

COUNCILORS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF SOUTHERN IJAW LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF BAYELSA STATE

SIGAH, FLINT
School of Management Sciences,
Federal Polytechnic Ekowe, Bayelsa State
Email: flintsigah@gmail.com
Phone: +2348037759757

&

OGURU, AYIBAMIEBI FOSTER
School of Management Sciences,
Federal Polytechnic Ekowe, Bayelsa State

ABSTRACT

The fundamental rationale for the creation of local government is for the development of the rural areas. The need to examine and evaluate the contributions of councilors in local government administration and its impact on the development of local government generally and paying particular attention to Southern Ijaw Local Government Area of Bayelsa State prompted this study. The Marxian political economy was adopted as the theoretical framework. This theory is concerned with the laws which govern the production and distribution of resources in a society. The analysis here is based on the “productive forces”. This concept refers to the combination of three elements of the labour process; labour power, object of labour and means of labour, these three elements together constitute the “productive forces” which is considered to be a major determinant of development in any society. Emphasis was basically laid on labour power where Councilors in the local government system are part of. Based on our findings, it was concluded that, the development of local government lies greatly on councilors. The lack of development at the local government level is partly as a result of the lack of performance of councilors. However, some factors were identified to have militated against their effective performance. In the light of these, recommendations have been proffered with a view to improve councilors’ performance of their role in achieving sustainable development at the local government level.

Key Word: *Councilors, Determinant, Local Government, Role, Sustainable Development*

INTRODUCTION

Local government is widely recognized, as a veritable instrument for the transformation and the delivery of social services to the people. It is also recognized as being strategic in facilitating the extension of democracy to the local level by increasing the opportunities for political participation by the grassroots population. It is as well widely regarded as being well situated to perform the above functions due to the various advantages which it has over the other tiers of government and their field agencies. Among such advantages are: (a) **Nearness to the people;** The physical and psychological distance between officials of the other tiers of government and the people tends to frustrate efforts in making people to fully identify with government programmes. Generally, people at the grassroots level tend to understand local government better and to be closer to it because they are able to feel its presence and impact on their day-day activities. (b) **Responsiveness;** The nearness of local government to the people and the fact that it is normally constituted of their locally elected representatives have placed it in a position where it can easily articulate and aggregate the people’s demands, and is more likely to be attuned to their local needs and aspirations (Ugwu 2000).

However, these could only be achieved if the stakeholders in the system, which includes councilors, live up to their responsibilities. There is lack of appreciation in the role of councilors in this regard. This is perhaps due to limited knowledge on how the presidential system ought to operate at the local government level. Most participants in our political system are not sufficiently enlightened on the presidential system at the local government level. Another reasons perhaps, might be the arrogance of state government actors, especially state legislators, who have refuse to respect the autonomy of local government, and the behavior of most chairmen of local government, who run the councils like sole administrators with utter disregard for the role of councilors. All of these informed this study, with particular reference to Southern Ijaw Local Government Area of Bayelsa State.

In this study therefore, we shall examine critically and comprehensively the above assertions with a view to determine its significance and impact on the development at the local government level.

THE CONCEPT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Generally, local government is the type of government that helps either the central or state government or both to carry out effective administration of the country at the grassroots level. Though, at varied times, different scholars and authors, have attempted to give definitions of local government. However, no one definition is all encompassing and universal. The expression local government means different things to different people in different parts of the world. Ibodje cited in Ibaba (2004), observed “local government can hardly be given a one for all type of definition. It is also not very easy to define it in exact term.....Local government can only be characterized in such a way that it can be recognized as such different times and places”. Let us at this point cite a few definitions of local government by some scholars and authors. “Local government has been defined as the lowest unit of administration to whose laws and regulation, the communities who live in a defined geographical area and with common social and political ties are subject” (Orewa and Adewumi 1992). From the Nigeria guideline for local government reforms of 1976 cited in Ugwu (2000) define local government as “government at the local level exercised through representative councils established by law to exercise specific powers within defined area. These powers should give the council substantial control over local affairs.....direct the provision of services and to determine and implement projects so as to complement the activities of state and federal government in their areas.....”. On her part, Okoli (2005) defined local government as “a unit of government established by act of law to administer the functions of government and see to the welfare and interest of the local dwellers under the local government system”. Odenigwe (1984), perceived local government as “that part of a nation or state which deals mainly with matters of concern to the people of a particular place”. According to Golding (1975) “local government is a system of government at the local level exercise through a locally elected representative council, enjoying substantial autonomy in the exercise of specific powers over a given locality in the performance of a range of functions and responsibilities allotted to it by law”

