have conceived the term community development in diverse ways. According to the Great Britain Office (1955) as cited in Oduaran (1994) the term community development was first mentioned internationally at the 1948 Cambridge conference on African Administration organized by the British Colonial Office. There, it was agreed that the compound word should be used in place of mass education and defined as a movement designed to promote better living for the whole community with the active participation and if possible on the initiative of the community, but if this is not forthcoming spontaneously, by the use of techniques for arousing and stimulating it in order to secure its active and enthusiastic response to the movement. He further noted that since then, the concept has undergone some form of semantic metamorphosis and has therefore been used in different contexts to refer to mutually related development activities and situations. Accordingly, varieties of meaning are ascribed to community development. Barikor (1984) defined community development by contemporary standards as a polymorphous “product”- an amalgam of many dynamics and complementary factors including educational, economic, social, political and cultural transformation of the community and their subsequent emancipation from regressive tradition, poverty, ignorance and diseases.

Bello and Bola (1987) on their own stated that community development is a process of social action in which people of the community organized themselves for the identification of their needs, planning an action to meet those needs with maximum reliance on their own initiatives and resources, supplemented with assistance in any form, from government and non-governmental organizations.

In the words of Hillman (1960) community development is a method of helping local communities to become aware of their needs, to assess their resources more realistically, to organize themselves and their resources in such a way as to satisfy some of their needs and in so doing, acquire the attitudes, experiences, and co-operative skills for repeating this process again and again on their own initiative.

Etigbamo (2013) defined community development as a deliberate plan of action undertaken by an individual or group of persons, government or non-governmental organizations with the active participation of members of the community or by the community themselves with or without the support of external agencies in order to bring about economic, social, political, technological and cultural improvement in the overall living conditions of the people of the community.

Generally, community development is aimed at promoting better material and non-material living conditions of the people of the community relying on their resources, initiatives and participation.

The Concept of Local Government

The term local government has been conceived differently by different scholars, practitioners and organisations. The 1976 local government reform in Nigeria saw local government as the government at the local level exercised through representative councils established by law to exercise specific powers within a defined area. These powers should give the council substantial control over local affairs as well as staff, institutional and financial powers to initiate and direct the provision of services and to determine and implement projects so as to complement the activities of the state and federal government in the areas, and to ensure, and through devolution of functions to these councils and through the active participation of the

people and their traditional institutions, that local initiatives and response to local needs and conditions are maximized.

This definition according to Ugwu (2000) is rooted in the meaning of local government by the United Nations Office for public administration as reported in Ola (1984) which viewed local government as a political division of a nation or (in federal system) state which is constituted by law, and has substantial control of local affairs, including the power to impose taxes or to exact labour for prescribed purposes. The governing body of such an entity is elected or otherwise locally selected. These definitions according to him indicate some elements, which precipitate the establishment of the third tier of government called local government. They include:

- Citizen participation in the management of local affairs.
- Efficient and equitable provision of essential services.
- Resource mobilization for development purposes.

To Dagana (2005) local government is an administration of the rural areas by people who knows their community needs. This type of administration according to him is informed by the idea that since the people know the needs of their communities they would do everything within available resources to develop the area

Local government as a tier of government operates at the base level of society. It is the nearest government to the people. Historically, local government is the oldest form of government since government began with the organisation of people into small communities in a limited area. Local government is sometime referred to as local self-government.

Importance of Local Government

Ugoo and Vincent (2007) noted that the importance of local government in Nation building cannot be over emphasized. It is the basic bedrock of any true system of democracy. According to them, democracy and governance at the top may not be successful unless there is a strong foundation at the bottom. Similarly, Dagana (2005) also submitted that the importance of local government lies in its ability to cater for and meet the needs of the local citizens since the central government cannot alone provide and meet all the needs of the people.

Generally, the importance of local government includes the following among others:

- Promotion of grassroots democracy: Local government provides opportunity for democracy at the grassroots level. Since local government areas are smaller than that of the state and central government, it affords many people especially at the rural areas the opportunity to participate in the democratic processes. Thereby bringing democracy to the grassroots.
- Local government encourages the participation of the people in their local affairs. When local government functions properly, local people will participate in setting up policies that affect them. They will know better what local priorities shall be and therefore, they will participate in the process of meeting their needs.
- Local government serves as training school for future national leaders. The involvement and participation of people at the local level in the management of their own affairs gives them necessary experience to handle greater task at the state and national levels.
- Local government serves as a channel of communication between the other levels of government and the local people. The needs, desires and operations of the local

communities are articulated and carried upward to the state government while the plans and programmes of the state and central also gets to the people through the local government.

