

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORMS IN NIGERIA: A HISTORICAL REVIEW

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Abstract

The paper reviewed the history of local government reforms in Nigeria from pre-independence to the fourth republic. It observed that the Nigerian government has profound interest in making the third tier government effective and efficient to provide social services to the people. But very shockingly and surprisingly too, people from the local areas in the country have not reaped the dividends of these reforms. The 1976 local government reform and the Babangida reform of 1991 provided ample recommendations for local governments to be self-sustaining for growth and development, but the opposite has continued to be the case. The paper discovered that local governments in Nigeria have experienced series of constraints, some of which are administrative, constitutional and corruption on the part of local government staff as well as state control of local governments, especially funds allocated to it from the federal account. Following the puppet status of local government and inability to fulfill its mandate of being an agent of development of the local areas, the paper concluded that Nigerian leaders and makers of local government reforms are not altruistic especially in matters affecting local governments in the country. Some recommendations were made among which were that local governments should be made autonomous especially in financial matters by amending the 1999 constitution to remove it from the apron-string of state governments and granting it a full tier status like the state and federal governments.

Keywords: Local Government, Reforms, History, Review.

Introduction

Local government is the oldest institution in human history. It exists in all countries of the world with various appellations but with the mandate to cater for the welfare of the people at the local level of governance. Local government is the keelson upon which other tiers of government find sustenance. It is very dynamic in nature and could be likened to a laboratory for experiment in the art of governance for the state and federal governments. Local government provides a training ground for future leaders in the country. The state and federal governments owe their existence to the local government. All states and federal government capitals are housed or located within the territories of local governments by whatever nomenclature it is known and called.

The local government, like an organism is dynamic and cannot survive perpetually or too long in a particular environment or condition. It cannot continue forever under a particular set of statutes, rules and regulations, but must undergo constant reforms to adapt itself to new circumstances, situations and environment (Ekpe 2021; Baridam 2021). Reforms are meant to ensure optimal performance of local government in the provision of services to the people as contained in the laws that established the third tier government.

The history of local government in Nigeria since attainment of independence in 1960 is punctuated with reforms. The reasons adduced for these reforms have always been to position the third tier government for effectiveness and efficiency in service delivery to the people at the grassroots.

This study is therefore a review into the various local government reforms that the Nigerian Federal Government has carried out over the years to put the third tier of government on the pedestal of growth and development. Whether this has been achieved or not is the concern of this paper.

Conceptual Clarification

Local government as a concept lends itself to various definitions according to the intentions of scholars. Egbe (2002) with reference to the United Nations (1959) defines local government as a political sub-division of a nation which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local government affairs, including the power to impose taxes, the governing body of such an entity is elected. Oyediran in Akpan (2018) views local government as a government in which there exists popular participation both in the choice of decision makers and in the decision making process. Election is conducted by the local bodies, which, while recognizing the supremacy of the central government is able and willing to accept responsibility for its decisions.

The federal government's guidelines for local government reforms (1976) defines local government as government at local level, exercised through representative councils established by law to exercise specific powers within defined areas. These powers should allocate substantial control to councils over local affairs as well as the staff, institutional and financial services with the power to determine and implement projects so as to compliment the activities of the states and federal government in their areas and to ensure thorough devolution of functions to these councils, the active participation of the people and their traditional institutions, for local initiative and response to local needs to be maximized. Local government is that tier of government at the local level, established by law and granted power to administer its own affairs through elected representatives in such a way that needs will be satisfied for peaceful co-existence of the local people and development of the local areas.

Reform, in the views of Akaakuma (2008), is concerned with identifying an existing problem and making efforts to offer solution. It has to do with the formulation of policies aimed at restructuring and transforming an organization, in this case the local government for better performance. Reforms are made to bring about effectiveness and

efficiency in service delivery. Akpan (2019) sees administrative reforms as an attempt to **assist** an organization reach a high level of achievement. Local government reforms are **therefore** meant to reposition local governments for effective service delivery to the **people** in rural areas of the country and by so doing, bring government nearer to the **people**.

