

Local Government Autonomy as a Strategy for Socio-Economic Development of Rural Communities in Nigeria

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Abstract. The main thrust of this paper is to explain local government autonomy as a strategy for effective rural development in Nigeria. The study sees local government as the government with basic responsibility of transforming the rural communities in Nigeria. Although the local government is found wanting due to the meddling of other tiers of government on its activities, hence, the desirability for local government autonomy for its effective functioning. The study used primary and secondary data to achieve its objective. 400 copies of the questionnaires were administered to two local governments each of the four selected states in Nigeria. 390 copies of the questionnaires were retrieved without error and used for the study. The data were presented in tabular and percentage frequency. Sustainable development theory was adopted as the theoretical framework to discuss the relevance of durable socio economic development of the rural people and the areas without compromising the future of the rural people. The findings indicates that political, financial and administrative autonomy of the 774 local governments is needed to enable the local governments achieve its objective for effective and durable rural communities' development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Local government autonomy, socio economic development , rural community, rural development, sustainable development .

1. Introduction

The importance of local government autonomy in Nigeria is predicated on its justification for socio economic development of the rural areas, culminating to socio economic development in Nigeria. As a tier of government in a federating state, it is basically created with the principal aim of improving the living standard of the rural people and transforming the rural areas in Nigeria. This drive motivates Jamo (2018) to see local government as a government fundamentally established to bring service to the rural areas and governance closer to the rural people in Nigeria. It is a government needed by all due to its relevance in the development of the people and their rural communities. According to Ahamba (2017) "local government is something that we need in this country, if we really say democracy is government of the people, by the people and for the people" The local government is needed to provide the platform for democratic participation of the rural people and creating the enabling ground for choosing who governs them through necessary political process in Nigeria.

The good thing in Nigeria is that every citizen is from a local government and is residing in a local government including foreign nationals, and the local government becomes the nearest and easily accessible government to the people, with the powers to provide the needed basic facilities for survival. Mgbachi, Ebiziem & Obi (2014) explained local government within the context of a political subdivision of a state

established by law with necessary powers to control the affairs of the local people and providing necessary opportunities for their development. This explanation is amplified by FGN (1976) as it states that local government is a government at local levels empower by law to exercise specific powers in a define area. The law empowers the local government with statutory powers to function within its jurisdiction, with the cardinal objective of developing the rural people and areas in Nigeria.

The British government laid the foundation for Nigerian local government and modelled it after the British Whitehall Model, with the design to administer and development the local areas. In 1950, the Eastern region local government ordinance of 1950 was established to allow the Eastern region administer its local people; the Western region local government law of 1952; and Native Authority law of 1954 allowing the Northern Nigerian to administer its people. These wide range of laws were reforms to empower the regions to operate effectively and socio economically develop the rural areas during the colonial period. Upon political independence in 1960, the local government enjoyed more reforms with powers to function autonomously as a tier of government in Nigeria. In 1967, the concept of native authority was replaced with a new one – local government. Significantly, this reform reduced the powers of the traditional rulers on the local government and positioned it for autonomous operations (Okoni, 2016). In 1976, the local government was formally recognized a third tier of government in Nigeria, with basic powers to function, thereby creating more opportunities autonomous powers for the government. The 1979, 1989, and 1999 constitutions of the Federal Republic of Nigeria recognized local government as the third tier of government with autonomous powers to function in the federating state. Ever since, it has been one reform or the other to enable the local government attain its height of efficiency in rural development. Similarly, Wilson (2013) states that the local government system has undergone several reforms in its structure, personnel, finances and operational focus in Nigeria, all aimed at

empowering the local government as an autonomous and functional government.

Financially, the local government was provided with powers to generate its funds internally and to statutorily receive certain percentage of the funds from the federation allocation on monthly basis. The funding from federation allocation to the local government was 10% of the total federation allocation in 1989, improved to 15% in 1992; and 20.60% in 2008 till date. This is aimed at empowering the local government financially to function effectively and autonomously for rural development. Structurally and service wise, the 1988 reforms brought civil service reforms to the local government service with relevant departments and personnel to carry out its service objectives to the people with the aim of improving rural development.