- Local government is also important because it helps to reduce the burden of the central government.
- Another importance of local government is that it provides a ground for testing policies before a massive implementation is embarked upon. If the policy failed locally, it will serve as warning for the implementation of that policy at the national level. However, local success will provide a model for the national government.
- Other importance of local government include making available a wider political representations, the provision of cheap services, providing a means of training in public administration and establishment of a base for the collection of basic statistical information necessary for economy planning and development among others.

Functions of Local Government in Nigeria

The fourth schedule of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria made elaborate provision for the functions of local government. These functions include the following:

- The consideration and making of recommendations to a state commission on economic planning or any similar body on;
- The economic development of the state, particularly in so far as the areas of authority of the council and of the state are affected, and Proposals made by the said commission or body;
- Collection of rates, radios and television licenses;
- Establishment and maintenance of cemeteries, burial ground and homes for the destitute or infirm;
- Licensing of bicycles, trucks, other mechanically propelled trucks, canoes, wheelbarrows and carts;
- Establishment of slaughter houses, slaughter slabs, markets, motor parks, and public conveniences;
- Construction and maintenance of roads, streets, street lights, drains and other public highways, parks, gardens, open space or such facilities as may be presented from time to time by the House of Assembly of the state;
- Naming of roads and streets and numbering of houses;
- Provision and maintenance of public conveniences, garage and refuse disposal.
- Registration of all births, deaths and marriages;
- Assessment of privately owned houses or tenants for the purpose of levying such rates as may be prescribed by the House of Assembly of a state;
- Control and regulation of:
 - Outdoor advertising and hoarding
 - Movement and keeping of pets of all description
 - Shops and kiosks
 - Restaurants, bakeries and other places for sale of food to the public.
 - Laundries,
 - Licensing, regulation and control of the sale of liquor.

- Participation of such council in the government of a state as regard the following matters:
 - The provision and maintenance of primary, adult and vocational education.
 - The development of agriculture and natural resources, other than the exploration of minerals.
 - The provision and maintenance of health services.
 - Such other functions as may be conferred on a local government council by the House of Assembly of the state.

Other functions that local government do perform include the following:

- Maintenance of law and order within their area of jurisdiction.
- Mobilization of the people for rapid rural development of the grassroots with specific reference to:
 - Self-help projects, farm production.
 - Conflict resolution among warring communities, clans etc.
 - Provision of housing and urban layout.
 - Provision of electricity.
 - Enlightenment services

The Role of Local Government Councils in Community Development

According to Etigbamo (2012) the primary purpose of local government is to bring government nearer to the local communities so that the people at the grassroots could participate fully in the process of governance. This is in order to provide local services and thus accelerate the pace of social, economic and political development of the local communities through the involvement or active participation of the local populace. Local government therefore, makes appropriate and development activities responsive to local wishes by catering for their needs. As grassroots based, consisting of small units of local communities upon which political power are developed to cater for their needs, local government serves as a viable instrument for rapid and even development of local communities. As a community based authority, it creates great sense of “we feeling” among the people of the area.

As observed by Ona (1995) and Etigbamo (2012) the concern of local government in rural and community development is because local government is better placed and has superior capacity to understand and conduct local affairs. The rationale for this assertion is that local government has the capacity to identify needs and demands of the grassroots than the other two tiers of government that is federal and state. Accordingly, the 1976 local government reform state three main objectives which directly formed the bulk of roles it must play in rural and community development. These are:

- To make appropriate services and development activities to local wishes and initiatives.
- To mobilize human and material resources through people’s participation in development process.
- To encourage local initiatives and leadership potentials.

The above implies that it is incumbent on local government to infuse and employ necessary local traditional institutions and organizational structures like the village head, district or clan head, town associations, youth and women groups into the institutional and organizational arrangements of the lower tier of government for the achievement of community development objectives.

