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## Local Government Administration and Grassroots Development in Nigeria: A Theoretical Appraisal.

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### **Abstract**

*Since 1976 when the Local Government reform took place to the twenty-first century, there has been some monumental transformations and changes. Apart from being the third tier of government, it has expanded exponentially to become an indispensable institution for expanding the democratic space at the grassroots level. Regrettably, for more than four decades, nothing significant has happened, especially in serving as a training ground for budding politicians, and attracting development at the grassroots. The aftermath is that local government administration has become a patrimony in the hands of the ruling class. In fact they have become a seamless appendage of the State Governments. The consequence of this is the absence of governance at the local level. This paper seeks to make a theoretical appraisal of local government administration and how it has provoked grassroots development in Nigeria. In carry out this task, we relied on two sources for data collection. These are the primary and secondary sources. The secondary sources include literature review, newspapers, magazines, official bulletin and gazettes. The primary sources include personal interview and discussions. It was discovered that the objective of the 1976 Local Government Reform has become a mirage. The ruling class now sees it as a patrimony to satisfy political allies and cronies through the award of contracts and political appointment. We, therefore, recommend that the Local Government should be development – oriented through the application of democratic etiquette and good governance.*

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**Keywords:** *Local Government, Administration, Grassroots, Development, Patrimony*

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### **Introduction**

Nigeria is destined to play a dominant role in the global village. This is predicated on its cultural diversity, human capital and unique geographical features. The country's coastal line stretches across a space of over 700 kilometres, while the coastal line to the Northern limits cover a distance of about 1,040 kilometers (Otite, 2000:1). With a rich land mass of over 98.321 million hectares of which 74,036 million hectares are arable (Akani, 2015:1), and an abundance of oil and gas such as 36 billion barrels of oil reserve and 187 trillion cubic feet of natural gas (Akani, 2015:1). It is against this background that Nigeria is seen as a behemoth and the fountain head of Africa's liberation.

There are about 36 states and 774 local government councils created to enlist the participation of the communities in development process and deepen democratic frontiers. Unfortunately, successive rulers have not appropriated these features to encourage a common Nigerian nationality and collective feeling. Most regrettable is that the defective pattern of governance has alienated those at the grassroots, thus denying a good number of Nigerians the benefit of development. The aftermath is that as the country continues to become a political juvenile and economic midget, its macroeconomic paradigm continues to reinforce penury, poverty and

despair at the local level. Okolie (2015) noted that 64% of Nigerians live on \$1.25 per day and 83.9% on \$2 per day. From 1980 to 2010, the proportion of Nigerians living in poverty increased from 27.2% to 69.0% respectively; while more than 112.47 million Nigerians are living in poverty, the North-West of Nigeria has the highest incidence of poverty of 70.4% in 2010 (Okolie, 2015:108).

With the current economic recession in the country, making a dollar the equivalent of over ₦400 and inflation almost 17%, it is likely that many more people will fall below the breadline level. This is exacerbated by the fierce character of political struggle that stifle with impunity all democratic norms and increase popular nauseating against politics at all levels. As service to the people is brazenly abandoned, allegiance to the masses has become anachronistic, and grassroots democracy almost seen as a utopia. It is against this backdrop that Ake (1996) stated that the root of the country's development crisis can be laid on the doorstep of politics.

*We are never going to understand the current crisis in Africa (Nigeria) much less contain it as long as we continue to think of it as an economic crisis. What is before us now is primarily a political crisis, its economic consequences are serious as we know only too well but they are nonetheless incidental. Not only is the crisis ostensibly political in character, it is also political in origin (Ake, 1987:1).*

As the Nigerian state has found itself in a hapless, prostrate, and privatized condition, the rural communities have been consigned to perennial hardship and exploitation. It becomes difficult how local government administration can fulfil its statutory commitment to the people. This paper therefore, is aimed at a theoretical appraisal of local government administration in Nigeria.

