

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUTONOMY AND  
GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: AN OVERVIEW**

**SUNDAY ICHIMA (PH.D)**  
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE  
IBRAHIM BADAMASI BABANGIDA UNIVERSITY, LAPAI

**SHEHU ADAMU A  
&  
TAIWO A BELLO**  
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION  
FEDERAL POLYTECHNIC, BIDA, NIGER STATE

**Abstract**

This paper examines the lack of autonomy in the operations of local governments in Nigeria. Using secondary data, the paper looks at the benefits of local government autonomy, explores the financial and constitutional obstacles to local government autonomy in Nigeria and recommends direct financial allocation to local government accounts by the federal government and the abolition of the powers of state governors to dissolve elected local government Councils.

Keywords: Autonomy, development, grassroots, Care-taker committee

**Introduction**

It is expected that every local government would bring the government closer to the grassroots by giving that tier of government some financial, administrative and political leverage to perform their functions without undue interference from the higher level governments. This in essence is the connotation of autonomy to which many writers have argued that local governments in Nigeria would be less effective in the discharge of their duties except their autonomy becomes a reality. It must be noted that a principal characteristic of a local government structure is their non-sovereign nature. But this does not translate to undue interference in the affairs of the local governments as has continuously been the case in Nigeria.

Development implies ability of a country to take decisions on issues affecting them without waiting for instructions of other countries though the interest of foreign countries play good role in shaping their policies without necessarily dictating the direction of such policies. At the local government level it is therefore pertinent to ask who dictates the trend of local government policies? Who has powers to alter what a local government has decided in Nigeria?

This paper tries to look at the concept of development vis -a- vis the constitutional and administrative provisions for operation of local government system in Nigeria and argues that if local governments must be veritable tools for grassroots development then there must be a paradigm shift in the operational conditions of the local governments. The paper uses secondary data in presenting its position .

**Conceptual Definitions**

The main concepts here are development, local government and autonomy. The concept of development implies total transformation of a system, a progression from a lower and often less desirable state to a higher and more preferred one(Anyebe,2001). Seers (1969) posed some fundamental questions relating to the meaning of development , such as what has been happening to poverty? What has been

happening to inequality? What has been happening to unemployment? These questions address basic features of underdevelopment which development seeks to amend. Similarly, Rodney (1972) defines development as a process where a society develops economically as its members increase jointly their capacity for dealing with their environment

The concept of local government is popularly defined by the United Nations (UN) Office for Public Administration as a political subdivision of a nation, constituted by law and has substantial control over their local affairs including powers to impose tax for development and whose governing body is elected or selected locally (quoted in Ichima 2017). Basic components of a local government therefore includes substantial control over the affairs of the area, the governing body being elected or selected locally and powers to collect revenue.

The concept of autonomy as used here refers to a situation in which the local government “performs their devolved functions without hindrance or interference and having adequate resources to carry out their functions (Ichima, 2017:114). It is the total access to authority in performing prescribed duties.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts the System's theory as the theoretical framework for analysis. The system's theory as postulated by Easton (1960) views organisations as set of inter-related parts, pattern of behavior among individuals and institutions, a set of structures performing their respective functions with the aim of achieving certain goals while maintaining itself amidst vicissitudes. The system's theory presumes:

- i) the existence of a Whole on its own merit
- ii) the Whole consisting of interrelated parts
- iii) each component part working to help the Whole achieve its goal
- iv) each part influencing the other and being influenced itself by the other component parts
- v) the Whole being influenced positively or negatively by its environment
- vi) an input-through-put -output loop that summarises the activities of an organisation

In the light of this theory, the study looks at the external and internal environment in which local governments operate in Nigeria and how these undermine local government autonomy and by extension, constituting set back to grassroots development in Nigeria. The internal environment relating to quality of leadership, human resources capacity, internal revenue generation and efficiency of workforce determine the degree of autonomy local governments enjoy. Similarly, the constitutional provisions, state-local government financial and administrative relations, party politics and political God-fatherism constitute external factors shaping the degree of autonomy of the local governments and therefore how they can influence development in their areas.

### **Factors Of Autonomy In Grassroots Development**

It is expected that with autonomy the local governments would become more efficient and effective in the discharge of their duties ;given that performance would be measured by the level of provision of goods and services compared to what the people's expectations are. Some of the variables that would make for efficient performance of the local governments if their level of autonomy were appreciated include but not limited to:

#### **a) Citizen Residence**

Primarily, every person resides in one local government or the other whether in the rural or urban areas. Every manpower relevant for the smooth running of the local government is therefore resident in the local government areas. There is no doubting the necessity for autonomy of the local governments for efficient performance therefore as the impact of such autonomy or lack of it will be felt by every one resident in it.

