



Local Government Autonomy and the Challenges of Rural Development in Delta South Senatorial District of Delta State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The freedom of local government to judiciously use both finance and other constitutional powers to provide social services is a significant imperative for rural development in Nigeria. Hence, this study examined local government autonomy and challenges of rural development in Delta South Senatorial District. In achieving the general and specific objectives of this study, two research questions and hypotheses were raised to guide the study. The sustainable Development Theory was adopted as the theoretical framework of this study. The descriptive survey design was used with a population of One Million, Seven Hundred and Ninety Six Thousand, Eight Hundred (1,796,800). Questionnaire serves as the major instrument for data collection. The hypotheses were tested using Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) statistical tool based on the analysis, the study revealed that there is significant relationship between local government autonomy and rural development and as such, local government needs to be granted the needed freedom both financial and otherwise to develop the rural areas, concerted efforts is needed to review existing laws concerning local and state governments joints account and revenue generation. The study therefore recommends among others that Local government should be given the needed freedom both financially, political and administratively to organized, coordinate its affairs for rural development.

KEYWORDS: *Local Government, Autonomy, Financial Autonomy, Rural Development*

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria operates a federal system of government with a Federal Capital Territory (Abuja), 36 states and 774 Local Governments. It is a truism that government exists primarily to provide services that will make life worth living. Governance at the local level plays a crucial role in ensuring the effectiveness and provision of public goods to the vast rural population. The creation of Local Government anywhere in the world stems from the need to facilitate developments at the grassroots (Agba, Akwara, and Idu, 2020). All political systems seek the attainment of effective and efficient service delivery at the grassroots. This is because; Local Government service delivery system anywhere in the world affects day-to-day activities of citizens. Thus, whatever is the mode of government; Local Government has been essentially regarded as path to, and generator of national integration, administration and development (Arowolo, 2020).

The expediency for the establishment of local government anywhere in the world stems from the need to facilitate development at the grassroots. The importance of local government autonomy is a function of its ability to generate sense of belonging, safety and satisfaction among its populace (Akindele et al, 2020). All forms of government, regimes or political system have so far ensured the attainment of this goal. Such approach for ensuring national administrative development and political efficacy is found in the concept of local government (Chiedozie, 2019). Whatever is the mode of government; local government has been essentially regarded as pathway, and guarantor of national integration, administration and development (Gauga, 2020).

Since the inception of the system of local government in Nigeria, there had been persistent clamour for the autonomy of the local government as the third tier of governance in the federation. It is interesting to note that even the federal government has in recent times joined in championing the course of local government autonomy. In the forward of the guidelines for the 1979 local government reforms, it was clearly remarked that, "the states have continued to encroach upon what would have been the exclusive preserve of local governments. With this reform, the local government was granted the power of grassroots governance with apparent improvement in the autonomy as the third tier of government in the country.

While admitting that local government autonomy cannot be absolute in a federation it is pertinent to note that local governments need to be granted good measure of fiscal autonomy so as to be able to carry out effectively the task of rural development. These series of reforms carried out by the federal government in order to strengthen the local government as the third tier of government in the federation has given rise to visible improvements of the revenue base of the councils.

For many years, local government allocation has been hijacked by the various state governments because of absence of a truly local government system in our practice of democracy. Section 7 (1) of the 1999 Constitution allows for an elected administration in the councils but in practice, most of the councils in Nigeria are administered by appointed chairmen or caretaker committees. Only very few can be said to be under democratically elected officials. Even in those with elected administrations, their finances are under direct control of the state government. Hence there is no visible development

in practically all the 774 councils in Nigeria. Their roads are as dilapidated as ever. There is nothing to show that there is grassroots government in Nigeria. And, this is the tier of government that is supposed to be closer to the people. Unfortunately, they are not centres of exist only on paper. In reality, they are not centres of rural development.