The Native Authority System

The history of local government reforms in Nigeria is long. As stated by Egonmwan (2002), Oruebo and Okoroafor (2013), it could be traced to the era of colonial **rule** when Lord Lugard, the then Governor-General of Nigeria in 1914 amalgamated the **Northern** and Southern protectorates of Nigeria which ushered in indirect rule. The **colonial** power under the umbrella of the Native Authority Ordinance of 1916 as their **legal** foundation religiously executed the indirect rule in the country.

The native authority system was organized in a way that it harmonized with the **traditional**, social and political arrangement that was already in existence and used by the **people** (Ogunna 2007). This arrangement was aimed at introducing a system of local **government** in which the traditional rulers operated indirectly on behalf of the British **colonial** government. The traditional rulers administered the people under the watchful **eyes** of the British officials. The native authority had four main components within its **structure** – the residents, chief, native treasury and the native courts. The resident was an **appointed** public officer. His office and that of the chief were very powerful. They were **to maintain** peace and order and collect taxes for the colonial government who was selfish **with little** or no attention to the condition of local areas and the inhabitants. The British **colonial** government adopted the indirect rule system to serve their personal interest since **they** did not have enough man-power and funds to cater for the vast area of Nigeria and **large** population.

Egbe (2014) points out that the period of indirect rule was characterized by **massive** exploitation of Nigeria by the British government for selfish personal interest. **Roads**, harbours, railways, the civil service and the introduction of cash crops were **inordinate** efforts of the British at the detriment of Nigeria and Nigerians. The indirect rule system witnessed high level success in the Hausa-Fulani area of Northern Nigeria **than** in other parts of the country because of the already established indigenous **centralized** system and a highly developed judicial system coupled with efficient **administrative** system which made it possible for integration and control of the political **system**. Indirect rule made partial success in the western part of Nigeria due to the **monarchical** and highly centralized system of government in place with the Obas in full **control** before the colonial invasion, however, the colonial government found it difficult **to introduce** taxation in the west. This, according to Egbe (2014) was as a consequence of **the** existence of tributary relationship between the monarchs and their subjects since the **organization** of the treasury was alien to them. The introduction of taxation in the west **was met** with protest and the educated elites equally rose up against indirect rule and **sought** radical changes in the system of local government. These contributed significantly **to the failure** of indirect rule in the west.

In the eastern part of Nigeria, indirect rule met abysmal failure for reasons which ranged from the acephalous nature of the Igbo society which did not have a centralized authority structure. The appointment of warrant chiefs by the colonial administration in Iboland was an affront on the people as it was seen as illegal and at loggerheads with the traditional political structure of the people. There was nothing like indigenous system of taxation in Iboland for the British colonial government to fall back on. This posed serious financial difficulty to the operation of the native authority as they lacked financial support. The search for revenue to run the system led to the introduction of direct taxation in the area between 1927 and 1929. This generated serious reactions which culminated in the popular Aba Women Riot of 1929. The severity of outrage by citizens of the eastern region became more serious because of changes which made the British district or divisional officer the president of native courts after 1922. This position before then was handled by warrant chiefs. The citizens felt marginalized and humiliated and so had to fight back (Egbe 2014).

The native authority system was synonymous with the French system, with a strong mixture of traditional elements (Ibodje 1999). In his critique of the Native Authority System, Ogunna (2007) observes that it was alien, strange and undemocratic especially as it neglected and excluded the educated elites from participating in the government of their own land. The most annoying and irritating aspect was that the colonial system produced chiefs who were autocratic, authoritarian, exploitative, oppressive and corrupt.

The 1950 Local Government Reform

The 1950 local government reform witnessed the introduction of modern system of local government in Nigeria. This was a dream realized because it came at a time when people were yearning for local self government and the colonial government equally needed efficient representation and local system of government for Africans (Oruebo and Okoroafor 2013). The 1950 reform brought about the introduction of the British Whitehall model of local government into Nigeria. Traditional rulers formed more than 25% of council members in the western council and Lagos. In Northern Nigeria, however, changes were gradual during this period in the history of local government reforms. The legal framework adopted for local government was provided by the Eastern Region Local Government Ordinance of 1950, the Western Region Local Government law of 1952 and the 1954 native authority law in northern Nigeria. The councils during this period performed a wide range of functions among which were primary education, healthcare services, Police and the Judiciary. These functions were meant to ensure harmony between colonial government's implementation of a ten-year plan of welfare and development (1946-1956). The councils equally enjoyed great measure of autonomy in the areas of finance, personnel and general administration.