Notwithstanding the numerous administrative, financial, structural and legal reforms enjoined by the local government system in Nigeria to attain autonomous status for effective socio economic development of the rural communities, it appears the local government still suffer undue control by other tiers of government in Nigeria, resulting to inability of the local government to attain its development objectives on transformation of the rural areas. Such unwarranted control and deprivation of autonomous powers are noted in financial control by the state government, administrative and political control by the state house of assembly, and service control by the state owned local government service commission through the making and implementing human resource management policies for the local government service among others. This places the local government as mere documented tier of government without adequate operational powers to control its affairs, thereby leading to inability of the local government to adequately achieve its development objectives for the rural areas. Similarly, Akpan & Ekanem (2013) hold that the inability of the local government to function autonomously in Nigerian federating state accounts for the local government poor performance in its socio-economic development agenda for the rural areas and the people therein.

Then, if local government must function effectively and achieve long term development for the rural areas as its prime objective, the local government in Nigeria must exercise autonomy in its powers and operation in political and administrative activities, financial, structural and policy making and implantation procedure. It is therefore the thrust of this study to prosecute local government autonomy as a desired strategy for the local government effectiveness in socio economic development of the rural people and areas in Nigeria.

1.2 Research Questions

In view of the issues raised above, our study presents the following research questions to guide the study:

- Could financial autonomy of the local governments be a strategy for effective socioeconomic development of rural communities in Nigeria?
- Will political and administrative autonomy of the local governments have significant impacts on socio-economic development of rural communities in Nigeria?

1.3 Research Objective

This study is basically aimed at examining political, administrative, financial and service autonomy of the local governments as strategies for effective socio economic development of rural communities in Nigeria.

2. Conceptual Discourse

2.1 Local Government Autonomy in Nigeria.

The quest for local government autonomy in Nigeria dates back to the colonial era, when during the intensive demand for the development of the rural people, and subsequent desire of the colonial master to strengthen federalism leading to creation of the regional governments with powers and authority to develop the rural areas. Ever since, the local government system has received several reforms aimed at supporting the functions and powers of

the local governments in Nigeria (Wilson, 2013). Among other reforms, the 1976 reforms clearly and formally identified the local governments as the third tier of government in Nigeria, and today Nigeria has 774 local governments with the main objective of bringing government closer the people and developing the rural areas and people therein. In his view, Okoli (2009) stated that the development of local government autonomy in Nigerian local government system started in 1984, when Dansuki report was adopted to address issues of freedom in the finances and administrative functions of the local governments. Nwachuku (2000) sees local government autonomy as the degree of freedom, authority and powers or command which a local authority can exercise in the management of its own affairs without interference of the state or federal government. The above explains local government autonomy from the perspective of degree of freedom of local government in making and implementing policy decisions concerning its affairs. The local government desire freedom in the management of its programmes and projects without recourse to other tiers of government. Agunyai, Ebirim & Odeyemi (2013) opined that local government autonomy connotes the power of freedom to the local government to exercise its authority within the confine of the law or constitution. The scholars further argued that autonomy of the local government is subject to the provisions of the law or constitution. However, the scholars could not explain which law or constitution should the local government derive its powers. Is it the law or constitution of the state government or federal republic of Nigeria. This gap leaves both scholars and practitioners of local government administration with unclear operational direction on local government autonomy in Nigeria. Uketor (2009):339) states that local government autonomy implies the degree of power accorded the third tier of government with regard to legal, administrative and financial independence within the limit of the constitution. The autonomy becomes imperative in such areas as legal, administrative and financial operations if the local governments in Nigeria must function.

On the contrary, Akpan & Ekanem (2013) argues that the law or constitution where the local government ought derive its autonomy is practically strangulating the local government and depriving its autonomy. This is demonstrated in section 7 of the 1999 constitution, which empowers the State House of Assembly to legislate on administrative policies and operations of the local government areas within the state. Also, section 162 of the 1999 constitution empowers the existence of state and local government Joint Account and Allocation Committee (JAAC), under which cover, the state government operate to control and exploit local government finances leading to loss financial and administrative autonomy. However, several attempts by the National Assembly to amend the relevant sections of the 1999 to enhance local government autonomy have met brick wall.