#### **b) Proximity of officials to the people's needs**

It is also worth noting that ability to perform some functions is greatly affected by the proximity of the functionary to the location. Autonomy gives local government officials the needed morale and authority to perform assigned functions with better zeal since they are equal beneficiaries of such

projects, goods and services. The location of the local government officials at the grassroots level would therefore help in easy identification of aspirations of the people and therefore hasten development.

c) Tendency to discourage corruption

A major hindrance to development in Nigeria is said to be corruption. Igwe (2010) opined that Africans are underdeveloping Africa more than the colonial masters did. Views are that since the local government functionaries are not just located within the local governments but are elected or selected by the people within the locality, there will be less tendency for corrupt practices that would compromise the development speed of the local area. This is because it is a geographical setting where every one knows every one else and corrupt enrichment can easily be traced and exposed if proper and prompt disciplinary measures would be meted to corrupt officials. The shame of being tagged by one's community as a thief is a good deterrence to corrupt practices.

d) Aspirations of the people as basis for development

For development to be meaningful it must arise from the aspirations of the people. Development projects that have no bearing with the needs of the people cannot be said to add to the development of the area. Again, it is believed that because the local government officials live and operate within the area, they would know the needs of the locality and that when such projects are executed, they would add value to the lives of the communities (Blair 2000). It is, for example, not enough just to proliferate boreholes in a community. It is more useful if and when such communities have more need for boreholes than other basic amenities. With autonomy and the presence of these officials in the local government areas it becomes much easy to identify the basic aspirations of the people per time.

e) Regular consultations with representatives

An ideal democratic setting does not just recognize election and selection of representatives by the grassroots people but goes further to infer that regular formal and informal consultations would be done between the citizens and their representatives on issues affecting the people (Olowu and Smoke, 1992). This is a factor in political development. If the local governments are given autonomy to operate, the consultation with those that elect them on policies to be formulated and projects to be executed become more realistic.

f) Liberation from undue interference

From the colonial days until the 1976 local government reform in Nigeria, the traditional rulers made local government (Native Authority), look as their personal instrument for oppression of the citizens to appease the colonial masters and later, the Regional governments. The current practice is for state governments to see local governments as mere appendages of the states. Except there is a deliberate detachment of the local governments from the undue control of the state governments, efficiency of the local governments cannot materialise.

### **Why Autonomy Is Lacking**

Autonomy presupposes not only the legal authority to operate but possession of human and material resources to operate. Given this understanding it is important to point out that as it currently operates, the local government in Nigeria cannot be a factor for grassroots development because from constitutional provisions to administrative and financial relations with the two higher governments, the autonomy of local governments in Nigeria has been compromised.

From 1976 when major local Government reforms were undertaken in Nigeria, it has been the focus of the Federal Government that the local governments should gradually become autonomous, performing their devolved functions without hindrance or interference and having adequate resources to carry out their functions. It has however been rather difficult to optimize autonomy at the local government level in Nigeria because some constitutional and administrative bottlenecks have made the autonomy a mirage (Ifeolu, 2016).

The local government reforms notwithstanding, the autonomy of local governments in Nigeria is beclouded by many obstacles. There is the lack of Political Will on the part of politicians at the state level to grant autonomy to the local government Councils. According to Akpan and Ekanem (1013) research findings show that in both old and new federations the nature and character of the political system largely determine the kind of autonomy the central or regional or state government devolves to the local unit or local government. This is because the more dependent the Councils are on the state governments the more they are amenable to manipulation by state governors. Some scholars like Yusuf and Dauda (2010) have argued that local government councils do not have the needed human resources that would facilitate their autonomy. Similarly, others have argued that the level of corruption and poor attitude to work at the local government level are internal hindrances to local government autonomy.

In the Guidelines for the 1976 local government reforms in Nigeria the federal government defined a local government as government at the local level exercised through representative councils established by law to exercise specific powers within defined areas. These powers should give the councils substantial control over local affairs as well as staff and institutional and financial powers to initiate and direct the provisions of services and to determine and implement projects so as to complement the activities of the state and federal governments in their areas.