### **Conceptual Framework**

A comprehensive understanding of this paper may be abstruse without an explanation of the basic concepts involved. These include Local Government (LG), Administration and Grassroots Development. LG expresses governance at the primary level of society. It takes for granted the existence of a central or higher level that may not capture and cater for all the basic needs within a polity. LG becomes a device to extend the frontiers and processes of government to the people who may not feel the impact of the centre. It is a political authority which is purposely created by law or constitution for local communities by which they manage their public affairs within the limits of the law (Odion-Akhaine, 2009:27).

Ola and Tonwe (2005:2) defined it as a sphere of government within which local bodies are legally permitted to adopt variations in administration. As the United Nations Division of Public Administration puts it, it is purely,

*A political subdivision of a nation (or in a federal system, a state) which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local affairs including powers to impose taxes or exact labour for prescribed purposes. The governing body for such an entity is elected or otherwise locally selected (Odion-Akhaine, 2009:287).*

A careful look at all the definitions would reveal some fundamental characteristics of LG. These include:

1. It is created by a statute.

Section 7 of the 1999 Nigerian constitution as amended specifically stated that:

*The system of local government by democratically elected 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 function of such councils.*

2. Specified powers and functions as in the fourth schedule of the 1999 constitution as amended.

3. It has a defined territory.

4. Addressing problems that are peculiar to local communities.

Since they address problems at the lower level, their role in the development project, deepening democratic ethic and evoking patriotic zeal cannot be overemphasized. In fact, they constitute the building blocks on which the entire political structure is built. Apart from exposing the extent of welfare commitment of a State to its citizens, Kapur (2006:698) stated that it is the best school of citizenship, reduces unnecessary red-tapism, increases a sense of neighbourhood and a consciousness of common purposes and common needs (Chand, 2006:694). Administration is an essential component of every human endeavour. This is because it constitutes the cornerstone of every success story. Indeed,

*if our civilization breaks down, it will be mainly a breakdown of administration, and the future of civilized government, and even of civilization itself, rests upon our ability to develop a science and philosophy and practice of administration competent to discharge the public functions of civilized society (Adebayo, 1984:2).*

Administration, therefore, is the organization and division of powers in order to accomplish a specified end (Adebayo, 1984:1). It is a process geared towards the accomplishment of a given goal, in an organized and systematic manner. It is not a fortuitous event or a happenstance in an aimless voyage or based on the behest and whims of a boss. The distinguishing factor is that it is an organized and systematic process that aims at the best possible practice. Local government administration can therefore, be defined as a body created by law to govern the local communities through an organized and systematic process to achieve the goal of grassroots development. This is why we often hear of the local government system.

Grassroots refer to the lowest part of an echelon. It is the basic and essential part of an entity. Within this context, it connotes the minute section of a polity that is rural, possessing village characteristics, and considered the fundamental and primary source of the State. Essentially, development is improving the conditions of life, measured in terms of the seize of the economy, as the Gross National Product (GNP) that is, the value of the total final output of goods and services produced by an economy (Peek and Hartwick, 1999:4). By the late 1950s and early 1960s, measurement of development through economic growth received a dethronement. It is now a process of human empowerment and enhancing the quality of human wellbeing. It is basically a human-issue, human-cantered, and the capacity of the individuals to realize their inherent potentials, and effectively cope with the changing circumstances of their lives (Okolie, 2015:13-14).

*Just as grassroots democracy encourages political participation at its most expansive and fundamental sense, in a process in which all citizens politically at the rural village, community or town levels participate and are encouraged to participate as fully as possible in the formation and regulation of major decisions and political lives (Onuoha and Fadakinte, 2002:262).*

Grassroots development becomes a process through which the local government extends or initiates development at the rural, village and primary source of society.