In his view, Ogunna (2014:45) identified local government autonomy from two perspectives namely, “the resources available to local government as a determinant of its autonomy ; and ability to have control over these resources in terms of legal, political and administrative powers to harness and apply the said resources”. The capacity of available resources at the disposal of the local government and its ability to control same for the socio-economic development of the rural areas determine its autonomy. On that vein, Ebiziem & Obi (2015) corroborated with the above view, as they see financial autonomy as the basis for local government autonomy in Nigeria. The scholars further noted that as attempt to achieve financial autonomy for local government, the federal government increased the financial allocations to local government from 10% in 1986 to 15% in 1992 and 20.60% in 2008 till date. This argument is inadequate as it could not acknowledge relevance of other sectors such as the administrative, political and legal autonomy in development of the rural areas.

In another perspective, Akpan & Ekanem (2013) opined that various reforms carried out in local government were aimed at granting the local governments its needed autonomy in Nigeria for effective functioning, as observed in the 1976 reforms, the provisions 1979, 1989 and

1999 constitutions. However, Akindele, Olaopa & Obi (2002), Ammani (2012), and Jamo (2018) argued that the various reforms and provisions of the constitutions were inadequate to achieve effective local government in Nigeria, as the Local Government still suffers unnecessary interference from other tiers of the government, thereby creating administrative, political and financial setback for the local governments. Awofeso (2004) supports the above view and opined that despite the efforts made by previous administrations, the local governments still remain non-autonomous in practical terms. President Buhari Mohammed in Jamo (2018) attribute the failure of local government in development of the rural areas to non-operational autonomy of the local government, thereby giving opportunity for unwarranted state government interference on local government affairs, leading to poor performance of the local government in rural development in Nigeria. Then, local government autonomy is needed for effective rural development in Nigeria.

3. Theoretical Discourse

Sustainable development theory is adopted as the theoretical framework for this research. As a theory, sustainable development was popularized in 1987 by the Bruntland Commission of United Nations in its report tagged “Our Common Future”. According to United Nations (1987:43) sustainable development implies “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs”. The 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 the society. 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). Barbier (1987) 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 choice of sustainable development theory is to address the needed rural development that will improve the social and economic condition of living 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 and effective functioning for effective rural sustainable development in Nigeria. This implies 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 774 local governments in Nigeria.

4. Study Methodology

The study is on local government autonomy and socio economic development of the rural communities in Nigeria. Primary and secondary data were collected to achieve the objective of the study. The primary data were collected from questionnaire items and interview on the subject matter. We used sixteen (16) questionnaire items and administered 400 copies of the questionnaire to two (2) local governments each of the four (4) selected states, namely, Rivers, Bayelsa, Abia and Enugu States. A total of three hundred and ninety (390) copies of the questionnaire were retrieved successfully without error and used for the study. The questionnaire was divided into 3 sections. Section 1 contains the questionnaire distributions figure, section 2 and 3 have 16 items on local government autonomy and socio economic development of the rural communities in Nigeria. The respondents’ responses were presented and analysed in a tabular and percentage frequency in tables 2 and 3. The secondary data were collected from documented evidence on the subject matter and content analysis used as a tool to analyse the data.

5. Data Presentation and Discussion of Findings

Table 1: Questionnaire Distribution

S/N	4 selected states	2 selected Local Governments	Number of Questionnaire Administered	Number of Questionnaire retrieved without error.
1	Rivers	Obio/Akpo LGA, & Eleme LGA	100 Copies	98 copies
2	Bayelsa	Odi LGA, & Kaiyama LGA	100 copies	96 copies
3	Enugu	Nsukka LGA, & Udenu LGA	100 copies	100 copies
4	Abia	Ukwa West LGA, & Ukwa East LGA	100 copies	98 copies
TOTAL			400 copies	390 copies

Source: Field Work, 2018

Table 1 above proves that the research selected and sampled four states with two local governments each, and 100 copies of the questionnaires were evenly administered, totaling 400 copies. Although the total number retrieved varied. 98 copies were retrieved from Rivers, 96 copies from Bayelsa, 100 copies from Enugu, and 98 copies from Abia State, totaling 390 copies successfully retrieved and validly used for the study.

Research Question 1: Could financial autonomy of the local governments be a strategy for effective socio economic development of rural communities in Nigeria?

To answer research question 1, data were generated from the respondents’ responses on the subject matter of local government financial autonomy and socio economic development of rural communities in Nigeria.