Local government is also duty bound to mobilize the rural dwellers for effective political participation. Okoli (1995) described this role as mobilizing the rural power centres for the implementation of community development programmes. Mobilization according to Oyeyipo (1987) is the awakening of the consciousness or awareness of the people about their physical, cultural, international, social, economic and political environment and forces that promote and inhibit their progress and wellbeing.

Furthermore, as the nearest government to the people, local government is at best to know the needs and demands of the local people and more so the leadership of the people to be involved in the decision-making in order to enlist their support and co-operation during programme execution. Apart from the above, local government encourages the development of local technologies appropriate for community development and self-reliance.

Local government also plays the role of human capital development. This lies in the investment in human capital through formal and non-formal education, skill acquisition, conscientization and social mobilization which are necessary ingredients of community development. The preservation of local environment resources is also a cardinal role of local government in community development. Local government bye-laws help in combating environmental degradation while promoting environmental friendly habits in the local dwellers through mass campaign.

Ugwu (2000) and Etigbamo (2012) noted that the importance of local government to rural, community and national development cannot be over-emphasized. Right from colonial era to date, local government councils had been so re-organized as a vital instrument to enhance community development in Nigeria. Hence the following are areas in which the local government facilitates community development. They are:

Economic Sector: Since the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria bestowed on the local government the power to be involved in planning and execution of economic development, it is argued that this involvement will enable local government develop programmes that will give direction and purpose to the local communities. It can also mobilize both human and material resources through the involvement of members of the rural communities in their local economic development programmes. Onyishi (2000) noted that some other ways local government enhance economic development in the rural communities include; market development, implementation of national economic policies, increased economic opportunities can be provided through the assistance of the local government in form of credit facilities, land and other productive capital for both agriculture and non-agricultural production among others.

Transportation and Communication: Local government plays a role in the construction and maintenance of rural roads. They build feeder roads and bridges to link villages as well as farmlands in order to make transportation of agricultural products easier. Local government also facilitates the development of rural communities by embarking on mass transit programme. It also makes communication easier by disseminating information to the rural populace about national and state issues.

Agricultural Sector: According to Njoku (1993) as cited in Ugwu (2000) local government has been very active in the implementation of agricultural policies and extension services. For

instance, to educate and help the local farmers understand the mechanism and appreciate modern techniques of production such as the use of quick maturing, high-yielding varieties of seeds, chemical fertilizers, mechanization of agricultural operations and crop protection measures like the use of pesticides. This increases productivity as well as enhance socio-economic lives of farmers.

Provision of Essential Amenities: This is one major role local government plays in community development. Lack of basic social amenities such as water and electricity contribute greatly to the dichotomy between urban and rural communities. It is lack of these amenities that causes rural-urban drift. Local government has the duty to provide electricity and other social amenities to communities.

Rural Industrialization: Local government contributes to community development through rural industrialization. This they do by encouraging small scale industries such as garri processing industries, livestock, palm oil processing, bag and craft processing industries among others. The local government does these by the provision of craft facilities such as soft loans, tax freedom as well as provision of land. Industrialization plays a vital role in economic development because it brings about improvement in the capita income, employment opportunities and makes communities and individuals self-reliance.

Encourages Town Unions and Voluntary Agencies: Local government councils encourages and support town unions and voluntary agencies to participate in community development efforts. Ofuebe (1996) as reported by Ugwu (2000) observed that local government councils support community development projects embarked upon by town unions and other agencies by providing grant in aid, technical experts and necessary building and construction materials.

Problems of Local Government Councils in Nigeria

Local government councils in Nigeria are faced with series of challenges which makes them incapable of performing their statutory responsibilities effectively. These include the following among others.

- **Mismanagement and embezzlement of funds:** This is a common feature of most public sectors in Nigeria and developing countries in general. Local government officials perpetrate corruption through the inflation of contracts, ghost workers syndrome, undue claims, cornering and conversion of local government funds into private uses as well as improper remittance of generated revenue. Ebobrah (2011) as cited in Etigbamo (2012) opined that local government councils in Nigeria are seen as avenues for local politicians to generate instant wealth for themselves and their protégés. This according to him is because of low demand for accountability hence local government executives are at liberty to embezzle local government funds.
- Similarly, STAND (2010) observed that budgets of local government councils are regarded as highly secretive documents hence this gives local government chairmen many opportunities to divert and embezzle funds. The study exposed a common pattern of corruption, diversion and mismanagement of funds among local government councils in Nigeria as budgets were vague and lacking transparency. The most obvious example of corruption was enormous allocations for “Miscellanea” and “security vote”. Osas (2012) also reported that funds in the local government system are used in paying non-existing workforce, unverifiable projects as local government

chairmen have nothing to show for the huge funding in the system. Noting that senior personnel of the local government including the DPM's and HPM's have turned the council's system into a local farm where they make illegal harvest. Oyadongha (2012) also revealed that the local government system is bedeviled with cases of mismanagement of funds, over-bloated staff, ghost workers and lack of proper accounting in the management of funds.

