

The Role of Local Government Council in Agricultural Transformation in Nigeria: Need for Review of Policy

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Abstract: The study focuses on the role of local government councils (LGCs) in agricultural transformation: need for review of policy. Local government (LG) as the closest tier of government to the people is a government at the grassroots level of administration meant for meeting peculiar grassroots needs of the people. As the third tier of government, it brings the agricultural interventions to the rural farmers. Constitutionally, federal government of Nigeria had some agricultural functions that LGs should perform in rural areas. Although, local government is the closest tier of government to the people of Nigeria, yet the resident population in it is denied the benefits of its existence. The failure of local government in the area of service delivery over the years has made the citizens to lose faith and trust in local government administration as an institution in Nigeria. Most LGCs in Nigeria do not offer any assistance to agricultural interventions in local government areas (LGAs). This study reveals certain challenges that militate against efficient performance of LG functions especially in agricultural development. Some recommendations also were articulated and these include: The issue of embezzlement and corruption should be strongly checked and discouraged in all tiers of government in Nigeria through thorough auditing and checking of contracts awarded and execution of such contracts, etc.

Key words: Local government administration • Agricultural functions • Inefficiency • Challenges • recommendations

INTRODUCTION

The mainstay of the Nigerian economy since independence is agriculture, as it accounts for over 38% of the non-oil foreign exchange earnings and employs about 70% of the active labour force of the population (Bureau of Public Enterprises (BPE), [1]. The efforts of the federal government to transform agriculture dated as far back as the middle of 1960s after Nigerian independence. The 1999 Constitution of Nigeria as contained in the Fourth Schedule, Section 7 stipulated the following as the roles of the LGCs towards agricultural development and transformation: establishment, maintenance and regulation of slaughter houses, slab, markets, gardens, parks; participation in the development of agriculture and natural resources, other than the exploitation of minerals. According to the New Nigeria Agricultural Policy (2001),

the LGCs will be expected to take over progressively the responsibilities of state governments with respect to (1) the provision of an effective extension services; (ii) provision of rural infrastructure to complement federal and state governments' efforts; (iii) management of irrigation areas of dams; (iv) mobilization of farmers for accelerated agricultural and rural development through cooperative organizations, local institutions and communities; (v) provision of land for new entrants into farming in accordance with the provision of the Land Use Act; and (vi) coordination of data collection at primary level. It was envisaged that local government could help to provide rural infrastructures such as feeder roads, health centres, water and electricity, build more primary and secondary schools, provide agro-services to mention but a few. It is also the responsibility of LGCs to ensure that land preparations equipment such as heavy duty

equipment to open the land and tractors are available for farmers to use at appropriate time and at a subsidized rate. Local governments therefore, have critical role to play in the national agricultural development to ensure self-sufficiency and sustainable food production in Nigeria.

Despite these interventions and level of involvement in agricultural production in Nigeria, food security in Nigeria is still a dream. Many assessment studies on the effectiveness of LG governance showed that things have not changed for better in the quality of governance at this stratum of government. Arowolo [2] observes that importance of local government is a function of its ability to generate sense of belongingness, safety and satisfaction among its populace. Series of Nigerian government agricultural and rural development interventions have not achieved noticeable effect on the lives of rural farmers in terms of increased agricultural production. Many of the LGCs cannot show any meaningful projects executed between 1999 (that LG Constitution was amended) to date notwithstanding the monumental inflow of allocations from the federal government. The general observation is that the performance of agriculture in Nigeria has not been able to match the expectation ascribed to the sector in the development process. The LGCs do not carry out these functions in the local government areas.

The paper therefore reviews the role of local government councils in agricultural transformation: Need for review of policy; examines challenges that may contribute to LGCs' inability to deliver their functions effectively which include: inadequate planning, corruption and mismanagement of resources, method of recruitment and lack of commitment of LG workers, inadequate manpower, lack of participation by the people, lack of autonomy, lack of continuity of LG programmes and projects by different administrations, undue interference by other tiers of government and intergovernmental conflict, inconsistency in the conduct of LG elections. The following are the suggested solutions to the problems: transparency and accountability, motivation for local government workers, inconsistency in the conduct of LG elections, corruption and mismanagement of resources, strong sources of revenue. The paper relied on current literature and observations on local government administration in Nigeria.

Challenges That Militate Against Local Government Council Performances: The problems that plague the local governments include:

Inadequate Planning and Poor Implementation:

Hard-earned and limited resources accrued to and raised by local government are always mismanaged. Priorities are misplaced; projects are done not according to or as demanded by the people but regrettably in tune with the selfish end and aggrandisement of the political leadership in collaboration with the senior bureaucrats at the local government level of administration.