The meaning of the concept local government appears nebulous, giving the varied explanation and definitions given to the term. However, it is important to note from the above definitions that, it is a sub-unit of government at the local level. Ofoeze (1999), explains local government to be; “.....a system of local administration intended primarily to co-ordinate the activities of the state government in such way as to insure proper decentralization of functions and actual participation of local people in the general development and management of their affairs”. One very important thing to note from the above definition is the underlying term decentralization. The term decentralization used here refers to an organizational arrangement whereby the management of public function is transferred to sub-units, bodies or agencies with jurisdiction limited to only certain parts of the total territory of a country.

Following the above, local government can be seen as a sub-unit of government at the local level, characterized by a political status and thus policy-making power, a defined geographical boundary, local autonomy and increased scope for popular participation in government activities, with structural differentiation and multi-functional powers.

ORIGIN AND DYNAMICS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

The world over, different forms or patterns of local government have existed at different periods. Different types may even exist side by side at the same period in the same place. In this study, we are going to look at the various local government systems that have existed from the pre-colonial era to date as briefly as possible.

Local government system in Nigeria dates back to the pre-colonial era. During this period, local government in Nigerian political system operated through the instrumentalities of traditional authorities. These traditional authorities were the Emirs, Obas, Age-grades and Village Councils. It was through these traditional political institutions that authoritative allocations of values were made for the society. These institutions were held sacred, and this legitimated their actions and decisions. In the Emirate system of Northern Nigeria, the principal political ruler was the Emir. All the decisions and functions of the government were made and carried out in his office. Local government under this system was under the supervision of District and Village Heads, appointed by the Emir. Under this system, the Emir alone has the sole authority to appoint people into political position and ascribe their roles. Among the Yorubas of the Western part of the country, the Obas were regarded as the fathers of the people and this gave sacredness, reverence and authority to their office. A kind of constitutional role surrounded the institution of the Obas. They were assisted by various categories of Chiefs, who played active part in the administration of those localities. Finally, among the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria, the traditional political system was based on family lineage, village and towns units. Administration of the localities in this system was carried out at the village and family levels through decisions made by Age-grades, Ndichie, Oha-Eze and Okpara's (Ananti, 2012). This was the beginning of local government in Nigeria, though there was no formal name as local government then. According to Ugwu (2000)

“The existence of provincial system, which operated in Borno and Oyo Empires as well as the emirate system of Sokoto caliphate exhibited rudimentary conception of local government administration. In these areas, there were smaller districts, villages and wards that were subject to the kingdom and emirate government. These smaller or sub-ordinate levels of government could be seen or described as local government”.

With the advent of British rule in Nigeria, some of the traditional political institutions, especially the Chieftaincy Institutions were involved in the system of local government known as “Indirect Rule”. The main substance of the indirect rule system of the British colonialist was the Native Administration, otherwise known as Native Authority. This system was introduced by the British colonialists in the 1900s. It is imperative to note that the existing traditional political institution under which the Native Authority system and by implication Indirect Rule thrived was the Emirs, who were powerful and near absolute kings in the North, the Obas-constitutional-Monarch in the West, and Warrant Chiefs in the East. These constituted the hub of the Native Authority. Though, there was no uniformity in the pattern of establishing the Native Authority, it varied from region to region, and from one district to another. However, they were under the strict supervision of the British Officials particularly the District Officers (DOs). It is important at this point to note that, while the system worked very well in the North, due to the Emirs, who were powerful and near absolute kings. The system did not succeed well in the West as was the case in the North, because the Obas did not enjoy such powers like their Emir counterparts of the North. The system was a complete failure in the East due to the acephalous socio-political nature of the people in this part (Egeonu 2007, Okoli 2005 and Ugwu 2000). The failure of the system in the East was as a result some factors thus:

“No single person or body held absolute power in decision-making rather the decision-making powers were vested in a number of bodies which includes; Council of Elders, Village Council, Age-grade among other” (Okoli, 2005)