- The level of mismanagement and embezzlement of funds is so high that most local government council in Nigeria has nothing to show despite the huge statutory allocation.
- Lack of autonomy: Dagana (2005) noted that until the local government councils are autonomous they will continue to be appendage of the states. This has rendered local government council's ineffective in the performance of their basic responsibilities as their functions have been hijacked by the states. This is a major setback in the local government system in Nigeria.
- Another serious problem facing local government councils in Nigeria is the operation of states – local government joint allocations account. This provides opportunity for state government in Nigeria to mismanage local government funds. For instance, states in the Niger Delta region and others with 13% derivation from oil revenue sees local government funds from the joint allocations account as additional funds for reckless expenditure while state without 13% derivation sees local government funds as their own 13% derivation. This most times leaves local government councils in the country with almost little or no fund to even pay staff salaries not to talk of funds for developmental purposes.
- Failure of regulatory agencies. There has been a complete failure by regulatory agencies to supervise and monitor the activities of local government councils in Nigeria. Regulatory agencies of local government have being very ineffective over the years. The ministry of local government and the local government service commission in most states are so compromised that they are unable to perform their supervisory role. In fact, in most cases, they jointly mismanage local government funds with local government officials hence they are unable to perform their functions. Dagana (2005) noted that regulatory agencies of local government councils had not be equal to the task of monitoring and checking glaring abuses in the local government system partly because they are inadequately staff or lack the political will to carry out their duties.
- Lack of transparency and low demand for accountability: Activities of local government councils in Nigeria are shrouded in secrecy from budgeting to award of contracts and workforce (including employment of staff) and revenue generation. This leaves most citizens (especially the rural dwellers) of this nation with little or no knowledge of the operations of local government councils. This is made worst with the seeming lack of interest and demand for accountability by citizens. This gives opportunity to local government officials to do whatever they want at the detriment of the rural dwellers.
- Lack of qualified manpower: Lack of fund and other motivational factors makes it difficult for local government councils to engage the services of competent and qualified personnel. Besides, most qualified workers are unwilling to render their services in the local government system because of the limited opportunities available. A study carried out by Etigbamo (2012) in six local government areas in Bayelsa State revealed clearly the lack of qualified manpower especially community development experts who are supposed to be driving the development process as change agents in the rural communities. He revealed that in the six local government councils studied, there was only one community development expert. To say this is

grossly inadequate in an understatement. This situation makes it very difficult for local government to function effectively in the planning and execution of community development projects.

This is further aggravated by low caliber of politicians that man the affairs of local government as most of them do not have the required level of education, maturity and exposure.

Communal Crises: This is one major challenge facing most local government councils in Nigeria. There are perennial intra-communal, inter-communal and inter-ethnic crises in most local government areas in Nigeria. This has hampered most local government efforts in initiating and executing community development projects.

Lack of Democratic Values and instability: Most local government councils in Nigeria are run by members appointed by the governor of the state rather than been elected by the people. An appointed official is limited in many ways and can be remove from office at any time. Hence may not be able to plan and execute community development programmes efficiently without the approval of the governor. This causes instability and hampers development.

Over-dependency on Federal Statutory allocation: Ugoo and Vincent (2007) noted that over-dependency of local government councils on federal statutory allocation for both recurrent and capital expenditure has killed if not totally the internally resources of revenue generation. This is why when there are financial crises, or delay in the disbursement of allocation, local government councils including the states run into crisis in the payment of salaries and other recurrent expenditure. According to them, the greatest impact of this over-dependency is that it has killed the initiative and the ingenuity to establish independent sources of revenue and the investment ability of the councils as is the case in advanced countries of the world. This has affected their ability to initiate and execute community development projects in the various communities.