### **Development at the Grassroots: An Appraisal.**

Having explained the basic concepts, can we say that there is grassroots development in Nigeria ,through the Local Government Councils? Before an appraisal of development at the grassroots, it would be apposite to briefly look at the emergence of local government administration in Nigeria. LG in Nigeria has passed through three phases in its evolution. The first phase witnessed the Native Authority System. This system was heralded by the Indirect Rule (IR)system. When Britain assumed responsibility of what later became Nigeria after the abrogation of the charter of the Royal Niger Company (RNC) in January 1, 1900, it was confronted with the task of administering a vast territory with few white officials and limited fund. Okonjo (1974:27) stated that after the fall of Kano and Sokoto in 1903, when the whole protectorate (Northern) came under effective control, Lord Frederick Lugard had 231, 248 and 266 civil European officers for 1903-04, 1904-05 and 1905-06, respectively. The alternative to this dilemma was to rule through the native or traditional rulers. This was the background to IR.

*It was a rule through the native chiefs or traditional authorities who are recognized as an integral part of the machinery of government, with well-defined powers and functions recognized by the Government and by law, and not dependent on the caprice of an executive officer (Okafor, 1981:5).*

The functions of these rulers were strictly collection of taxes, settlement of local disputes and maintenance of law and order. They were supervised by the District Officer(D.O) who in turn reported to the Resident of the Province. This was the hierarchical system of Native Administration. While the theoretical basis of the administration was rooted in Lugard (1923) *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, it was legalized through many Ordinances such as the Native Authority Ordinance of 1914, and No. 43 of 1933, Native Court Proclamation of 1900, 1901, 1903, 1906 and 1914, and Native Revenue Ordinance of 1916. In most cases, these laws strengthened the powers of the rulers beyond the bounds and limitations of custom and tradition.

Whitaker (1970:16) declared that:

*Our aim is to rule through the existing chiefs to enlist them on our side in the work and progress of good government (our) is that we may make of these born rulers ...types of British officials working for the good of their subjects in accordance with the ideals of the British Empire.*

Lugard introduced NA in the Northern Protectorate between 1900 to 1913. This was because of the centralized administration introduced by Uthman Dan Fodio. This was after his Jihad of 1804. With the amalgamation of Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914, the system was introduced in the latter between 1916 to 1927. Where there was no central authority, he appointed some chiefs with a warrant to legitimize their functions. Although, the nascent bourgeois class rejected the incorporation of the chiefs into the colonial system, nevertheless, they were recognized as the pivot of local administration. By the early 1950s, a second phase emerged. This was the democratization of NA. With the increase of educated elites and the increasing momentum of nationalist agitation, the regions were given autonomy to manage their own affairs. Membership of the councils was based on electoral struggle. This marked the twilight of the powers of traditional rulers. This was through the promulgation of the Eastern Region Local Government Law of 1950, the West in 1952 and North in 1954. These laws made the chiefs advisory members of the Council and in most cases with no voting right. From 1950s to 1975, each region or state had the power to establish, manage and finance its local administration. Even after the Nigerian civil war of 1967-70, the States created by the military administration adopted a multi-tier system of administration. As a result, such systems as Development Administration, Council Manager, Urban, Country and City Councils became were in vogue. Adedeji and Ayo (2000:7) noted that:

*A fundamental feature of this period was that each region or state carried out the reorganization of its local government system. In the way it deemed fit, since under the Nigerian federal system, local governments were created, abolished and replaced as need, whims and/or caprices dictated.*

Worried by this development, the quarterly Journal of Administration (Vol. III, No. 3) of April 1969 noted in its editorial that:

*No Nigerian institutions are in greater need of review, reform, reorganization and revitalization than those of local government. In regard to few institutions there is a profound contrast between their potential impact and their ineffectiveness (Adedeji and Ayo, 2000:1).*

