

Local Government and Socio-Political Development in South East, Nigeria

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Abstract

The aim of the local government system is to bring the government at the centre closer to the people at the local level.. The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between local government and the socio-political development of South East Nigeria by shedding light on the challenges which includes; political interference, corruption, poor inter-governmental relations, etc, opportunities and potential strategies for effective governance at the grassroots level. Participatory democracy theory was used because it is primarily concerned with ensuring that citizens have the opportunity to be involved in decision-making on matters that affect their lives and the local government system is a tool to do just that. The functions of local government in the South East were also examined. Also terms like; development, social development and political development were looked into and who the people of the South East are were also examined. Various recommendations were then given to ensure sustainable socio-political development in the zone using local government as a tool to do just that.

Keywords: Local Government, Development, Social Development, Political Development and South East

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Introduction

The Nigerian local government system plays a pivotal role in the country's socio-political development. Nigeria being a federal state with three tiers of government, Nigeria's local governments serve as the foundation for democratic governance, citizen's orientation on the bases of governance, community mobilization and grassroots development initiatives. This research aims to delve into the relationship between local government and the socio-political development of the South East, Nigeria by shedding light on the challenges, opportunities and potential strategies for effective governance at the grassroots level. Nigeria as a federation, adopts three tier level of government: federal, state, and the local government. The local government level represents the closest form of governance to the people acting as a bridge between the national and state governments and the citizens. It is at this level that essential services such as education, healthcare, infrastructures and local economic development are primarily delivered.

However, despite its critical role, the Nigerian local government systems face multifaceted challenges that hinder socio-political development. These challenges include corruption, inadequate funding, weak institutional capacity, political interference; lack of autonomy, the list goes on and on. Consequently, the potential for local governments to act as catalysts for grassroots development and citizen participation has often been undermined. To this end, the research seeks to explore the dynamics between local government and socio-political development in South East Nigeria by examining key factors that influence their effectiveness. It will examine the historical context of local governments in Nigeria, including the evolution of the system and the legal frameworks that govern its operations. To address the challenges faced by the local governments, the research will also investigate strategies and best practices for enhancing their capacity and improve governance outcomes. This will include exploring successful models of participatory decision-making, strengthening accountability mechanisms, promoting transparency and citizen engagement and advocating for increased fiscal autonomy.

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The findings of this research are expected to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on local government and socio-political development in Nigeria as a whole. By identifying the key areas for reform and improvement, this study will aim to provide policymakers, practitioners and stakeholders with evidence-based insights that can inform policy formulation, enhance local governance practices and ultimately foster sustainable socio-political development at the grassroots level, help pave the way for a more inclusive, accountable and prosperous local government systems in Nigeria.

Concept of Local Government

Local government has been defined differently by many authors but what the definitions have in common is that local government is a system of governance at the local level in a country. However, we shall adopt as working definition the definition by Okafor, (2005:110) that “local government is defined as a political subdivision of a state which has a legal; existence under the law and is run by elected representatives of the local people, with substantial autonomy in administrative and financial affairs”.

Evolution of Nigeria local government system

The term “Local government” has been given various definitions by many experts. According to Stoker (2006), local government refers to the system of government in which local authorities at the sub-national level are responsible for specific functions within a defined geographical area. Pierre & Peters (2000) then opined that local government refers to the decentralized form of governance that exists alongside central government with elected officials and administrative structures responsible for the management and provision of public services at the local level. While, Rhodes & Wanna (2007) defined local government as the system of governance through which local authorities exercise authority and make decisions on behalf of the residents within a particular jurisdiction with the aim of promoting local development and welfare. For Goldsmith & Page (2017), local government is a political and administrative organization that operates at the sub-national level and is responsible for governing a specific geographical area by providing public services and representing the interests of local communities. Local government in Nigeria has undergone different phases since the colonial era. During the

pre-colonial period, traditional rulers were responsible for maintaining law and order in their localities. In the North were the Emirs while in the West and East were the Obas and Igwe's/Eze's. However, with the arrival of the British in the late 19th century, a centralized system of indirect rule was introduced which subordinated traditional rulers to the dictates of the colonial authorities. This was not without some discrepancy because the indirect rule system worked well in the North and minimally in the West but in the East were many difficulties which resulted in the use of Warrant Chiefs. This system was then replaced by a democratic local government system in Nigeria after independence in 1960.

The first democratic local government system in Nigeria was introduced in 1976 by General Murtala Muhammad. With his death in February, 1976; it was then brought into play by Gen Olusegun Obasanjo who was his Vice. The reform created 301 local governments in the country with elected chairmen and councilors. The system was designed to promote grassroots development and enhance participatory democracy at the local level. According to Okolo& Osimerah(2017), the 1976 guidelines stipulated that a Local Government should have a population of not less than a hundred and fifty thousand persons (150,000) with the tendency to have up to Eight Hundred Thousand persons in urban areas (800,000). However, subsequent military regimes in Nigeria interfered with the local government system, reducing it to a tool for political patronage. The Fourth Republic which began in 1999, witnessed several attempts to reform the local government in Nigeria with varying degrees of success.

In 2019, President Muhammadu Buhari signed the Nigerian Financial Intelligence Unit (NFIU) Bill into law, which granted financial autonomy to local governments in the country. The law was expected to enhance transparency and accountability in the local government system in Nigeria. Currently Nigeria has 774 local governments.

