

REVISITING THE PERSPECTIVES AND FUNCTIONS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NIGERIA'S QUEST FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: Although, the roles of the grassroot government in community development have been explored; but an up-to-date analysis on the specific objectives of this paper is unavailable. Consequently, the specific mandates of this paper are tripartite: to examine the concept of community development and associated perspectives/angles of community development; to highlight the roles of local governments in community development; and to relay the hindrances hindering local governments from performing its function of implementing and fostering community development. Rooted in participatory theory and qualitative research design; the paper made pertinent findings and observations regarding the objectives of the paper. On the perspectives, the following angles of community development were analyzed: Community development as provision of basic infrastructure, community development as community building, and community development as neighborhood regeneration. Re-examining the functions of local government in community development, this paper observed that local government is an agent of mass mobilization and participation. Revisiting the perspectives and functions of local government in Nigeria therefore highlights the need for further reforms aimed at strengthening local governments for effective community development as local governments have been unable to truly become vehicles of: mass mobilization, massive economic growth and development, and social and economic justice in Nigeria.

Keywords: Beggar thy Neighbor Foreign Policy Approach, Economic Growth and Development, Modernization Theory, National Development, Participatory Theory, Sustainable Development.

Introduction

Nigeria, a product of the colonialist as well as imperialist activities of the British government (Chioke, 2024) has its peculiar system of local government. Local governments since the start of 21st century have passed through fundamental shift from local government to local governance (Itai, 2023), seeking to ensure community

development amidst many public administration challenges. Imperatively, “while local authorities were traditionally responsible for providing basic services, they are now expected to act as proactive entrepreneurs by offering diverse services and addressing economic, environmental and community development issues (Itai, 2023).” From time immemorial, local governments in third world climes and beyond were crafted to facilitate economic and sociopolitical developments at community levels. In other words, the existence of local government structures preceded colonial rulership and imperialism in Nigeria for the achievement of community development.

Indeed, local government has been the governance structure put in place for administering the local people of various communities and ethnicities existing in their respective territorial domains. The already existing local government systems became the nucleus and fundamental structure that British government adopted in colonizing Nigeria and the rest of other African climes where such administrative structures were already in existence. In this dimension, there are varied indications that local government is meant to be a driver of rural and/or community development. Put differently, the point is that, “local government is a veritable grassroot vehicle for steady oversight and coordination of activities as regards socio-economic and political development (Udenta, 2007, p.302).” Nigeria’s local governments have been involved in community development process (Abugu, 2014, p.129), but public administration at the country’s local government level remains messy (Chioke, et al, 2022). To situate community development through the instrumentality of local government/institutions; participatory theory demonstrates the possible approach to understanding how public administration local government and community development. To this end, this paper examined community development from the perspectives of participatory theorists.

Community development was formally defined in 1945 as mass education which conceptualized community development as a movement designed to produce better living for the whole community with their active involvement and possibly on the initiative of the community members (Eze, 1999, p.8). Therefore, it is herein argued within the philosophical position of Udenta (2007, p.302) that local government when properly harnessed, provides a vehicle, an avenue, a framework for community involvement and invariably in development planning and implementation. Then concerning the dynamics of politics and administration in Nigeria; the need to empirically ascertain the functions of local government in community development is glaringly overwhelming. Apparently, this is the premise that premised the authors’ resolve to embark on this study through a qualitative approach.

To make precise conclusion on the journey so far; there is need to re-examine the roles of local government in community development and examine how Nigerian local governments have performed those functions. Based on this, the goals of this paper were to: examine the concept of community development and its associated perspectives/angles; and highlight the roles of local governments in community development. Following a qualitative method, the authors adopted content analysis method in analyzing data used for this investigation with multiple sources of data incorporated to minimize errors and ensure validity and reliability of the data used for the study’s analyses.