Perhaps, it was this clarion call to lay a firm foundation for rapid socio-economic development that the Federal Military Government under General Olusegun Obasanjo as he then was embarked on the Local Government National Reform in 1976. The Reform precipitated the third phase in the evolution of LG. Among other things, the Reform which was a historic attempt to make LG more vibrant and amenable to the needs of the local people provided for the recognition of local government as the third tier of government, major part of their fund from the Federation Account, a fixed term of three years for political office holders, creation of local government civil Service commission for the purpose of administering career civil servants in the local government system (Ajieh, 2004:9). A local Government Area to be made of between 150,000 to 180,000 people. According to the then Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters, Brigadier Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, the Federal Government was essentially motivated by the necessity to stabilize and rationalize Government at the local level. He declared that:



*The Federal Military Government has therefore, decided to reorganized local government as the third tier of government activity in the nation. Local Government should do precisely what the word government implies i.e., government at the grassroots or local level (Local Government Reform, 1976).*

From 1976 to the twenty-first century, there has been some innovations, and changes which has affected the composition, structure and functions of LG, especially during the regime of President Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida(1985-1993). From 301 local government areas in 1976, it increased to 549 in 1989, 689 in 1991, and by the time General Sani Abacha died in July 8, 1996, the number was 774. While Section 7(6a-b) stated that:

- (a) Subject to the provisions of this constitution, the National Assembly shall make provisions for the statutory allocation of public revenue to local government councils in the Federation, and,
- (b) The House of Assembly of a state shall make provisions for statutory allocation of public revenue to local government councils within the state.

Section 162(5, 7-8) creates a scenario for what seem to be a financial autonomy of the Local Government Councils. But this lofty intention has been vitiated by the provision of sub-section 6 which states that:

*Each state shall maintain a special account to be called 'State Joint Local Government Account' into which shall be paid all allocations to the local government councils of the state from the Federation Account and from the Government of the State.*

Unfortunately, in spite of the lofty ideals aimed at strengthening the capacity of the local government councils, it has failed to justify its relevance by offering the best opportunity to the people to bring local knowledge, interest and enthusiasm to bear on the solution of their own local problems (Kapur, 2006:692).An examination of the 774 local councils will reveal a cacophonous tune of discontent, misery, abandonment and neglect. This is in spite of the inexplicable sum of money either internally generated or received from the FG. Between January and July 2015, the country earned about \$25.105 billion (₦5,02 trillion) from the sale of oil and gas (Vanguard Newspaper, October 20, 2015), and between June 1999 and May 2007, the three tiers of government shared a total of ₦16.447 trillion (Oyovbaire, 1008:171). The Minister of State for Petroleum, Dr. Ibe Kachukwu revealed that for the past twelve years, \$40 billion had been spent in the Niger Delta Region (NDR) (This Day Newspaper, August 27, 2016). This amount includes those appropriated for Local Government Councils (see table 1).

**Table 1: Money allocated to Local Government Councils in NDR between June 1999 – July 2004.**

State	No. of Local Government Areas	Amount (₦)
Abia	17	26,682,950.51
AkwaiBom	29	47,277,186,964.32
Bayelsa	8	15,835,646,772.05
Cross River	17	32,837,668,422.35
Delta	27	41,070,809,081.62
Edo	18	33,338,577,725.08

Ondo	17	30,086,864.17
Rivers	23	44,295,240,073.53

*Source: Expenditure Department, Federal Ministry of Finance.*

Regrettably, this huge amount could not progressively turn around the fortune of the rural poor. The reason is not farfetched. Politicians have come to see public office as a veritable means of getting access to the commonwealth, which they consider as a patrimony. This perception accounts for the immoderate desire for primitive accumulation, brazen corruption and politics laden with rancour and brutish. In this process of the survival of the mighty, allegiance is paid not to the rural poor, but to the political gladiators and their crowd of hero-worshippers. Blind political loyalty and official deceit have become the accepted norm of the time.