Coupled with this is the greatest bane of development in the Nigerian public service in general and local government in particular which corruption is. Reports of probe panels at the three tiers of government have revealed the culpability of civil servants.

Corruption and Mismanagement of Resources:

Oviasuyi *et al.* [3] observed that another issue militating against local governments' performance has to do with corruption. As in all levels and institutions of government in Nigeria, corruption is predominantly wide spread, undiluted and unambiguous in the local government. Corruption in low and high places, has been rampant among the senior civil bureaucrats to whom the public funds meant for developmental purposes are entrusted.

Arowolo (2008) observes that generally, wide-scale embezzlement by officials of the grassroots has made the needed development of the grassroots a tall dream and has rendered them financially incapable to discharge their constitutionally assigned responsibilities. Despite the increase in the total amount of funds available to local government in Nigeria since early 1990s, its economic and financial profile is still very poor, relative to the development programme it is expected to carry out. It is a statement of fact that in the local government system, corruption has become all pervading, unabashed, uncontrolled and persistent. This perhaps explains the inefficiency and ineffectiveness in local government administration in Nigeria. The system has virtually become superfluous and redundant. Oviasuyi *et al.* (2010) also note that some of the areas where corruption thrives in local government include the following:(a) Inflation of prices of bought items;(b) Over-estimation of cost of projects;(c) The ghost workers syndrome;(d) Award of contracts and subsequent abandonment; and(e) Outright payment of huge sums of money to political godfathers, etc. It is important to state at this point that the high rate of corrupt practices in the local government cannot be overemphasized, as it has over the years rendered the local government administration inactive and devoid of concrete developmental activities.

Method of Recruitment and Lack of Commitment of Government Workers: According to Oviasuyi *et al.* (2010) another factor militating against local governments' performance has to do with the recruitment of persons who do not possess the requisite leadership and managerial skills to deliver the gains of governance to the people.

Indiscipline is rampantly perceived and well pronounced among the workers in third tier of government. The senior officers who travel to their families away from their offices on Friday return very late the following Monday or may decide to stay back till Tuesday; and the junior members of staff who directly or indirectly observe this more often than not are in the habit of playing truant with their jobs. Little or no commitment to duty has become a rule rather than an exception. Manner of recruitment is questionable as it is based on subjectivity and consideration of sentiment. Employment was based on favouritism, nepotism, ethnic and political consideration and other primordial factors that replaced and displaced competence, qualification, experience and performance.

Offices have been turned to marketplaces where officers hawk their goods freely. The rules that guide moral conduct and professional ethics seem to have, at worse, become cobweb that is so weak to tame the monstrous activities of the workers.

Inadequate Manpower: Save for some few local councils in Lagos states and, perhaps, some southern states, local government generally has experienced and is still experiencing dearth of skilled, technical and professional staff like qualified engineers (of all types), medical doctors, accountants, statisticians, economists, lawyers, town planners, etc. [4]. The facilitating factors for this include: low image of local government in the mind of professionals who feel and think that there is no job satisfaction sufficient to keep them at that low level of public service. Hopeless nature of the job attributable to and arising from, low or no incentives for junior workers, no chances for creativity and innovation as well as perpetual delay in payment of salary.

Lack of Participation and Involvement of Local People: From all indications and convictions, research and physical observations have shown that there has been more hue and cry than action. [5], reports that local government prepares estimates for its revenue and expenditure without proper recourse to and due consultation with, the people for whom the exercise is

being carried out to know their needs, their problems and potentials. A number of factors are responsible for non-involvement of people in their own affairs. These include: loss of interests in the project that will not benefit the chairmen and their cohorts, the age-long belief by the officials that people are ignorant, illiterate and unenlightened, lack of political will by the leadership to run an open administration due again to selfish interest, poverty of socio-political philosophy for change.

Lack of Autonomy: The concept of local government is to bring governance nearer to the people at the grassroots but this idea of joint account with state government seems to have made a mess of this concept [6]. The author reports that the joint accounts have hampered the role that empowered the local government chairmen to operate independently for meaningful development. The utmost intention of federal governments laudable ideas is that funds be managed by LG chairmen for rural development but the reverse is the case. [7], also reports that there is public outcry over governors' meddling in LG allocation. It was first revealed by the chairman of Association of Local Govt. of Nigeria ALGON, Enugu Chapter Hon. Julius Ogbuke, how the former Governor Chimaroke Nnamani diverted over N1.121b council funds into projects that were not executed. In the same vein, the Edo State chairman of ALGON Hon. Felix Akhabue told Governor Adams Oshiomhole that Osunbor regime had always tampered with LG funds. He cited how Oredo Local Govt. Council allocation was deducted for the past 10 months from N75m to N90m and now N101m. In Niger State, former commissioner for commerce, Hajiya Kaka Wabi said N150 million from local Government Joint account was invested in the April 2007 poll. Wabi made the disclosure while testifying before the commission of enquiry set up by governor Muazu Babangida Aliyu to probe former Governor Abdullahim Kure's administration in Minna. In answer to a question put to her, she concluded that the only receipt she had was that the PDP won the election in the State. In Benue state, the House of Assembly passed the 'Benue State Joint Account and methods of Distribution of Funds 2008' within 24 hours after it was received from the state government. This bill gives the state governor the power to spend councils funds totalling 73 per cent from Federation Account. These malpractices with LG funds cut across the 36 states and after the state government have fiddled with the funds, whatever is left goes into payment of salaries, nothing is left to execute projects in the public domain.