Literature Review

On local government, there abound numberless conceptual explications on its nature and meaning/definition. Local government could be a: deconcentration or devolution. Deconcentration is the transfer of state responsibilities and resources from the center to the periphery (Nnamani, et al 2019), but devolution is the dispersal of power and authority on a territorial basis, thereby granting power and authority by the national government to subordinate body (Okolie & Eze, 2006). Ugwu (2017, p.14) observed that local government is at the base of a pyramid of governmental institutions, with the national government at the top and intermediate governments (states, regions, provinces) occupying the middle range. Olisa, Okoli and Nwabufo (1990, p.93) put it this way: local government is a unit of government below the central, regional or state government established by law to exercise political authority through a representative council within a defined area. Local government is a system of decentralization of government in which many of the functions of government are distributed among units separated both physically and organizationally from State government departments (Odenigwe, 1977). A local government is a corporate body that can sue and can be sued. It therefore has its own independent existence (Orewa, 1991, p.22). Furthermore, "Local government is any organized leadership championed via the use of local personnel for harnessing material resources and human capital development at the grassroots level. This suggests that the major focus of local government is the transformation of material resources of the local people and the development of human capital for participation in politics and contribution towards the organizational goals cum the overall sustainable national development. These are the hallmarks of an ideal local government (Chioke, 2022, p.47)." At the moment, there is no correlation between these hallmarks and the reality aground as per Nigeria's local governments and governance thereof. With this, the current local government system is merely a contrivance contrived in order to pretend to be developing communities while syphoning the treasury and commonwealth of the general public.

Etymologically, the word, 'local' shows that local government is any government that has other authorities higher than it. By this, one can argue that local government is a structure created by the state government for the performance of functions which are of local importance. Therefore, local government is not completely autonomous anywhere in the world. In the right sense, it is argued that although not completely autonomous, local government is a unique government structure put in place to perform certain duties targeted towards engendering community development or rural development within a geographical location and as such, it ought to be uniquely handled in a manner that will make it deliver the cardinal objectives for its establishment. Apart from this, local government is vital for other reasons. According to Odenigwe (1977, p.19), "it provides the communities with a formal organizational framework which enables them to conduct their affairs effectively and regulate the actions of their members for the good of the general public." Resultantly, the efficacy of local government could be seen from the lens of the level of finance it actually generates, the level of development therein, and the degree to which it ensures the needed security and material well-being of the rural people via the strategic planning and provision of social amenities. By this, local government unites the people and communities within a definite area.

Now, the focus is on demystifying community development via definitions put forward by eminent authors. First, development means different things to different people.

Accordingly, it has been misunderstood, misinterpreted and greatly misapplied in different directions. This notwithstanding, "Development is about the improvement in the quality of life. This improvement could be socio-economic and/or political. It is an intensive and an extensive reality (Udenta, 2007, p.279)." Community development is holistic approach grounded in the principles of human rights, empowerment, inclusion, self-determination, social justice and collective action (Kenny, 2007). Community development is centered on fostering better living for the community with the active participation of community dwellers and as such, local government is an agent of community development (Chioke, 2022, p.49). It suffices that the major target of community development is to cause the improvement of people's standard of living and productivity of the labor force/human resources of the community. Similar view was held by Abugu (2014) who opined that the goals of community development should be to improve people's productivity cum enable the people to partake in their future social, political and economic life. Hence, Eze (1999, p.7) rightly contended that, "Community development denotes various strategies and interpositions through coordinated actions of the community members in order to usher in for the people social and economic development. It is an effort geared towards achieving the solution of community problems, raising their standard of living as well as promoting social welfare, justice, community cohesion and the development of their material and human resources to the fullest extent." In respect of the foregoing position; it is obvious that community development demands synergy of the governors and the governed - government authorities and the community people.