Developments in the 1950's showed clearly that the decade was that of training the people for administration of local government councils in Nigeria. The period equally witnessed a transformation of the sole native authority in the northern region in response to the democratic needs and demands of the people. This comprised of the chiefs-in-

council, chiefs and council and federated native authorities with non-traditional members, either elected or nominated. The Northern Region Native Authority Council, unlike the Eastern and Western Regions had full political, administrative and financial powers. There were 246 Native Authorities in Nigeria by 1950. The north had 144, west had 55 and east had 47. During this period, indirect rule was still in place but with minor adjustments, especially in the southern part till the latter part of the 1940's. These minor adjustments were meant to accommodate and/or absorb the growing number of educated and enlightened Nigerians into the system for effectiveness and efficiency (Egbe 2014).

The basic structure of the native authority had attained perfection by 1921 and remained undisturbed until the 1950's when Nigerians began to participate actively in the legislative functions at the national level. This marked the beginning of introduction of new laws for governance at the local level of government.

Local Government in 1951-1966

This was the period of representative democracy in Nigeria. It marked the breaking away from the British colonial control introduced in 1914. This brought about the introduction of different systems of local government in the three regions of East, West and North in Nigeria. The Macpherson constitution of 1957 was very explicit. It arrogated powers to the three regions of the North, East and West to make policies on local government. By this action, the Nigerian political leaders took over power from the British colonial administrators. This put a stop to the idea of imposition of a unified local government policy on Nigeria and laid to rest the domineering influence of colonial administrators on policies that emanate from local government.

In an effort to separate totally from the colonial past and its slavish and domineering native authority system, measures were adopted to strengthen local institutions. These measures were to increase powers in the areas of education, healthcare, public works, employment of qualified indigenous administrative and professional staff. While the eastern region experimented with various systems of local government administration with varying degrees of success, the western regional local government law of 1952, on the other hand introduced the representative system of local government for the entire region. This idea was borrowed from the northern and eastern regions. The major concern was the transplantation of the British system of local government into Nigeria, a local government with county, districts and local councils. This experiment by the two regions of West and East failed woefully showing the unthinkable idea of importing hook, line and sinker a foreign system into a country without regard to the socio-economic, cultural and political setting of that country.

The North adopted gradual policy changes whereas changes in the south were visible everywhere. Many things were seen as being responsible for the failure of the representative democratic system. These were:-

- i) High level corruption among councilors and council employees.
- ii) Meager resources of the authority were fragmented through proliferation of authorities.

- iii) The high expectations of the people for outstanding dividends of the new local government reforms were dashed as functions assigned to the local government councils swallowed up the lean resources available.
- iv) There were series of disagreements over minor issues because of rival interests in the council.
- v) Trained staff were lacking in the local government councils.
- vi) Negative political influences of political parties in local government equally posed constraints.

The operation of local government councils between 1951 and 1966 in southern Nigeria experienced several defects among which has already been captured earlier in this paper. The military coup de'-etat of January 15 and July 4 1966 and restructuring of Nigeria into 12 states provided an opportunity for re-examination of the status and functions of the third tier government in the new political arrangement. (Egbe 2014).

Local Government Reforms under the Military 1966-1975

During the above period, remarkable reforms were witnessed by local governments across the country. In northern Nigeria, the native courts were made to be under the Regional Judiciary while the Nigerian police and Nigerian prisons took over the native administration. In 1968, the twelve newly created states witnessed the launching of local government reforms while implementation of the military government proposals on local government took place in 1970. The military government was motivated to embark on local government reforms because it wanted to enhance popular participation in the affairs of the local government and deliver services to the rural people. This led to replacement of native administration with Local Government Authority while re-organization of local government authority saw them replaced with administrative and development areas.