Table 2: Respondents’ Perceptions on local governments’ financial autonomy and socio economic development of rural communities in Nigeria.

S/N	Local governments’ financial autonomy and socio economic development of rural areas in Nigeria	Frequency of Responses	Percentage of Responses
1	Scrapping of JAAC and direct funding of local government from federation account	70	17.9%
2	Return of local government internally generated revenue sources back to local governments	55	14.2%
3	Stoppage of illegal deductions and diversion of local government funds to other agencies	60	15.4%
4	Mobilisation of local government funds for empowerment and rural development	50	12.8%
5	Joint projects involving local government and other tiers of government to be clearly defined on terms of funding.	52	13.3%
6	Local governments representatives’ in FAAC	58	14.9%
7	The financial operations of the local governments to be determined by local government laws inline with the constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria	45	11.5%
	TOTAL	390	100%

Source: Field Work, 2018

Table 2 above has seven (7) questionnaire items on the subject matter, and were noted on account of the frequency of the respondents’ responses with different degree of percentages on each as discussed below.

Scrapping of JAAC and direct funding of local governments’ from federation account has 17.9% of the total respondents’ responses on the subject matter, indicating that the operation of JAAC should be stopped and local government funded directly from the federation accounts as a means of achieving local government autonomy to enhance the local government financial capability to carry out rural development activities for today and tomorrow in Nigeria.

Return of local government internally generated revenue (IGR) sources back to local governments’ accounts for 14.2% of the responses on the subject matter. This response is due the fact that the state governments have hijacked the internally generated revenue sources of local governments within its domain, thereby starving the local governments of funds to develop the rural areas. When the IGR is returned, it marks local government financial autonomy to enhance its revenue base for development projects.

Stoppage of illegal deductions and diversion of local government funds to other agencies has 15.4% of the total respondents’ responses on the matter, proving that there are several illegal deductions made by the state government from local government funds through JAAC. These deductions are made on directive of the governor in favour of the ruling political party and other agencies, and sometimes to attend to some state projects. The study shows that such deductions do not prove that local is in control of its fund and therefore is undemocratic; hence its stoppage becomes a means of improving local government funds for rural development.

Mobilization of local government funds for empowerment and rural development has 12.8% of the total respondents’ responses on the subject matter, showing that most of local government funds are mobilized by other tires of government for non-empowerment and rural development purpose due to non-financial autonomy of the local government, and when the reverse is achieved, local government funds would be adequately used for the empowerment of the rural people and development of the areas.

Joint projects involving local government and other tiers of government to be clearly defined on terms of funding, accounts for 13.3% of the responses and proves that in some joint projects involving the local government and other tiers, particularly, the state government, the local government funds is used to fund the entire project in name of joint project, thereby depriving local governments the needed funds for rural development in such state. Hence, autonomy will address this inadequacy.

Local governments representatives' in FAAC has 14.9% of the responses, which implies that as means to achieve local government financial autonomy, the local governments in Nigeria need to have representatives in the federation allocation and accounts committee (FAAC) to argue for adequate funding of local governments for socio economic development of the rural communities.

The financial operations of the local governments to be determined by local government laws in line with the constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria has 11.5% of the total responses on the subject matter, proving that the local governments in Nigeria needs financial autonomy through relevant laws to be contained in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. This will enhance local government capacity to operate financial systems that will grantee its achievement of the desired rural development capacity in Nigeria.

In view of the above respondents' perceptions on financial autonomy and socio economic development of the rural areas, it is obvious that financial autonomy is a significant strategy in achievement of effective rural development in Nigeria.

Research Question 2. Will political and administrative autonomy of the local governments have significant impact on socio-economic development of the rural communities in Nigeria?

Table 3: Respondents' Perceptions on political and administrative autonomy of local governments and its impact on socio-economic development in Nigeria.