Despite all these, the system lasted up till 1966. The widespread resentments and disenchantments against the Native Administration system, coupled with other socio-political factors, increased nationalist activities, emergence of political parties and resultant constitutional changes necessitated the transformation of Native

Authority system of local administration. Furthermore, people were desirous to democratize the local government structures. This desire was more pervasive in the South (East and West) than in the North. The Eastern Regional Government was the first to embrace modern elements of local government system. The Regional House of Assembly in 1949 adopted a memorandum, which culminated and gave birth to the Eastern Nigeria Local Government Ordinance of 1950, which sought among others, to make local government administration more effective and democratic, as well as to garner the support of the local people in local governance. The Western Nigeria Regional Local Government Ordinance of 1952 gave impetus to modern system of local government in the area.

It introduced a system that had similarities with the pattern in Eastern Nigeria, although with slight difference. In the West unlike the East, there was a deliberate attempt to accommodate the traditional rulers. Apart from this minor modification, the practice in the West remained essentially the same with the practice in the East. In addition to the above, Lagos, the Federal Capital Territory, under the Lagos Act of 1963, has an all-purpose, multifunctional city council. This was outside the jurisdiction of the Western Regional Government. It was administered under the auspices of the Federal Government, and consisted of majority elected members, with few appointed members. The Oba of Lagos was appointed the president of the council, while the day-day running of the council was under the Council Chairman, who was elected annually by the council itself. Modern local government did not start early in the North. The Native Authority systems remain the central basis of local government in the North, even when the Eastern and Western regions had abandoned it. This was due to the fact that, it was favourable to the prominent traditional rulers and the few educated elites, who were involved in the system. However, the Native Authority Law of 1954 by the Northern Regional Assembly introduced very minor reforms, though still based on the Native Authority System, which still revolved around the traditional rulers. There was little or no democratization of the system. It is evident that, this period actually marked the take-off of modern local government practice in Nigeria. Local governments witnessed an enhanced degree of mass participation and community development. However, there were some major structural and functional problems, which include; size of the local government area, that is; some of the councils were either too large or small, and some lacked the requisite resources to provide essential services. Furthermore, the regional government, and partisan politics filtrated the system, as such local government became smeared by political intrigues and maneuvering (Fajobi 2010, Egeonu 2007, Ananti 2012, Ugwu 2000 and Okoli 2005).

The termination of the first Republic by the Military in 1966 affected the pattern of local government system as well. Within this era, the regional structure was abolished, and in its place emerged a twelve state structure. The reforms introduced into the local government system varied from one state to another. There was no uniformity. In the states of the North, the old system of Native Authority Council was abolished, and replaced with Local Authority Councils, and new ones created which invariably whittled down the influences of the traditional rulers. In the Southern States exists, a different pattern of Local Government Administration. While the States of the former Eastern and Mid-Western regions operated the Development Administration System, the Western States had the Council Manager System, though with their peculiarities (Ugwu 2000).

The 1976 local government reforms was the first major nation-wide and comprehensive effort that was evolved by the Federal Government. Prior to this time, the reforms had been piecemeal and limited to either regions or individual states. The reforms introduced a formal structural differentiation between the local government and other levels of government, in terms of personnel, financial management and functions. Thus; Ibaba (2001) states that;

“The reforms introduce fundamental changes in the local government system. Firstly, it introduced a uniform, single tier, local government system throughout the country. Also the reforms led to the recognition of the local government as a third tier of government, which has its own identity, power and source of revenue. Equally, it made provision for local government to share in federally collected revenue”

Constitutional recognition was as well given to the councils, thus, empowering the federal government to legislate on local government issues, as well as its recognition as a distinct tier of government. In this regard, various constitutions at various times, made provisions for these, for instance, the 1979, 1989 as well as the 1999 constitutions made such provisions (Okoli 2005). Section 7 Sub-section 1 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended, provides that;

“The system of local government by democratically elected local government council is under this constitution guaranteed; and accordingly, the Government of every State shall.....ensure their existence under a Law which provides for the establishment, structure, composition, finance, and functions of such councils”

Based on this provision, the Bayelsa State House Assembly in the year 2000 made a law on local government administration to regulate the operations of the councils; the “Bayelsa State Local Government Law 2000”. In the current dispensation, local governments are run by elected councils, with Executive Chairmen who are the Chief Executives and Chief Security Officers of the Local Government Areas. There are also elected Councilors and appointed Supervisors. However, there are speculations on further reform, as there is still controversy over whose constitutional duty it is to create new local government areas, the regulation of the tenure of elected local government officers as well as the need for financial autonomy of local government.