In the eastern states, the major difficulty in the operation of local government during the period was the outbreak of the civil war, however, there existed a form of localized administration which assisted in the rehabilitation of the region after the civil war. In the South Eastern states, development administration was put in place to replace what existed before. It created 140 Areas Development Councils. In the east central state the government created a divisional administration based on a system of local authority which was intended primarily to co-ordinate the activities of the state government functionaries in both the division and local government to ensure proper decentralization of functions and active participation of the local people in affairs of their local government. These were executed in agreement with the guidelines and supervision of the local authority. The local administration was returned to the "Divisions" but reduced 55 divisions to 34 with a population of between 100,000 to 300,000 with Enugu, Aba and Onitsha as divisions in the urban areas (Alfred and George 2013).

In western states, the council manager type of local government was adopted. It was a-39 all purpose councils to replace the old local government structures. The council

manager system did not have elected councils, administrators or elected committees to run the affairs of the committee with assistance from the staff (Egbe 2014). Since the aim of the committee was to achieve maximum efficiency in service delivery to the people, it was operated like a commercial enterprise. In 1969 however, advisory committees were appointed to take over from the administrators or appointed committees. The advisory committees, comprised of 10 unpaid members with the district officers as chairmen.

There were gradual changes in the structure of the councils in the northern states with increasing numbers of elected or appointed non-traditional office-holders becoming members of local authorities which resulted in stable and successful administration. It is worth-noting that the six northern states then fell into three pairs which was referred to as "basic local government arrangement:- Benue, Plateau and Kwara States. Although dissimilar in details, they basically maintained a relatively familiar form of divisional administration. Plateau had nine divisions, but only six were coterminous with the newly established local administrations, while three were subdivided to have a total of fourteen local administrations. In Kwara State, eleven local administrations were created each coterminous with the eleven divisions. The sole administrators were appointed to oversee the new authorities. In the north central and Kano States, the administrative machinery adopted to bring government closer to the people was known as "Administrative Areas".

The Local Government Reform of 1976

In the evolution of local government administration in Nigeria, the 1976 local government reform marked a turning point. The reform was a positive response of the Federal government to the recommendation of the Udoji Public Service Review Commission which recommended a multi-purpose single-tier system of local government throughout the country with the same structure and functions. The reform made local government a third tier of government after the federal and state governments. The reform was made possible by the General Olusegun Obasanjo administration. It was a consequence of some inherent defects in the former local government system between 1968 and 1975 which made local government ineffective and unable to bring development to the rural people.

The then Chief of Staff Supreme Headquarters Brigadier Shehu Musa Yar'adua captured the defects in his "forward to the guidelines for local government reforms (1976) thus:

Local governments have over the years suffered from the continuous whittling down of their powers. The state governments have continued to encroach upon what would normally have been the exclusive preserves of local government. Lack of adequate funds and appropriate institutions have continued to make local governments ineffective and ineffectual. Moreso, the staffing arrangements to ensure a virile local government system had been inadequate. Excessive politicking had made even

modest progress impossible. Consequently, there has been a divorce between the people and government institutions which affected their most basic needs.

The principal objectives of the guidelines were as follows:

- i. to make appropriate services and development activities responsive to local needs and initiatives by devolving or delegating them to local representative bodies.
- ii. to facilitate the exercise of democratic self-government close to the local levels of our society and to encourage initiative and leadership potential.
- iii. to mobilize human and material resources through the involvement of members of the public in their local development.
- iv. to provide a two way channel of communication between local communities and government, both at the state and federal levels.

In general, functions which local government bodies perform should be those in which success depends on community responsiveness and participation and which are of a personal nature requiring provisions close to where the individuals affected live and in which significant use of discretion for understanding of individuals is needed.

Features of the 1976 Local Government Reforms

The 1976 Local Government Reforms had the following features:

- i. There was uniformity and standardization in the local government system throughout the country with a population of 150,000 to 800,000.
- ii. Within the federal structure of the federal republic of Nigeria, the local government was made a third tier of government.
- iii. Local government for the first time in Nigeria was captured in the 1979 constitution with functions assigned to it, among which was to ensure total implementation of the provisions of the 1976 local government reforms.
- iv. Local governments were granted relatively high level of autonomy.
- v. Specific functions were assigned to local governments and equally enshrined in the fourth schedule of the 1979 constitution.
- vi. There was democratization of the third tier government through popular or indirect elections.
- vii. Local governments were entitled to a percentage of revenue from the federation account and state governments.
- viii. Traditional and emirate councils were to be constituted in line with the reform guidelines and traditional rulers were insulated from participation in the affairs of local government except in an advisory capacity to the elected or appointed chairmen of councils.