The provisions for the autonomy, as they were, are essentially and apparently aimed at protecting the local government from superfluous interference from other tiers of government and to enable it play significant roles in the national development process. With adequate funding, due process and accountability, local governments stand to propel rural development in terms of provision of basic social amenities like portable water, electricity, education, health-care service, recreational facilities to their respective communities. By so doing, the system could have inter-alia prevented rural-urban migration and its attendant socio-economic, political and environmental ills.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The State government encroachment into local government affairs and their total control of the local government council's financial allocation and also using caretaker committees who are loyalist to the State Governor has thus triggered the agitation for local government autonomy aimed at reversing such encroachment given the immense role that can be played in grassroots politics by the local government. (Omoruyi, 2021), stated that local government reforms have been articulated in a bid to correct excessive state encroachment, abuse of powers and the use of undemocratic leaders and care-taker committee chairmen to run the local governments in Delta state. Of all local government reforms deliberately executive to address this anomalies, the 1976 local government reform which recognized local government as a third tier, accords autonomous powers to the local councils and reduced excessive politicking of state over local government occupies an enviable place in Nigeria's political system.

Okoli (2019), affirmed that the issue of autonomy has to do with the Local government, beyond mere constitutional provision that would be organized as the third tier of government, with power to regulate, to spend and powers to provide services". But experience and empirical evidences have shown that financial autonomy of local government is non-existent in Nigeria. Through the Local Government State Joint Account, some states apart from arbitrary deduction also forced the local government to embark on some ridiculous projects that are not in congruence with the needs of the local people under the pretext of ensuring uniformity in development. Also the interference of external forces in the administration, finance and political affairs of the local councils has pose significant threat to the development of rural areas in the state it is the preponderate of this lacuna that this study set address by examine Local government autonomy and rural Development in Delta South Senatorial Districts.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The general objective of this study is to examine Local Government Autonomy and Rural Development in Delta South Senatorial Districts.. the specific objectives are to:

- i. Local Government Autonomy and Socioeconomic Development of Rural Areas in Delta South Senatorial District
- ii. Local government Autonomy and the Challenges of Rural Development in Delta South Senatorial District.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following questions guide the study:

- i. To what extent has Local Government Autonomy contribute to Socioeconomic Development of Rural Areas in Delta South Senatorial District?
- ii. To what extent has Local government Autonomy posed serious Challenges of Rural Development in Delta South Senatorial District?

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

- i. There is no significant relationship between Local Government Autonomy and Socioeconomic Development of Rural Areas in Delta South Senatorial District
- ii. There is no significant relationship between Local government Autonomy and Challenges of Rural Development in Delta South Senatorial District

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Local government Autonomy and Socio-economic Development of Rural Areas

Socio-economic development refers to a process of socio and economic development in a social system (society). It is measured with indicators such as Gross Domestic Products (GDP), life expectancy literacy as well as levels of employment. Ering, (2020) noted that socio-economic also refers to society related economic factors which relate to and influence one another. Angahar (2019) avers that the delivery of public goods and services at the local level or the grassroots is aimed at moving the standard of living of the people to the next level. Consequently, Balatilo and Ibrahim, (2021) explains that the

efficient and effective provision of basic amenities as well as social infrastructures for the people at the grassroots are key factors to the existence of any government

Akwara and Idu (2021) contends that as agent of rural development, local governments are to be free to utilize funds made available to them by both federal and state governments as well as their internally generated revenue to improve on the lives of the people within their areas of operation through initiation and attracting developmental projects to the local governments such as provision of access roads, water and rural electricity. Oladunjoye, (2019) deduced apart from being a viable political and administrative organ for the socio-economic governments also act as the training ground for the breeding of grassroots democracy fundamental in national development . According to United Nations Development Group (2011) local governments are formal institutions, officially mandated to deliver varieties of public goods and services at the grassroots level to engender the most needed socioeconomic development. The assignment of service delivery responsibilities to local government is largely predicated on the principle of subsidiary, which suggests that government functions should be assigned to the lowest level of government which is capable of efficiently undertaking this function. This implies that local government are proximate, and they can be expected to delivery services which correspond to local priorities as well as in ways which genuinely meet local needs. Moreover, local governments are institutionally sustainable. It is these two fundamental attributes of local government – their proximity and institutional viability – which makes it so well suited for autonomy to appropriate pro-poor services to usher in socio-economic development of rural areas.

Olabisi (2021) noted that the need for local government autonomy is to allow the local government specific powers to perform array of functions, plan, formulate as well as execute its own policies, programmes and projects, and its own rules and regulations as expected for its local needs. This autonomy encompasses power to control its finance, recruit and discipline its staff. It is predicated on the fact that when local government has power to take decision on its own as regarding its finance and policies, rural areas will have the assurances of socioeconomic development. This is accentuated by the fact that local government is closer to the people and when local government councils have the powers of their own without any overbearing influence from the state, they could implement decisions policies which will enhance the socioeconomic development of rural areas in the country without having to wait for the state which in most cases focus mainly on the state development and neglecting the rural areas.