Community development is the development of the community executed through the active participation of the indigene (Abugu, 2014). According to Smart (2017), community development chiefly focuses on the redistribution of power to address the causes of inequality and disadvantage. This position consequently suggests that any community development program must be championed by members of that particular community at all stages ranging from determination of community development issues, selecting and implementing actions regarding community development issues to evaluation of what has been done so far. For this reason, there must be community development initiatives. Significantly, Ife (2016) argued that with community development initiatives, community members can become more empowered in a way that they can increasingly recognize and challenge conditions and structures which are negatively impacting their wellbeing. Scholars have reasoned that at the community level; community development and empowerment initiatives can achieve long-term outcomes like stronger and more cohesive communities, evidenced by changes in social capital, civic engagement, social cohesion and improved health (Campbell, Pyett & McCarthy, 2007; Ife, 2016; Kenny, 2007; Wallerstein, 2006). It is thus clear that community development metamorphoses into national development. Therefore, while community development focuses on a unit or units; national development is larger and focuses on the general system. Importantly, we examine the perspectives on local government as regards community development in a separate section of this paper.

Theoretical Standpoint

There is hardly any study without a theoretical base that relays adequate explanation of the various variables or issues under investigation. In light of this, this paper was anchored on participatory theory of development. Participatory theory is about community participation

in the development that is meant to solve their local needs. The authorship of the theory is hidden, but since it bothers on development, it could be traced to development theorists. Midgley, et al (1986) opined that the historical antecedents of community participation include: the legacy of western ideology, the influence of community development and the contribution of social work and community radicalism.

Participation theory of development explains the process of community development. According to Storey (1999), participation represents a move from the global, a spatial, top-down strategies that dominated early development initiatives to more locally sensitive methodologies. Buchy, Ross and Proctor (2000) added that literature on participation and participatory processes stems broadly from two major areas: political sciences and development theory. However, this paper sees the theory as being largely situated in the domain of development. In the view of Lane (1995), participation is greatly influenced by theories of development. The dominance of the top-down approaches to development was largely a result of modernization theory which was dominant in the 1960s (Lane 1995). Importantly, modernization theory is a theory of development. It (modernization theory) tried to explain development and reasons for underdevelopment in third world countries like Nigeria from the purview of liberal scholars. On modernization theory championed by liberal scholars, Chukwuemeka (2022, p.5) averred that they attribute underdevelopment especially in Nigeria to lack of skilled manpower, high incidence of corruption, politicization of ethnicity, absence of adequate institutional structures, non-availability of modern technology, inability of the third world countries to explore its natural resources, and absence of effective leadership. Participatory theorists and practitioners did contend that development demands sensitivity to cultural diversity cum other specific points that were ignored by modernization theorists (Dinbabo, 2003). However, the lack of such sensitivity as argued by Coetzee (2001) accounted for the problems and failures of many projects.

According to Dinbabo (2003, p.13), “the main tenet of participatory community development approaches is that all stakeholders collaborate in any development activities from the very beginning of project identification, prioritization, planning, implementing, evaluation and monitoring.” Participatory theory is in line with community development as it advocates development engineered by citizens at the grassroots through the principles of inclusivism, togetherness, cooperation, equal partnership, power sharing and transparency. This theory therefore answers the question: How can government at the grassroots achieve community development? Significantly, it is thus herein applied as the theoretical framework of this paper in answering the foregoing question. In applying the theory to local government and community development in Nigeria; the theory shows and buttresses the point that development especially at the community level requires bottom-top method involving people of different social rankings, political and religious affiliations.

Material and Methods

This paper is a desk-based investigation aimed at revisiting the existing perspectives and functions of local government in Nigeria as instruments of community development. Thus, the paper adopted the technique of reviewing relevant extant literature in its bid to examine its specific goals. Qualitative research design, which included the use of secondary data collection strategy was adopted. Importantly, Chioke (2024, p.267) observed that this, “method is used when the researcher(s) is/are interested in examining issues or variables

that may not fit into the rigors of quantitative analysis.” To analyze the data, content analysis was employed. Identifying, presenting, and interpreting the data found in extant literature were part of the analytical procedures involved in writing this paper.