Thus, the 1976 local government reform from all indications was very significant and distinct from other reforms. This was why Akpan (2018) observes that what distinguishes the 1976 local government reform from all other previous

reform exercises in the country is the formal and unequivocal recognition of local government as constituting a distinct level of government with definite boundaries, clearly stated functions and provisions for ensuring adequate human and financial resources.

The Babangida Reform 1985-1993

Following observed defects in the 1976 local government reform, General Ibrahim Babangida on taking over power in 1985 introduced measures to enhance the economic viability of local governments and granted more constitutional autonomy to local governments which include:

- i. Increase in the local government share from the federation account from 10 to 15 percent in 1991 and from 15 to 20 percent in 1992.
- ii. Direct remittance of local government funds from the federation account to local governments.
- iii. Deduction at source, the state's 10% internally generated revenue and making direct payment to local government councils.
- iv. Granting of autonomy to local government through the 1989 constitution and the abolition of the ministries of local government throughout the country on October 1, 1991.
- v. The introduction of the presidential system at the local government level in 1991 with the chairman and his appointed supervisors forming the executive arm while the elected councilors constituted the legislative arm.
- vi. Local government through enabling laws were freed from unnecessary control by state governments (Francis 2012; Okoroafor 2013 and Anazodo 2014).

The Babangida reform introduced checks and balances into local government administration, but very unfortunately, the council chairmen became so powerful to the extent that the elected councilors could not check them effectively. This brought negative consequences such as misappropriation of funds and other crimes. The Babangida reform, despite some experienced human problems recorded high level success especially at the initial stage.

Local Government under the 1999 Constitution

The 1999 constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria provides a guide for the operation of local governments in the present dispensation. As contained in the first schedule, part one, section 7(1) of the constitution, it provides for 774 local government areas. The constitution further states as follows:

The system of local government by democratically elected local government councils is under this constitution guaranteed; and accordingly, the government of every state shall, subject to section 8 of this constitution ensure their existence under a law which provides for the establishment, structure, composition, finance and functions of such councils (FRN 1999).

The State Houses of Assembly throughout the duration were, by the above provisions empowered to legislate for the operation of local government councils, thus bringing to an end the unified system of local government which was made possible by the 1976 local government reforms. The provisions on the other hand granted powers to the State Houses of Assembly in the country to enact laws for the operation of local government councils in their respective states. This paved way for State Houses of Assembly to introduce the presidential system at the local level through enabling laws.

But just as with the Babangida reforms, serious problems were experienced, among which was that, at the end of tenure of elected councils in June 2002, elections were not conducted by some states to fill political positions in the local government councils, rather some of the states resorted to appointment of caretaker or transition committees which were at loggerheads with constitutional provisions. By these unconstitutional arrangements, people at the grassroots were denied the opportunity of participating in electing their leaders into various offices in the local government councils.

Appointed chairmen of councils during the period saw themselves as demi-gods who had final say in all matters pertaining to the councils. They became corrupt and mismanaged council funds at the expense of grassroot development. This trend as observed by Egbe (2014) and Akpan (2018) started from the Babangida era and has continued unabated till today in almost all local government councils throughout the federation.

Problems of the Presidential System at Local Government Level

The introduction of the presidential system of government at the local government level came with its own problems. These problems were:

- i) Poor relationship between the states and local governments – state governments regard local governments as puppets of fate perpetually attached to the apron-strings of the masters to satisfy their inordinate aspirations. This has hampered the growth and development of local government areas across the country.
- ii) Conflicts between the executive and legislative arms – these conflicts oftentimes are caused by encroachment on powers and functions of the local government legislature by the executive arm and vice versa. This has always been a challenge to democracy at the local government level.
- iii) Corruption in councils – corruption and misappropriation of council funds by chairmen and some council members have contributed greatly to the problems of local governments across the country. Most impeachment moves by councilors against chairmen of councils are as a result of corruption or to obtain their share from the chairmen.
- iv) State governments contribute significantly to the problem of local governments

through continued interference in the affairs of local governments. They have always imposed their selfish will on local governments through imposition of candidates during elections, thus disallowing the local people from electing people of their own choices into political offices in local government councils. Most state governments in Nigeria have failed to remit the constitutionally mandated 10% of their internally generated revenue to local governments, thus starving them of funds which could have been used to deliver services to the people.