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Samihah (2020) on his part states that the responsibility of providing basic essential services and bringing about socioeconomic development has been delegated to local governments as the third tier of government. He went head that the types of social services which a local government may require to provide include housing water, adult and vocational education, rural electricity, feeder roads, and transport primary health facilities and other social services. As a consequence, local governments have to effectively identify and target essential infrastructures as well as social services at any given point in time, neediest areas, have systems in place to track expenditure on projects and be able to determine if the allocation of resources has an impact. The most immediate need thus is to grant local government autonomy so that they may be empowered in gaining an understanding of where the priority areas are and what the local governments are planning to do. It will also give citizens an opportunity to hold local governments accountable for the delivery of social services.

Local Government Autonomy and the Challenges of rural Development

The state of development in rural areas is unacceptably grim with slow overall economic growth and development. According to Sokoh (2013), rural development can be described as the integrated approach to food production as well as physical, social and institutional infrastructural provisions with an ultimate goal of bringing about both quantitative and qualitative changes which result in improved living standard of the rural population. The indices of this sordid situation include poor agricultural productivity; gross infrastructural deficit; rapid population increase; unemployment; lack of social amenities; among others, which had culminated in dehumanizing rural poverty and underdevelopment in all ramifications. Ekpe (2016) noted that the people live on the fringe of starvation, destitution and ignorance, which undermined their immunity and natural resistance to diseases; such that epidemic continued to kill thousands every year. The local governments in Nigeria are bedeviled with a legion of problems, which tend to weaken their capacity and ability to achieve developmental goals and objectives. They have thus, failed to respond positively to local needs.

The major challenge to local government administration in Nigeria is funds, this has dwindle over times due to economic depression and financial melt-down while in the recent time, this has been aggravated by the event of COVID-19 pandemic that occurred all over the world. This financial meltdown has contributed to the low space of growth and development in local government in areas of socio-economic developments and provision of viable developmental projects. The number of abandon projects in local government due to lack of funds because of mismanagement, misallocation and inefficient uses of funds is enormous, thereby jeopardizing the well-being of the citizens within the locality. This poor financial management approach

has contributed to the basic failure and inefficiency of some local government in achieving substantial development of their locality, while in recent times, this had led to lack of trust, faith and confidence in local government administration. Besides, the persistent hijack and control of local government statutory allocation and financial resources by some state governors, has also negatively affects the performance of these local governments in carrying out their constitutional responsibilities. The introduction of state joint local government account has reduced the power of financial autonomy and strength to advanced sustainable development at the grassroots. In some instances, joint account is used to compel local government to engage in joint project(s) with little or no relevance to the citizens within the local government or projects that is outside the immediate needs of that locality.

Wada and Aminu (2019) opine that state and local government joint account allocation committee coupled with much supervision of various ministries and agencies have made the financial autonomy of local government a mirage. There has been high level of negative perception of financial management in local governments. This at time, due to inadequate internal control system to checkmate the excessive fraudulent activities on revenue collections and insertion of ghost employees' names in the local government payroll system, this has resulted in loss and leakages of funds which is tailored towards mismanagement and corruption pertaining to local government administrations. This has resulted into local government failure in its responsibility of meeting citizens' demands in the provision of public goods and services.

Local Government needs to plan to ensure that enough financial resources are available at all time in order to meet the needs of the Local Government expenditure in achieving the set goals and objectives. Good financial management enhances an effective management and functioning of local government administration. Financial management are beneficial to the local government when financial resources are properly planned and executed in the best interest of the citizens. Finance is very important to any organization whether private or public sector as all expenditures in various departments either capital or recurrent rest on the availability of required financial resources.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Sustainable Development Theory was adopted as the theoretical framework for this research. As a theory, sustainable development was popularized in 1987 by the Brundtland. Development refers to man's progressive qualitative and continued improvement of human labour (Chukwuemeka, 2021). Development is needed not only to enable citizens have higher standards of living and material advancement, but to achieve socio-economic and political transformation as well as attain technological feats over the environment (Igbokwe-Ibeto, 2020). Yet, development have been viewed as "multi-dimensional, referring to positive changes which affect the majority and which lie in the social, economic, political and cultural spheres of societal life. Rudeback (1997) noted that development is about the people, beginning from the grassroots where majority of Nigerians live. It is the ability of a people to use their cultural values over a period of time to change their situation whereby each new stage is better than the preceding one. Development involves a departure from the past to the new situation, which is reflected in the economic, social, educational and political aspects of a nation.