THE ROLE OF COUNCILORS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local government is said to be the participation of rural people in matters affecting them. It is referred to as the lowest level or third tier of government, through which the people at the grassroots could be reached more easily. It is a level of government, which is designed to allow for the involvement of the inhabitants at local communities in achieving sustainable development.

The 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which ushered in this present dispensation, guarantees democratically elected local government system and accordingly gives powers to State Governments to ensure their existence under a law that will provide for its establishment, structure, composition, finance and functions of such councils as already stated above. Thus, the Bayelsa State House of Assembly, with the powers conferred on it by the constitution have made a law; the “Bayelsa State Local Government Law 2000”. The law provides for the operation of a presidential system as against at the local government level. This provision automatically made room for the “Legislature” at the local government level, which consist of elected councilors representing various wards in the local government. The legislative arm which is clearly separated from the executive arm is headed by a Leader, who is similar to the speaker of the State House of Assembly and the Deputy Leader, who is like the Deputy speaker. Section 5, sub-section 1 of the “Bayelsa State Local Government Law 2000” as amended provides that: “There shall be a Leader and Deputy Leader of the council who shall be elected by the councilors of the Local Government Council among themselves”. Just like any other legislature, the local government council, which is the legislative arm, in accordance with the provisions of the “Bayelsa State Local Government Law 2000” as amended, has the power to perform the following functions:

- Debating, amending and approving the annual budget of the local government, subject the Chairman’s veto which may be set aside by two-thirds majority of the council members.
- Vetting and monitoring the implementation of projects and programmes in the annual budget of the local government.
- Examining and debating the monthly statements of income and expenditure submitted to it by the Chairman of the local government.
- Advising, consulting and liaising with the Chairman of the local government.
- Performing such other functions as may be assigned to it from time to time by law.

Another very significant function of the councilors is the power to remove from office, the Chairman and or Vice Chairman of the council. Thus, according to Local Government Administration Handbook cited in Okoli (2005)

“A Chairman or Vice Chairman of local government who is found guilty of gross misconduct, within the context of existing laws of the federation, could be impeached by the local government council”.

It is therefore important to note that the local government council has the power to perform full legislative functions, just like any other legislature in the country.

Local Government is a panacea for development at the grassroots level, and the role of Councilors in achieving this cannot be overemphasized. Councilors as the legislature at the local government level has an important role to play in its development as the watchdog of the executive, whose responsibility it is to implement policies and programmes of government in accordance with the provision of the law.

From survey conducted in the cause of this study based on some research questions, it was revealed that, if Councilors which forms part of the labour power in local government perform their role effectively, will contribute immensely to the sustainable development of local government. But the general view is that councilors don't know their role and have failed to perform same due to lack requisite knowledge to enable them perform their role effectively, unwilling to pay much attention to their responsibilities and sometimes compromise with the executive for financial gain rather than performing their role to achieve the needed development, it was also revealed that, they are been influenced or intimidated by the council chairmen.

CONCLUSION

Sustainable development of local government lies greatly on councilors if they could perform their role effectively. But from our findings on the study, it is evident that they had not performed their roles effectively, and consequently, had affected the slow pace of development at the local government level. What this means is that, the lack of development at the local government is partly as a result of lack of performance on the part of councilors. We therefore conclude that councilors have failed to perform their role effectively which had impacted negatively on the sustainable development of the Southern Ijaw Local Government Area of Bayelsa State.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Consequent upon our findings from the study, we make the following recommendations:

- (i) The system of selection and or appointment of councilors to the local government should be devoid of political competition, rather it should be based on competence, as this will usher in the best rural candidates with good background of local administration.
- (ii) Training and retraining of councilors should be done regularly as to keep them abreast of current legislative process and procedures to enable them perform their role effectively.
- (iii) The seemingly corrupt attitude of society should be discouraged, as it affects the effectively performance of councilors.
- (iv) Finally, councilors on their part should show all amount of seriousness in the performance of their roles as to redeem their image, and contribute meaningfully to the sustainable development of the local government area.

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