Today, Local Councils are under the firm grip of the States. They are squeezed, strangled and manipulated at the caprices of the Governor through the compromised State House of Assembly. A cursory look at the relationship between the Local Governments and the Governors will reveal that the latter, hiding under section 7 of the constitution amend the Local Government Edict to suit their purpose. This is by using Caretaker Committees to run the Councils, while elections are postponed indefinitely. In some States where elections are organized, the ruling party in the State wins all the positions even in the stronghold of the opposition party. The October 2016 local government election in Ogun State is a case in point. The All Progressive Congress(APC) swiftly won all the elections in the ward. The case of Ogun State is a reflection of the undemocratic governance at the local level, in almost all the 774 Local Government Areas ,and this is largely responsible for their non-performance and inertia. Recently, the Rivers State House of Assembly passed the Local Government Amendment No. 1 Law No. 5, of 2016. This statute gives the Governor the power to appoint chairmen of local government Councils up to nine months. For more than one year ,Local Government in Rivers State has been run through Caretaker Committees made up of mainly party loyalists and political do-gooders. This is not different in most of the States in Nigeria. Since those appointed are party loyalists, sometimes without requisite experience, and not subjected to accountability test the only plausible conclusion is that we shall soon witness an inevitable dead end in grassroots development. Perhaps, this is why most scholars now advocate that local government elections should be run by the Independent Electoral Commission(INEC). This will give a level playing ground to all the contestants. In this scenario of stifling voices of opposition, democratic etiquette is dwarfed, sloganeered and an illusory. It is against this backdrop that Laski (2004:411) warned that:

*We cannot realize the full benefit of democratic government unless we begin by the admission that all problems are not central problems, and that the results of problems are not central in their incidence, require decision at the place, and by the persons, where and whom the incidence is mostly felt.*

The profound corruption in the administration of local government councils has made it difficult for them to pay workers' salaries and allowances. In some cases, the Chairmen report to duty only during allocation time. They hardly report to duty, thus leaving the Councils, scanty and sometimes deserted by the Principal Officers whenever they are not around. Within this period, any community problem that requires immediate attention is allowed to deepen. Their materialistic ethic gradually places them on a highway of unregulated munificence, thus depriving the community of needed financial attention.

Accumulation of wealth on one pole is indeed accumulation of misery, underdevelopment and suffering on the other pole. It is therefore, not stupendous to aver that a local government council of this disposition cannot play the role of efficacious nursery for higher political office, and most importantly become the seedbed of democracy. Kapur (2006) asserted that building democracy from below has its enduring benefits.

*We have got rather the habit of thinking of democracy at the top and not so much below. Democracy at the top may not be a success unless you build on this foundation from below. It is only through local government that self government becomes real. To put it in the words of Bryce, 'the best school of democracy and the best guarantee for its success is the practice of self government' (Kapur, 2006:695).*

Apart from the barefaced political partisanship of Councils, Section 162(6) provides for a State Joint Account. This section gives the State enough elbow room to manipulate the Councils at their behest. In most cases, the exact amount paid into the Joint Account by the FG is not known to the Chairmen, and they are not paid what is due them from the Federation Account. Considering the nature of politics which does not respect the norms of struggle for power, the Chairmen can hardly ask question. They are contented with whatever is given to them, as asking questions may deprive them of the needed resources to be siphoned. After all, their appointment and election were based on the benevolence of the Governor. In the same vein, Section 162(7) provides that:

*The House of Assembly of a state shall make provisions for statutory allocation of public revenue to the local government councils within the state.*

This relevant section of the constitution which should have given enough money to the Councils for grassroots development is flippantly violated. The aftermath is that most communities are allowed to wallow in neglect and backwardness. Even Section 7(3) which empowers the local government Council to participate in economic planning and development is abandoned.

In fact, during our field research, it was discovered that some of the Chairmen hardly read the 1999 constitution as amended, as it concerns them and unaware of the Edict establishing them. To them, it would be a waste of time to embark on such pedantic exercise since they have unlimited access to public property. This is why many people now see local government administration as an all comers affair, where monotony, laxity, inefficiency and red-tapism abound. As far as this status quo remains local government transformation may be a mirage. As the major players continue to *feed fat from this decadence*, grassroots development will be an illusion. Olusegun Obasanjo, former President of Nigeria encapsulated it in this manner; Nigeria is a country perpetually great, but almost permanently in crisis, regularly threatened with disintegration, devoid of democracy, economically plundered and mismanaged, forever talking about democracy but retreating from democracy (Adedeji and Ayo, 2000:73).