Sustainable development is seen as development that meets our present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (UNDP, 2009). Anazodo, Igbokwe-Ibeto, Osawe & Nkah (2020), posit that sustainable development can only make sense to people when they are involved in the process of decision making through a Bottom-top approach. Popular participation is seen here as the active involvement of the people in a process of setting goals and making decisions about involvement in the process not just the acceptability of end results which satisfies the need to participate (Ake, 2018). This view on popular participation aligns with the democratic principles of freedom, equality, consent and liberty. Several theoretical approaches can be useful when applied to local government administration and sustainable development.

The Basic Need Approach (BNA) which is one of several centres on the essential needs of the people at the grassroots'. Yet, it may not be far-reaching enough because it merely scratches the surface of the existing development objectives and processes. The exigential social conditions of the people at the local government level call for expansion of this approach to enable it to tackle local level challenges. The BNA approach to local government administration should be conceptualized to make the basic needs package more heuristic to retrieve and release the "creative energies and potentials of the rural dwellers held down and crippled by centuries of degrading oppression and servitude" (Alermike & Olumodeji, 2020).

The sustainable development theory is centered on sustainability of resources for today and tomorrow use, and considers the environment as the principal issue to protect in the process of utilizing the resources. This prompts Wilson (2011) to state that sustainable development has become a key issue in socio-economic development and environmental resources management of local government system. Sustainability no doubt is the goal of the mankind to ensure that there is a balance between resource consumption and continuity in the ecosystem (Shaker, 2015). Barber (2017) stated that the basic concerns in sustainable development are the concern on basic needs considering the poor; and the concern that real development cannot be achieved without bringing into consideration the environmental, social and cultural values of the people, particularly the rural people. The sustainability of rural development greatly depends on the freedom of the local authority to adequately maximize efforts geared toward improving the living conditions of the people in the rural areas.

In applying the sustainable development theory to the analysis of local government autonomy and rural development, we must first look at what is sustainable. The choice of sustainable development theory is to address the needed rural development that will improve the social and economic condition of the rural people and their environment for today and tomorrow, which can be obtainable through the operation of autonomous local government system in Nigeria. The rural areas are characterize with poverty and development challenges arising from perceive neglect and deprivation of the powers of local government to function effectively, hence, local government autonomy is discussed as strategy to strengthen the local government for better functioning and effective rural sustainable development in Nigeria. This implies that the use of local government to improve the socio-economic life of the rural people without compromising the future of the rural people. The study argues that sustainable rural development is achievable through the application of political, financial, and administrative autonomy of the local governments in Nigeria.

RESEARCH METHOD

Data were sourced from both primary and secondary methods. The primary sources include the use of a structured questionnaire and in-depth-interview which were given to the respondents in the selected local governments in Delta South Senatorial District. The respondents were made to understand that, they are contributing to knowledge through their participation while the secondary sources of data collections includes : Publications, Seminar papers, Journals, Textbooks, Internet and Library which authors consulted and cited were adequately referenced. The research questions and hypotheses formed the basis for data analysis. The descriptive statistics to be used includes Mean, Standard deviation, Simple percentage count. This was used to analyze the demographic characteristics of the respondents while the Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) Statistical tool was used to test the hypotheses stated in this study.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Hypothesis1: There is no significant relationship between local government autonomy and socio-economic Development of Rural Areas in Delta South Senatorial Districts.

Table 1: Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) Summary Table of relationship between Local Government Autonomy and Socio-economic Development of Rural Areas.

DISAGREE (y)	AGREE (x)	Df	r-cal.	r-crit.	Alpha Level	Decision
61	250	3	-1	0.88	0.05	Significant
31	280					
101	210					
21	290					
81	230					

From the calculation above, the value of $r(-1)$ is negative number, which indicates negative correlation of relationship strength, and the r -cal value is not between -0.88 and $+0.88$. This means that the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant relationship between local government autonomy and the socio-economic Development of Rural Areas is rejected. This implies that there is significant relationship between local government autonomy and socio-economic Development of Rural Areas in Delta South Senatorial districts.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between local government autonomy and the Challenges of rural development in Delta South Senatorial Districts.