Perspectives of Local Government Vis-à-vis Community Development

The perspectives/angles below aptly captured the descriptions of local government in Nigeria and beyond.

Community Development as provision of Basic Infrastructures

The goal for creating local government is centered on the provision of basic infrastructures at the grassroots or community levels. Regarding this, Adekoya (2020) perceived local governments as institutions created to ensure grassroots democracy, social and economic wellbeing of the citizens in the areas of security, infrastructural developments, and provision of goods and services. Therefore, local government is ultimately pivotal for the purpose of community development. The Basic Needs Approach (BNA) shows the essential needs of the community/rural dwellers. To ensure this, “Public administration defines the operational platform strategic as well as tactical for the pursuit and actualization of the aims of public policy (Udenta, 2017, p.6).” The recognition and importance of local government in the development process is prompted by the imperative to tackle local socio-economic problems and to manage grassroots development through provision of basic rural infrastructure (Lawal, 2014). Public administration at the local government level therefore includes the actualization of public policies centered on the development of the community. Emezi (2011) submitted that local government is conceived as a system of local administration instituted to maintain law and order, provide a limited range of social amenities and encourage co-operation and participation of inhabitants towards the improvement of their conditions of living. Udenta (2007) argued that Nigerian local governments have been involved in the process of providing basic infrastructure like rural roads, rural electrification, health centers, provision of open spaces, erection of parks, markets and stalls, shops, telecommunication, and so on. Concerning this, Amoke (2020, p.193) stated that it is the responsibility of local government to provide services like portable water, rural electricity, health centers, roads networks, schools and their maintenance. But the extent to which local government does these in Nigeria is to a low extent especially in Southeast geopolitical zone (Chioke, Umeokafor & Mbamalu, 2020). Studies have shown that local governments in Nigeria have not lived up to its expectations and have been consequently condemned for non-performance (Chioke, et al 2020; Udenta, 2005). Then the puzzle is: What should be done to attain sustainable development? Scientific understanding of leadership, public accountability, and related issues is necessary to promote sustainable development. (Chioke, 2023). In search of sustainable development for the underdeveloped countries, local councils should be rejigged by removing leaders with track record of public accountability questions and then install leaders with character and capacity to birth sustainable infrastructural development in their various localities.

Community Development as Community Building

Aside basic amenities, there are other imperative issues one need consider in community development. This suggests that community development as community building is not

about merely making sure that there is enough infrastructure at the rural or community level. In a collaborative dimension, Udentia (2007, p.282) added that:

This involves but surpasses the provision of basic infrastructure. It involves a higher tone of psychosocial existence and activity. This difference is essential because one could just be doing something at the ephemeral level without being really involved in it - no due commitment or attachment just going through the motions: like children in a catechism class involved in a hypnotic parrotization, without deep thought about what is being said. Therefore, when the activities have surpassed the provision of basic infrastructure and are focused on building or sustaining a sense of community, then we are involved in community development as community building or cultural re-orientation."

In order to concretize this, there are certain aids and principles that engender community building by local government as agent of community development. These principles are: rule of law, equity, subordination of personal will to the will of the community, and togetherness, which strengthens the sense communal living. Where these are lacking, community building will not be achieved through community development programs. Pertinently, "community building involves the creation or institutionalization of a sense of common or shared identity, common or shared purposes and common or shared destiny (Udentia 2007, p.283)." In lieu of this, community building is about the destruction of all forms of alienation, marginalization and servitude in a politically organized setting.