Lack of Continuity of Lg Programmes and Projects by Different Administrations: Another major problem in local government administration in Nigeria is the lack of continuity by succeeding governments. This has become a major problem plaguing local government administration in Nigeria, as succeeding government fails to continue with the programmes and projects that are left behind by a past administration. This is not in the interest of the populace but just to create avenues for embezzlement and sharp corrupt practices. This has resulted in abandonment of projects and financial losses to the governments concerned. This to a large extent has contributed to ineffectiveness of local government councils and has over the years led to economic and financial wastage as well as the retrogression of development.

Undue Interference by Other Tiers of Government and Intergovernmental Conflict: It is important to point out that the intergovernmental relations between the federal, state and local government has been characterized by both co-operation and conflict; but it is conflict that has predominated state-local government relations. Some state governments have been known to have hijacked and diverted federal government's allocation to local governments.

Situation where the state governor unconstitutionally dissolves the entire elected council's officers without proper investigations on spurious allegations is not good for the future of local government administration in the country. Such external interference indeed subverts democratic process and undermines constitutional authority at the grassroots level.

Practically and in true sense, local government in Nigeria lacks autonomous financial power. The inherent nature of this problem has caused subservience, a situation where local government waits for the next directives from state government before the former could think of, let alone embarking on developmental projects. This has made local government an object of control and directives.

The major challenge that local government faces is the political control the respective state governors have on the local government chairmen because they sponsor election of most, if not all, of the chairmen. They are handpicked by the state governor rather than being elected. This again creates a problem of diversion of local government funds for personal use of state governor. Different state governors make some rules that enable them divert the LG money to another thing entirely which does not have impact on the lives of the rural dwellers but

that will be beneficial to the state governor. The implication of this is that few of the local government chairmen who have genuine intentions and are ready to perform are being discouraged. This again assigns more power and control to the state governor. The overall effect of this is the negative impact it has on the people of the grassroots as they are getting more and more alienated from developments.

Inconsistency in the Conduct of LG Elections: Local government election in Nigeria is usually done by appointed of candidates by different parties. This increases the incidence of the LG officials being controlled by their political God-fathers that put them in office. It will in turn result into corrupt practices and embezzlement.

Solutions

Transparency and Accountability: Where there is good governance, all that is at stake is public interest and there will be nothing to hide. The reason for good governance has continued to be problematic in local government administration in Nigeria. This is as a result of lack of transparency in dealing with critical political, economic and administrative issues. The handling of issues, such as service delivery, appointments to public positions are not done in transparent manner. It should be clear that, government presence and access to resources would remain less satisfactory to the people unless it is based on transparency.

Accountability means that people will be able to hold local government authorities responsible for public issues as it is affecting them. In other words, accountability involves an obligation to explain or justify specific actions [8]. This is a key requirement for good governance in local government administration in general and a system or an institution is accountable to those who will be affected by its decisions or actions. It should be noted, therefore, that accountability cannot be enforced without transparency, the rule of law and constitutionality.

Motivation of LGC workers: Motivation of LGC will go a long way in changing their attitude towards their job and improve their output. To this effect, Isah [6] suggests some welfare schemes that can help motivate LGC staff. These include housing for the staff, functional clinic to address their medical care, staff cafeteria, loan schemes, etc. Another central issue surrounding the motivation of local government employees is formal and informal training. It is, therefore, in realization of the value of

trained and skilled manpower and how this essential commodity can be practically utilized for productive output in the provision of services that most or all local governments concentrate and emphasize on the training of the local government staff. Since there is a great need to improve the qualifications and quality of local government staff, the objectives of staff training would be to:

- Raise the minimum educational standards of the local government staff for the requirements in the local government service.
- Improve the status and quality of the local government staff
- Introduce equal pay in comparable posts in the civil service.
- Improve on the performance of the local government staff in discharging their functions (administrative, professional and technical staff).

Formal training of the local government employees is, therefore, aimed at enhancing their capacity and sharpening their awareness as well as managing the delivery of services and resources. This form of training also includes induction courses for all the cadres of new entrants into the service to familiarize them with the structure, functions and organization of the system.