Table 4.9: Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) Summary Table of relationship between local government autonomy and the challenges of rural development

DISAGREE (y)	AGREE (x)	Df	r-cal.	r-crit.	Alpha Level	Decision
11	300	3	-1	0.88	0.05	Significant
111	200					
111	200					
91	200					
11	300					

From the calculation above, the value of $r(-1)$ is negative number, which indicates negative correlation of relationship strength, and the r -cal value is not between -0.88 and $+0.88$. This means that the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant relationship between local government autonomy and the challenges of rural development in Delta South Senatorial Districts is rejected. This implies that there is a significant relationship between local government autonomy and the challenges of rural development in Delta South Senatorial districts..

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study showed that, there is a significant relationship between the effects of local government financial autonomy and development of rural areas. This finding is in agreement with the study of Angahar (2019) who stated that, local government financial autonomy is seen as the freedom of delivery public goods and services at the local level or grassroots with the aim of improving the standards of living of the people. Also on the account of Imhanlahimi (2020), who avers that local governments are largely empowered to exercise authority freely within the confines of the law. This is to enable them discharge legally or constitutionally their assigned responsibilities, satisfactorily without undue interference from both the federal and state governments.

The findings of this study revealed that, there is a significant relationship between State-Local government joint financial relations and development of rural areas. This finding is in corroboration with the provision of the 1999 constitutions of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, section 162 (5) which provide that there shall be inter-alia, stating that the amount standing to the credit of local government councils in the Federal Account shall also be allocated to the state for the benefit of their local government councils on such terms and in such manner as may be prescribed by the National Assembly. Sub-section (6) also agree with this finding that, each state shall maintain a specific account to be call State Joint Local government Account into which shall be paid all allocations to the local government councils of the state from Federation Account and from the government of the State. This finding is also in agreement with the study of Ogunna (2019), who stated that, due to the persisted problems and challenges of inadequate revenue generation to the local government, the federal government has been reviewing the revenue grant to the third tier of governments since 1973 to date.

The findings of this study showed that, there is significant relationship between sources of local government revenue and development of rural areas. This findings are in agreement with the study of Alo (2017), who stated that there are two major sources of local government finance in Nigeria, namely: internal and external sources of revenue generation. Anifowose and Enemu (2019) also agreement with this findings that, the level of internally generated revenue by each local government depend on the size of such local government areas

CONCLUSION

Freedom is a fundamental issue in human existence and all societies, organization and government. Local government as a third tier of government recognized by law must be given the financial freedom and independence to conduct and operate on its own within the limit of the law and external control. The National Assembly as a matter of public importance and for development purposes urgently needs to review the provision of the constitution establishing the state- local government joints account which has no direct bearing to the lives of the people so that the interference and manipulative tendencies of the state governors would be avoided to allow the local government performance effectively and efficiently.

The study therefore concludes that the challenges of local government being an enviable institution for democratic participation, an effective and efficient system for socio-economic development of the grass root and accountable among others are attitudinal and institutional. These challenges are not insurmountable given the sincerity of purpose on the part of the Federal and State government to genuinely allow the spirit of the 1999 Constitution to work by curbing overbearing attitude of the State government, minimize corruption and make the system accountable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends the following:

- i. Local government should be given the needed freedom both financially, political and administratively to organized, coordinate its affairs for rural development.
- ii. The immunity granted to governors in the Constitution has significantly been abused and the study recommends a constitutional amendment to withdraw it. Governors should be made accountable while still in office and this may checkmate their excesses. The current arrangement while governors are prosecuted after leaving the office amounts to medicine after death as the damage had already been done and the judicial system is equally challenged.
- iii. Joint Allocation Account should be scrapped by allowing Local Government to have direct access to their statutory allocation. In addition, the state governments should hand off from constitutional internally revenue sources of Local Governments as practiced in US, Britain and France
- iv. The oversight function of the State Assemblies, Office of the Auditor General of Local Government among others should be strengthened to checkmate corrupt practices. Such arrangement might be view as a form of intervention but it is required to ensure compliance with Financial Instructions.
- v. Institutional mechanisms to punish corrupt public officials should be strengthened rather than the current arrangement of plea bargaining leaving corrupt to thrive.

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