In 1991, the United Nations defined a local government as 'a political subdivision of a nation...which is constituted by law and has substantial control over local affairs including the powers to impose taxes or exert labour for prescribed purposes (quoted in Ichima 2017). The governing body of such an entity is elected or otherwise locally selected' From the above definitions it is obvious that a good local government must have and should exercise some level of administrative and financial autonomy in order to effectively achieve desired goals. Local governments in Nigeria cannot exercise financial autonomy because their internal revenue cannot sustain them. They have to therefore greatly depend on the subventions from the federal and state governments. With such inelastic revenue base, the local governments cannot but be dependent on the higher tiers of government for financial survival.

The desire to advance participatory democracy through grassroots participation in local government affairs has encouraged the institutionalisation of local government systems all over the world. In Nigeria this system has evolved over the years from the pre-colonial traditional system of rural administration based on aristocratic and theocratic principles through the Native Authority system founded on colonial principles to the modern notion of local government for rural development. By 1976 a major local government reform was undertaken in Nigeria to give the local governments more financial and administrative autonomy to enable them carry out their constitutional functions. According to Mordi (2018) the contrary however is the case as the outcome of the reform or its practice has gradually led to the unanticipated witing of the autonomy of the local government system and made them more dependent on the state governments than was expected. The reforms as organizational innovations on the structural and/or programme orientations of the local governments for purposes of ensuring efficiency in goal attainments has therefore become a non-success(Odoh:1983:60)

By the 1976 local government reform the local government became constitutionally recognized as the third tier of government with residual powers and therefore are 'ipso facto' subordinate to the states. By implication therefore the states have control over their local governments and so they are not autonomous From 1976 the local governments began to share 10% of the internally generated revenue of both their states and the Federal government. This has increased to 23% of the feral government internal revenue as at 2015. But instead of it being a blessing to the local governments it has made the local governments more dependent on the federal governments as many of them have no internal revenue that can sustain them. They have been unable to exploit more sources of internally generated revenue because they are apparently comfortable with their share of the national cake.

By the 1976 reforms a state-local government joint account was created into which all consolidated subventions of local governments are to be paid and supervised or disbursed by the state governments on pre-arranged formula. This became constitutionally recognized in 1999 by the provisions of section 165 of the 1999 constitution. But this joint account has become a problem to the local governments as many states have formed the habit of refusing to release the total monies to the local governments under them. Sometimes, the states award contracts on behalf of the local governments and deduct such monies

from their allocations without their consent (Ichima: 2008:45). This is evidence of lack of autonomy for the local governments.

The 1976 local government reform in Nigeria gave state governments constitutional powers to create local governments though it stipulated that some guidelines must be observed. Paragraph 2 of the 1976 reform stated that 'local governments are created by and derive their powers from the state governments'. From the initial position therefore the existence of local governments is at the mercy of state governments who could create new ones out of existing ones. The powers of state governments to alter or merge local governments under them has made the autonomy of local governments a sham.

By the 1976 local government reform the state governors have powers to dissolve local Councils if the governor had reasonable grounds to believe that the Council was corrupt or not performing. The provisions of section 7 of the 1999 constitution confirmed this and empowered many state governors to be dissolving local Councils and appointing Care-taker Committees usually made up of people of the governor's choice. This is a fundamental erosion of local government autonomy because the elected Councilors are now replaced by appointed Councilors on flimsy excuses.

By the revenue sharing formula among the three tiers of government the local governments have the least share as the states and federal governments have the monopoly. Similarly, the revenue yielding activities such as mineral resources that would bring in internal revenue are controlled by the states and the federal government. Financially therefore the local governments have been made dependent on the two higher tiers even when it is known that in fact, all Nigerians live in the local government areas. In particular, the local governments in the rural areas need revenue that would boost the provision of welfare facilities for the citizenry.

The state governments have Local Government Service Boards that supervise the activities of local governments in areas of staffing and functions. The senior staff of the local governments are appointed for local governments or transferred to local governments. These have no allegiance to the local councils since they are accountable to the state government. This has contributed in reducing the autonomy of the local governments and reduced their supervisory or control role over workers in their council areas. This can only lead to staff indiscipline and low productivity. This is complemented by the existence of Ministries of Local Governments and Chieftaincy Affairs or such similar offices in states with the aim of administratively monitoring and supervising local governments within the state. Good as monitoring and supervision is, it can be implemented and is being implemented in ways that make local governments look like agencies of state governments. It compromises and negates the spirit of autonomy.

From the Ndayako report of 2003, the state governments are to approve local government budgets. This has made state governors to adjust or amend local council budgets to suit the political party manifestoes of the political party in power at the state level and where the local government chairman is unwilling to cooperate their local council is often starved of statutory allocations. In some local governments that the political party in power differs from the political party in power at the state level, this unsavory situation is more manifest.