Another form of training is the refresher such as short seminars, conferences and workshops may be mounted for the political and policy decision makers in the local governments aimed at awakening their thinking capabilities. Other specific seminars may also be arranged for the management cadre, for example, the councilors, heads of department, secretaries, etc. of the local governments.

Inconsistency in the Conduct of LG Elections: According to the 1976 reform, 75 percent of members of the council are to be elected through the secret ballot on ano-party basis under the direct and indirect systems of election. The remaining 25 percent are to be nominated by the State government. This guideline has been totally ignored in the process of election of LGC members and this contributes to free embezzlement of funds because members of the same political parties are usually selected for unity in embezzlement. To minimize the corruption that originates from election, it is suggested that the high cost of electioneering campaign in the country be examined and consider among other options, the desirability of whether political parties, rather than individual office seekers, should canvass for votes in elections.

Corruption and Mismanagement of Resources: Nigeria needs a comprehensive, well focused and concerted effort to fight corruption in the country. It is quite obvious that what is needed is a comprehensive review of the constitution. Igbuzor [5] suggests the following recommendations: In order to consolidate the gains made in local governance over the years and reposition local government for greater performance, there is the need to reform local government along certain lines. First, local government as a third tier of government should not be scrapped or changed to local administration. Rather, it should be strengthened and democratized. Officials of the local government should always be elected and not appointed. Second, there is the need to put mechanism in place to promote transparency and accountability at all level of governance. In this regard, it will, be crucial to strengthen institutions of horizontal accountability and anti-corruption bodies. In addition, civil society organizations particularly at the local level should be reoriented and empowered to hold elected officials accountable. Moreover, there is a great need to reform the structure of government at all levels (Federal, State and local government). All these will require a comprehensive review of the 1999 Constitution. The Executive and legislature should display the political will and commitment to reform the 1999 Constitution that has been criticized by all strands of society. The reform of the constitution will address other issues that are germane to good governance such as party financing, campaign financing and proper electoral system to mention but a few. Finally, government should place premium on the participation of the people in all governance and development issues. If all these recommendations are implemented, not only the local government system but also other tiers of government will be in a better footing to deliver what Nigerians have termed dividends of democracy.

In the same vein, the current relationship between the local councils and other tiers of administration, particularly the state government call for critical re-examination. There is need to plug all avenues of illegal deductions, fleecing and undue interference. Without this local governments will continue to totter and exist only in name [5].

Strong Source of Revenue: There is need for local councils to have strong economic base in order to be able to perform their functions including agricultural responsibilities. In this connection, Arolowo (2008) suggests the following: that statutory allocations to local councils be reviewed upward. In addition to that, councils'

shares of the federation account to be released to them directly to avoid lateness in the payment of salaries and arbitrary deductions by state government. Local government should have representation in the Revenue Allocation and Fiscal Commission, which determines and shares the federated revenue to the beneficiaries. It is not enough to have an upward review of councils' allocations, but also advisable for local councils to look inwards for improved Internally Generated Revenue (IGR). This will make them financially self-reliant. Besides, some local councils should look for ways of attracting industries to their areas as this will propel economic development and increase their revenue base.

CONCLUSION

Generally, local government administration in Nigeria has all it takes to provide the needed developmental apparatus as it affects agricultural development and transformation. It is pertinent to state at this juncture, that both the federal and state governments should shed their direct involvement and financial expenditure in favour of local government. Rather the two tiers of government should only allocate funds for the use of local government and leave the latter to run its own programmes with minimal interference. The issue of Joint State Local Government Account should be abrogated. All the control measures and mechanisms put in place by both the States and States Houses of Assembly should be reduced to allow the local government authorities in Nigeria focus on concrete developmental programmes devoid of incessant interruption. This paper articulated many factors that militate against LGCs performance in agricultural development. The characteristics of good governance, transparency and accountability were discussed. The areas of local government administration contributions to agricultural development which include solutions to problem militating against local government performances were outlined. While evaluating the problems of LGCs in Nigeria, emphasis was placed on general indiscipline among the workers and high level of corruption in this level of government among other things.

Recommendations:

- The federal government of Nigeria should organize re-orientation programmes for the staff of the LGCs in Nigeria to effect change in their attitude to works.

- LGCs should be encouraged to be fully involved in all the agricultural programmes introduced by the state, federal governments or external bodies.
- Healthy competitions among different LGCs should be encourage to stimulate effectiveness.
- The firm grip on local government administration by the state governments and State Houses of Assembly must be loosened in order to allow the local government administration provide the much needed goods and services for the people.
- The issue of embezzlement and corruption should be strongly checked and discouraged in all tiers of government in Nigeria through thorough auditing and checking of contracts awarded and execution of such contracts. Defaulters should be brought to law.

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