Community Development as Neighborhood Regeneration

This angle views community development as any systematic improvement of community that is faced with various turbulent social issues. It calls for rebirth, rejigging, reorganization, change and adjustment of the existing properties cum elements of the ailing community/system. For a proper understanding of the community development as neighborhood regeneration, the paper injects the view of Udentia (2007, pp.284-285) as stated below:

It is an arrangement in which the local government is best placed for the achievement of desired goals. In view of degeneration and decay resulting from so many sources including the loss of social dynamism and/or obsolescence, intellectual bankruptcy, poor executive capacity, poor maintenance culture, social atrophy/blight with the attendant alienation and anomie and other associated problems and challenges, there is a compelling need for a re-engineering, risorgimento, renewal, and rebirth. Both the ordinary regular cleansing actions in order to maintain homeostatic balance and the radical/remedial overhaul are all aspects of neighborhood regeneration when the end is the recovery and sustenance of the sense of community.

Importantly, neighborhood regeneration is about the renewal of the residential quarters with the sole interest of reviving, healing, resuscitating and improving its unpleasant present questions. Therefore, it is the present condition of the neighborhood that warrants regeneration.

Functions of Local Governments in Community Development

The following functions are the roles of local government in ensuring community development which are herein explored.

Local Government as Agent of Mass Mobilization and Participation

Notably, literature reviewed in the course of this paper noted that local government is an agent of mass mobilization (Abugu, 2014; Ezeani, 2006). However, this paper adds that local government is not just an agent of mass mobilization, rather it is an agent of mass mobilization and participation. Why? The reason is that local government do not just or merely mobilize people; it does that for those mobilized to actively participate in community development and by extension, sustainable national development. Therefore, mass mobilization is incomplete without participation of the community people. Mobilization is more of assembling together the rural/community people or other resources while participation is giving the mobilized people the opportunity to contribute meaningfully in the implementation of the community projects or development plans. From a similar parallax, while, mobilization connotes an assembling or putting into action or operation (Abugu, 2014, p.132), participation is the involvement of the community in the decision-making process of implementation of development projects (Maser, 1997). The need for mobilization and participation of the local people is thus thrown up as follows: We cannot realize the full benefit of democratic government unless we begin by the admission that all problems not central in their incidence require decision at the place and by the person, where and by whom incidence is most deeply felt (Laski, 1980, p.411). This suggests that the local governments are enhancers of community/grassroots participation in matters that concern them. Thus, the role of local government as an agent of mass mobilization and participation is to promote capacity building at the grassroots. Operationally, "capacity building refers to an approach to community development that raises people's knowledge, awareness and skills to use their own capacity and using available support systems, to resolve the more underlying causes of underdevelopment (Schuftan, 1996)." It should be noted that local government is not just an agent of mass mobilization and participation, it doubles as an agent of capacity building for community development.

It is on record that, "Local government administration facilitates political mobilization and sensitization of the people within its areas. The institutional framework of local government administration is pivotal to the success of any government program (Agbodike et al, 2014, p.100)." Local government allows for clientele participation in decision making and implementation of government programs that affect their lives (Akhakpe, 2013). Local government as a grassroot government transmits the pulse of other organs of government to the majority of the rural people and mobilizes them for effective national development (Abugu, 2014, p.132). Community development is better achieved through citizens' mobilization and participation. In short, it is through local/traditional institutions that the local government ensures or mobilizes the support of the people for steady, speedy and effective participation of the local populace in matters of importance to them. Imperatively, Nigerian local governments have achieved little in the area of mass mobilization and participation, emphasising the need for urgent people centred reforms.

Local Government as an Accelerator of Economic Growth and Development

Growth and development have been erroneously used interchangeably. The two are not the same. Growth precedes development. In short, growth is the foundation for development. Growth is change while development results from the consolidation of the change already in existence. Thus, where there is no growth, development becomes a wild goose chase. Gharajedaghi and Ackoff (1986) submitted that development is a mechanism through

which people increase their abilities and desires with the objective to satisfy their own needs.