Solving the Problems of Local Government for Effective Community Development in Nigeria

Tackling the problems of local government for effective community development programming in Nigeria requires a multifaceted approach. Hence the following are some solutions proffered to strengthen the local government councils in Nigeria to enable them carry out their statutory responsibility of developing the rural communities.

Establishment of department of community development: Etigbamo (2012) noted that the establishment of the department of community development in the local government councils saddled with the responsibility of planning, initiating, coordinating and implementing community development programmes and projects will go a long way in redirecting local government councils in Nigeria to its original mandate of developing the rural communities. He observed that presently, the department of community development is absent in the local government councils hence the inefficiency of most local government councils to carry out community development programmes.

The department of community development shall also be responsible for mobilizing both human and material resources especially the local traditional institutions and structures such as the village heads, clan or district heads, youth and women groups, town associations, educated elites and age grade and other organs such as community based and non-governmental organizations (CBO's and NGO's) for community development efforts. This

will encourage local initiatives and participation in the development process as well as creates potentials for leadership and ownership of community development projects.

The use of appropriate approaches to community development by local government councils: Local government councils in Nigeria often impose projects on communities, most of which are not their felt needs hence abandoned or will not be effectively utilized. Torutein (2011) and Etigbamo (2014) identified imposition of projects as one main causes of project abandonment by local government councils in Nigeria as the projects are carried out without the participation of members of the communities. They noted that while the directive approach where government or external agencies takes all the decisions about project should be discourage because of the numerous disadvantages the non-directive approach should be used as it is more appropriate for community development programming. Additionally, local government councils should also mobilize the rural populace for self-help projects and make adequate provision for financial and material support in terms of matching grant.

Reduction in the level of mismanagement and embezzlement of local government funds: This could be checked by periodically auditing the accounts of the councils and stiffer punishment is legislated for offenders. Anti-graft agencies should be strengthened and apolitical to effectively check the high level of looting of local government funds in the country.

More so, the supervisory agencies of local government councils such as the ministry of local government and the local government service commission should be strengthened and made to carry out their responsibilities effectively and not to be collaborators in the looting of local government funds.

The abolition of state-local government joint account and autonomy: The operation of the state-local government joint account as well as lack of autonomy of local government should be reversed. Local government should be autonomous and local government funds be directly remitted to each local government councils and necessary checks and balances be legislated against misuse of local government funds. This will help to check the over-bearing interferences of state government and its officials in the funds of local government in Nigeria. This will help to free up funds for development of rural communities.

Demand for accountability and transparency: The rural populace should be properly educated to know that it is their right to demand for accountability and transparency from their local government council officials. Demanding for accountability and transparency will help to tackle the problem of secrecy in the operations of local councils; the finances, policies and programmes. It will further remind local government officials that they are being monitored for any abuse of office. This will not only help in checking mismanagement of funds but funds will be put to judicious use especially for developmental purposes.

Recruitment of qualified personnel: Most local government councils in Nigeria are run like welfare centres where people are employed not because they are qualified but for political patronage and welfarism. This is why most council's payroll is over bloated with personnel who are unproductive. This must be checked to give way for the employment of qualified personnel especially community development officers and specialists to drive the mandate of local government councils. Furthermore, the council system must be made attractive to attract qualified manpower to the system:

Establishment of independent sources of revenue: Local government councils should as a matter of urgency establishes various sources of revenues rather than depend solely on monthly allocation from the federation account. Local councils could invest in agriculture, transportation and small-scale industries etc. to generate revenue not only for payment of workers' salaries but for the development of rural communities.

Enthronement of democratic values: Local government council chairmen and councilors should be elected and not appointed. This will give the electorates the opportunity to vote for candidates that have capabilities to develop the rural communities. This will bring stability and development to the rural communities.

Finally, every local government council in Nigeria should set up a conflict resolution mechanism to resolve communal, inter communal and inter-clan conflicts. This will help to reduce cases of conflicts which often times results in loss of lives and property and prevent development.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion has revealed how local government councils could be strengthened to effectively carry out community development programmes and improve the living conditions of the rural populace in Nigeria. Local communities in Nigeria are in dear need for development and for this to be actualized; local councils must be strengthened and redirected to its mandate of developing these rural communities. This can be achieved if the solutions proffered are effectively utilized.

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