- v) The federal government on the other hand has not shown sympathy on the local governments and by implication, the local population. This is clearly seen in the federal governments continued payment of local government allocations from the federation account to state – local government joint-account which are swallowed up by state governments.

Recommendations

The study made the following recommendations:

- i. Local governments in Nigeria should be made to have legal status and by implication autonomy which will empower the grassroot government to operate without fear in the interest of the local people. The present use of influence, manipulation and control by state governments do not augur well for local governments in Nigeria.
- ii. The situation in which local government finds itself in Nigeria is such that it cannot fast-track rural development except the constitutional albatross on its neck is removed. This simply means that the constitution should be amended for local government to free itself from unnecessary control by state government. Specifically, sections 7 and 8 of the Nigerian Constitution which empower state governments to ensure the existence of local government should be expunged or amended for local government to have a legal status and recognized as “government” like the federal and state governments.
- iii. Allocations from the federation account to local government should go directly to local government to empower it financially to deliver needed services to the people at the third tier level.
- iv. State governments should desist from undue interference in the politics of local government by allowing the people to choose candidates of their choice to run the affairs of councils.
- v. Measures should be put in place to make sure that state governments remit the

constitutionally mandated 10 percent of their monthly internally generated revenue to local governments across the country.

- vi. Corrupt officials in the local government system should be shown the way out or be properly checkmated to put a stop to stealing of local government funds.
- vii. Chairmen of councils should be efficient and effective in the overall management and administration of local government councils.
- viii. State Independent Electoral Commission (SIEC) should be scrapped while local government elections should be conducted by independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) during general elections in the country. This will make it difficult for state governors to impose their candidates on the people and manipulate the electoral process in their favour.

Conclusion

Extant literature on local government administration in Nigeria indicate that there is nothing wrong with the third tier government as a concept and its desirability cannot be overemphasized. Constant reforms are nothing but symptoms of the weaknesses of Nigerian leaders in their commitments and sincerity to serving the country.

Nigeria is a country where political leaders do not show altruism in their approach to issues that confront the nation – state. They have allowed their personal self interest to overshadow the public interest. There are series of flaws in the 1999 constitution as they concern local government which should be revisited and amended, or outrightly expunged if the third tier government must gain its status as a government in charge of the affairs of the local population. The problem with local government in Nigeria is not routine yearly making of reforms from previously failed reforms. The core problems rest in the minds of makers of these reforms who, themselves need to be reformed to think and act rightly with commitment and compassion in the overall interest of Nigeria and Nigerians, especially the poor masses in rural areas of the country who have been selfishly disconnected from the basic necessities of life.

Local government in Nigeria does not have a legal status as a government and lacks autonomy. Its rubber stamp status spells doom for the third tier government in Nigeria. Local government is not a creation of the constitution but of the state government and so owes its existence and survival to the state government which has continued to constrain it financially and otherwise through making of useless laws to outright use of force to compel local government do its biddings. The fundamental

problems of local government which oftentimes are worth repeating are poor resource allocation, bad leadership, state control of local government, rubber stamp chairmen and lack of financial autonomy which are deliberately permitted by the political leaders because they provide opportunities for them to corruptly enrich themselves at the detriment of the poor and wretched rural masses. The 1976 local government reform and the Babangida reform were well intentioned, but could not succeed at the level of implementation because of bad leadership and insensitivity to the plight of rural dwellers in the country. Nigerian leaders require some levels of reforms in their thoughts, words and actions in order to make the local people feel the impact of governance. The problems with local governments in Nigeria is the case of “man the problem and man the solution”.

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