S/N	Political and administrative autonomy of local governments and its impact on socio-economic development in Nigeria	Frequency of Responses	Percentage of Responses
1	Establish a reform local government service commission to be controlled by the council of local governments of the state.	46	11.5%
2	Non-interference of other tiers of government on administrative, development and political activities of the local government	43	11.1%
3	Local government workers to enjoy the same service status and autonomy like their counterparts in other tiers of government.	52	13.3%
4	The administrative structure and powers of the local government to be defined and determined only by the constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria.	45	11.5%
5	Appointment, promotion, posting and retirement of staff to be carried out by the reform local government service commission	40	10.3%
7	Local governments to be headed by only democratically elected chairmen on defined tenure established by the constitution of Nigeria	34	8.7%
8	Elected chairmen of local governments to be included in membership of the Council of State.	38	9.7%
9	The federal electoral agency to conduct all elections of the political functionaries in the local governments	50	12.8%
	TOTAL	390	100%

Source: Field Work , 2018

The table 3 above presents nine (9) questionnaire items on political and administrative autonomy of local governments and its impact on socio-economic development

in Nigeria. The respondents' responses were noted based on the frequency of responses and degree of percentages on each response as stated below.

The item on establish of a reform local government service commission to be controlled by the council of local governments of the state has 11.5%, indicating that as a strategy for effective local government autonomy in Nigeria, there is need for an independent local government service commission. Such commission should be appointed and controlled by the local government governments to management human resource policies of the councils. This strategy will improve the local government staff capacity for service delivery on rural development.

Non-interference of other tiers of government on administrative, development and political activities of the local government has 11.1% of the total responses on the matter, proving that local government autonomy requires non-interference from both state and federal government on internal programmes and activities of the local governments. This non-interference will strengthen the local government to concentrate on its objective of durable rural development.

Local government workers to enjoy the same service status and autonomy like their counterparts in other tiers of government has 13.3% of the responses. This proves that currently, there is disparity in condition of service between the federal, state and local government workers in terms of benefits and jobs security. Local government autonomy will bring to an end to this disparity, insecurity and undue control to enable the local government be productive in their service to the rural people.

The administrative structure and powers of the local government to be defined and determined only by the constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria has 11.5% of the total responses. It shows that the local government autonomy demands that the constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria should define the powers and functions of the local government and withdraw the powers of the state government from making laws for the local government to enable the local government exercise its powers on effective development of the rural areas.

Appointment, promotion, posting and retirement of staff to be carried out by the reform local government service commission has 10.3% of the responses representing the fact that effective local government autonomy requires that the appointment, promotion, posting and retirement of local government staff should be sole responsibility of the commission under the control of the local governments and not the state government. This will enhance effective human resource management of local government workers and better productivity in rural development.

Local governments to be headed by only democratically elected chairmen on defined tenure established by the constitution of Nigeria accounts for 8.7% of the responses on the subject matter. This means that autonomy requires only elected chairmen and councilors to administer the affairs of the councils, and their tenure to be defined by the constitution of Nigeria only. This will enable the political leadership of the council to function on define uninterrupted tenure and concentrate on delivering its mandate on development of the rural areas.

Elected chairmen of local governments to be included in membership of the Council of States has 9.7% of the responses. This implies that the autonomy requires the inclusion of the local government chairmen at least on representative capacity in the council of state to decide on vital development issues concerning the country. The inclusion of the council chairmen in the council of states will enhance local government autonomous status of agitating for more powers and empowerment for the development ifs areas. The federal electoral agency to conduct all elections of the political functionaries in the local governments accounts for 12.8% of the total respondents response on the subject matter, and indicates that as a requirement for local government autonomy, all elections for political offices in the local government must be conducted by the federal electoral body to ensure equity and fairness in the electoral process. This will stop the state government from manipulating the electoral system through it electoral agency to its favour based on the

interest of the ruling political party in the state. This independence in electoral system will give opportunity to all parties to contest freely and a more credible candidate to emerge for effective administrative capacity in the area, leading to effective rural development in the communities.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is imperative to state that local government autonomy is eminent for effective rural development in Nigeria, hence the need for financial, political and administrative autonomy of the local government. The quest for local government autonomy is consequent upon the perceived inadequacies in local government financial resources and management, poor human resource management policies and practice, ineffective programme and project management, and inadequate powers to carry out its functions in transformation of the rural areas. These challenges identified the current local government as a tier of government without adequate powers to achieve its objective, and therefore, it is characterized as dependent government on other tiers to function. As a tier of government, the local government ought to be a partner to other tiers and not to be dependent on other tiers for its operations. It is worthy to note that the desirability for local government autonomy cannot be overemphasized as a strategy to empower local government to carry out its functions effectively for rural development in Nigeria.

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