### **Conclusion**

From our discussion thus far we have discovered that local government administration has had a long way. Since the colonial time to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, attempts have been made at different times to reposition it for optimum performance, especially extending development



to the local people . This is because considering the vastness of the country, it will be an uphill task to attend to the basic needs of the rural poor. Unfortunately, the nature and character of political struggles have laid a firm foundation for the dismal failure of the local government councils. They have failed in the provision of basic social services, to demonstration of transparency and more importantly to make the people have a sense of direction through citizenry involvement in the planning, execution and monitoring of development projects at the grassroots. The arrogant display of ill-gotten wealth by public officers and the appointment of incompetent rulers to superintend over the Councils have deepened the collapse of service delivery capacities, and stifled the efflorescence of result-oriented local government councils.

Indeed, the euphoria, hope and expectation of the local people have been replaced with increasing frustration, cynicism and glaring disillusionment.

*Nigerian local governments today are deprived of their representative institutions and are being shorn of their functions while declining in manpower and fiscal resources. The hope which accompanies the reform of the early 1950s has been dashed... (Adedeji and Ayo, 2000:56).*

The lack-lustre leadership and the putrid environment under which local government Councils perform have choked and incapacitated the philosophy of grassroots development. The aftermath is that all the communities in the country are bereft of the basic amenities of existence, expressing high incidence of poverty and no hope of enjoying some of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. It is, therefore, not surprising that some of the communities have become hot beds of fierce agitation, disordered and often susceptible to anti-social norms. We can begin to appreciate the genesis of youth restiveness in the communities which has become a national phenomenon. All these point to the inescapable fact that as far as the local government Councils are used for political advantages, to promote private interest, grassroots development will become a myth.

In conclusion, therefore, the extent of success of national development is essentially dependent on the profundity of development at the rural level, and the extent, local government Councils would serve as a training ground for democratic practice. This therefore, requires the freeing of the Councils from the political grip of the State through Section 162(6). The Councils must be presided over by competent and elected leaders whose allegiance to the people must be sacrosanct and irrevocable. This must be through a defined law that does not encroach or mortgage their powers to some exogenous body unnecessarily. In accomplishing this task, the National Assembly must rise up to its historic responsibility of legislating for the people in such a way that such a legislation can be an instrument of grassroots development. This is by removing those gray areas in our Statute book that make it difficult for the local governments to perform their constitutional role as a nursery of the national legislature , and a channel of community development. The time has come for the direct allocation of funds to local government Councils, and be made to pass the text of transparency and accountability. A local government Council should not be a place reserved to compensate party members or cronies whose qualifications remain ability to sing praises of party leaders and shameless hero-worship. This cannot be overemphasized because no country can consider itself democratic or developed when it lacks the vitalizing ability to be responsive to local opinion (Laski, 2004:412), demands and aspirations.

### Recommendations

It is based on the above that we recommend the following;

- 1 Immediate repeal of section 162 of the 1999 constitution as amended, by the National Assembly to free the Local Government Councils from the suffocating financial grip of the States.
- 2 There must be regular elections into the Local Government Councils not later than every three years. If it becomes extremely expedient for Caretaker committees to be appointed, it should not exceed six months.
- 3 There should be an independent Auditor- General for the Local Government Councils in each State of the Federation. It should be answerable to the State House of Assembly, and it shall be responsible for the discipline of erring Local Government Councils.
- 4 In the same vein, an Auditor- General of Local Government Councils of the Federation should be appointed to audit the accounts of the 774 Local Government Councils. Its report should be submitted to the National Assembly for appropriate scrutiny and action.

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