In his address, General Babangida on October 1, 1988 stated that, “growth point must emerge from local government areas and provide the much-needed push to activate and energize productive activities in rural Nigeria and thus reverse the phenomenon of rural - urban drift.” Economic growth and development should be among the priorities of responsible local governments in Nigeria (Abugu, 2014, p.133). In the rural areas, effective local governments can assist the rural people in organizing themselves to mobilize and manage their resources effectively, reduce waste associated with rural development projects due to poor and inaccurate information, feedback as well as non-performing or corrupt bureaucracies (Olowu, 1988). In a lecture, Ozor (2002) emphasized that, “The grassroots should constitute the major basis of sustainable economic development program... No national economic development program can succeed without the active cooperation of the local populace who constitute the majority of the citizenry of this nation.” As such, local government through effective mobilization function as a facilitator for the acceleration of massive economic growth and development in Nigeria (Abugu, 2014, p.134).

Regrettably, the current travesty and happenings at the local governments show that the governance structures/local councils are far from ensuring economic growth and development through mobilization and participation of the people. Due to the omnibus administrative challenges, fiscal rascality and allied impediments; local governments in the country have not performed creditably as accelerators of massive economic growth and development. For one to experience economic growth, there must be increase in per capita income generated by individuals. To experience this at the local government level for the enhancement of community development and by extension national development; there must be adequate health care systems and healthy environment to ensure the health and well-being of rural/community people as health is wealth. In order to actively accelerate massive economic growth and development in the search for community development; local governments must provide employment opportunities, eliminate poverty through encouragement of SMEs and other related ways, fight corruption, and initiate and foster public private partnership in education sector and other vital areas of the local economy.

Local Government as an Agent of Social and Economic Justice in Community Development
Local government is recognized as a driver of social and economic justice for community development below the state level but hardly perform this task satisfactorily. Abugu (2014, p.134) intoned that, “community development will be difficult if not impossible in an environment characterized by abject penury and blatant economic and social inequality. Local government must in this regard provide the equal enabling environment to enable the rural populace carry out their economic activities and thus generate the sufficient resources to perform their civil responsibilities to the government.” Where there is absence of economic justice; economic inequality would be the order of the day. Economic inequality is the prevalence of unequal distribution of the national cake - the commonwealth of the country. This situation as complained by ethnic minorities in Nigeria has contributed to the serious problems associated with the country's federalism and political instability thereby leading to massive underdevelopment at the grassroots and states in Nigeria. Invariably, economic injustice arising from the sharing of the commonwealth of the people has made social equilibrium not to be manifestly experienced

in third world countries. This notwithstanding, “successful economic projects sponsored, initiated or supported by local government could lead to a reduction in social inequality by raising the living standards of the poor and thereby enabling them to participate more effectively in decision making at the local and central levels (Olowu, 1988).”

Conclusion

As Nigeria continues its quest for community development, the role of local government must be reevaluated and repositioned. On the perspectives of local government, it is clear that local governments in Nigeria are not appropriately tailored and managed to: ensure steady availability of basic infrastructure, engage the rural populace in community building, and execute neighborhood regeneration. In Nigeria, the potential of local governments to drive grassroots development is enormous, as they are now strategically positioned to identify and address the unique needs of their communities. However, to further strengthen grassroots governance in terms of performing community development functions, it is herein recommended that local government should be repositioned to carry out its globally recognized functions of engendering mass mobilization and participation, economic growth and development, as well as social cum economic justice. At the various states, the culture of undue meddlesomeness of the state government via the instrumentality of the ruling and non-ruling elites should be halted to ensure proper solutions are provided for the local needs with the limited resources of the local government. Through this, basic infrastructure, community building and neighborhood regeneration would be guaranteed when the community people have been given adequate platform to participate in community development as seen from the submissions of this paper’s theoretical framework. Revisiting the perspectives and functions of local government in Nigeria therefore highlights the need for further reforms aimed at strengthening local governments for effective community development as local governments have been unable to truly become vehicles of: mass mobilization, massive economic growth and development, and social and economic justice in Nigeria.

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