There is no uniformity in the tenure of local government councils in Nigeria. There has been a lacuna which the state governors are taking advantage of. The 1999 constitution stipulated that state governors would determine the tenure of the local government councils. So states allow their councils two or three year tenure. It is worsened by the fact that state governments are responsible for conducting elections into local government councils. As a characteristic of Nigerian politics, each state governor tries to influence election of the local government chairmen and councilors to suit their political leanings. This is a great undoing for the autonomy of local government administration in Nigeria.

Above all, is 'politics of godfatherism' which has manipulated not only who comes to political positions but more importantly, how the largesse of public resources are shared for private benefits. It breeds political entrepreneurs whose interest is to embezzle public funds through fictitious contracts and

outright draining of public funds. Because local government officials cannot control the god-fathers, it becomes obvious that their autonomy had been denied from the polls.

### **Conclusion And Recommendations**

This study examines the operational phases of the Nigeria local government system. We have argued that though local government reforms have been undertaken to bring about autonomy and efficiency of the local Councils, the reverse has been the case as the reform provisions have eroded the autonomy of the local governments. It has therefore been impossible for the local governments to effectively administer their finances for effective administration of their areas. There is therefore need for local governments to have more share of the national revenue since every one eventually belongs to one local government or the other. This will make available to them more resources to provide goods and services for the people. The federal government needs to put in place some administrative machinery that would disable state governors from tampering with funds in the state-local government joint account. To this end, direct allocation to the local government councils rather than through the state government would be helpful in curtailing frequent tampering with the local government funds by the state governors. The revenue base of local governments need to be strengthened. Derivational formulae should be worked out that would give local governments some financial benefits from mineral resources found within their domain. Similarly, efforts need to be intensified by individual local governments to generate more internal revenue. Appropriate and efficient taxation of all income yielding businesses should be embarked upon and the monies adequately accounted for. This will improve their financial base. Above all, the provisions of the 1976 reform that local government Councils can be dissolved by state governors if they are not performing satisfactorily should be expunged. The provision has led to unnecessary replacement of elected Councils by Care-taker committees usually appointed to reflect the political aspirations of the state governors. Many of the state governors do not perform well yet the federal government has no powers to dissolve their Executive Councils. There is therefore no reason why one man should be given authority to dissolve and replace a democratically elected Council. It is an anti-autonomous policy of the highest order.

### **References**

- Adigun, A. B. et al (2004). Nigeria's struggle for democracy and good governance: Ibadan: University Press
- Akpan, F., & Ekanem, O. (2013). The politics of local government autonomy in Nigeria reloaded. *European Scientific Journal*, 9(35)
- Ake, C. (2001). Democracy and development in Africa. Ibadan: spectrum books
- Amuwo, K. et al (2000). Federalism and political restructuring in Nigeria. Ibadan: Spectrum books
- Anyebe, A. A. (2001). Readings in development administration. Zaria: Sgereef Salam Press
- Blair, H. (2000). Participation and accountability at the periphery: Democratic local government in six countries. *Journal of World Development* 28(1)
- Bolton, B., & Thompson, J. (2001). *Entrepreneurs*. Oxford: Heinemann
- Hutchison, F. et al (2002). *The Politics of money: Towards sustainability and economic democracy*. London: Pluto press

- Ichima, S. (1998). Understanding development administration. Bida: Akan Publishers
- Ichima, S (2014). Politics and Politicking: The undoing of effective public administration in Nigeria. *Journal of Developing Country Studies*, vol 4 No 19, pg 51-54
- Ichima, S, (2017). Principles and practice of local government in Nigeria. Minna: Rock Press.
- Ifeolu, J. K. (2016). The search for local government autonomy in Nigeria: Legal and constitutional pathways to its realization. *Journal of Sustainable Development, Law and Policy*, 7(2)
- Jacobson, D. I. (2003). Politico-administrative conflict at the local level. *Local Government studies*, Vol 29, no. 4
- Olowu, D. & Smoke, P. (1992). Determinants of success in African local governments: An overview. *Journal of Public Administration and Development* 12
- Onifade, C. A., & Ojukwu, C. C. (2009). Corruption: Bane of sustainable development in Nigeria. *International Journal of Development Studies*, vol 4 no 2 pg 46-52
- Rodney, W. (1972). *How Europe underdeveloped Africa?* Washington: University press
- Rostow, W. W. (1960). *Stages of economic growth*. Cambridge: University press
- Seers, D. (1969). The meaning of development. *International Development Review*, 19(3)