Participatory Democracy Theory

The term "democracy" is derived from the Greek expression δημοκρατία (dēmokratia) (δῆμος/dēmos: people, Κράτος/kratos: rule). It has two main types; direct and representative democracy. In the former, the people in general have the authority to deliberate and decide legislation while in the latter; they choose representatives to do so for them. While direct

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democracy was the original concept, its representative version is the most widely used as of today. Public participation in this context is the inclusion of the public in the activities of a polity. It can be any process that directly engages the public in decision-making/consideration.

Participatory democracy is primarily concerned with ensuring that citizens have the opportunity to be involved in decision-making on matters that affect their lives. It is not a new concept and has existed in various forms since Athenian democracy. Its modern theory was developed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 18th century and later promoted by John Stuart Mill and G. D. H. Cole, who argued that political participation is indispensable for a just society. The choice of this theory hinges on the fact that local government itself being a tool to bring the dividends of good governance closer to the people is designed to promote grassroots development and enhance participatory democracy at the local level. In the early 21st century, participatory democracy has been more widely studied and experimented with, leading to various institutional reform ideas such as participatory budgeting.

Functions of Local Government

The functions of local government are contained in Chapter 2, Section 7 of the Nigerian. The functions of local government are as follows:

1. Establishment and maintenance of markets, motor parks and public conveniences
2. Construction and maintenance of roads, streets and drainage
3. Provision and maintenance of primary, adult and vocational education
4. Provision of primary health care and maintenance of public health facilities
5. Registration of births, deaths and marriages
6. Establishment, maintenance and regulation of cemeteries, burial grounds and homes for the destitute or infirm
7. Collection of taxes, rates, levies and fees as authorized by the laws of the state or the federal government
8. Ensuring and promoting environmental sanitation and public hygiene
9. Promotion of agricultural and rural development
10. Promotion and maintenance of public safety, orderliness and security.

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11. Provision of social welfare services and support to vulnerable groups and individuals such as the elderly, disabled, homeless and orphans.
12. Promotion of culture, tourism and sports in the local community
13. Management of public parks, gardens and other recreational facilities in the locality
14. Provision of emergency and disaster management services including rescue, relief and rehabilitation operations
15. Monitoring and enforcement of environmental regulations, land-use and building codes
16. Provision of public transportation services within the local community
17. Issuing of licenses, permits and certificates for various commercial, industrial and business activities within the local jurisdiction
18. Participation in the selection, election and representation of members to higher tiers of government such as state and federal levels.

Challenges of Local Governments

Local governments play a pivotal role in governance and service delivery. However, numerous challenges hinder its effective functioning. These include but are not limited to;

Inadequate finance

One of the major challenges faced by local governments in the South East is financial constraints. Limited financial resources hinder the provision of essential services and infrastructure development at the local level (Olowu, 2003). Local governments heavily rely on allocations from the federal government, which are often inadequate and irregular (Aboyade, 2017). This financial constraint undermines the ability of local governments to fulfill their responsibilities effectively.

Corruption and Mismanagement

Corruption and mismanagement pose significant challenges to local governments. Rampant corruption leads to embezzlement of funds allocated to local governments, diverting resources meant for public projects and services (Olowu, 2003). This undermines the trust of citizens and erodes the effectiveness of local government institutions (Aboyade, 2017).

Weak Institutional Capacity

Another challenge faced by local governments is the weak institutional capacity. Many local government officials lack the necessary skills, knowledge and expertise to effectively manage public resources and deliver services (Olowu, 2003). This hampers the implementation of development projects and undermines effective governance at the local level (Aboyade, 2017).

Political Interference

Political interference is a significant challenge faced by local governments. The appointment and removal of local government officials are often influenced by political considerations rather than merit and competence (Olowu, 2003). This undermines the autonomy and independence of local government institutions by hindering their ability to make decisions in the best interest of the local community (Aboyade, 2017).

Inadequate Infrastructural Development

Inadequate infrastructural development is a pressing challenge faced by local governments also. Many local governments lack basic infrastructure such as roads, water supply, electricity, e.t.c which hampers economic development and the quality of life for citizens (Olowu, 2003). Limited financial resources and mismanagement contribute to the inadequate provision of infrastructure at the local level (Aboyade, 2017).

Weak Intergovernmental Relations

According to Lawal, (2015), weak intergovernmental relations between the federal, state and local governments pose a challenge to local governments. The lack of coordination and cooperation among these tiers of government leads to overlapping functions, duplication of efforts and inadequate resource allocation. This hampers effective governance and service delivery at the local level.

Inadequate Revenue Generation

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Inadequate revenue generation is a significant challenge faced by local governments. Local governments rely strongly on statutory allocations from the federal government which are often insufficient to meet their financial needs (Adeyemi, 2017). Their inability to generate adequate revenues hampers the provision of essential services and infrastructural development at the local level.

Double Taxation

In situations of multiple taxation where state governments collect tax from the public and the public is then expected to be taxed again by the local government leadsto a shortfall in revenue generation and discourages investors from investing in the local government.

Development

Sinkovics et al (2015) opined that development can be understood as an improvement in three core values: *sustenance* (the ability to meet basic needs), *self-esteem* (the dignity associated with being a human) and *freedom* (from servitude and social and political limitations). For these scholars, sustenance, which means the ability to meet basic needs, is one of three core values of economic development. The argument here is that economic development cannot be said to have taken place if people lack the ability to meet basic needs in a sustainable fashion. Self-esteem which implies having self-respect, self-dignity and honour. The concern here is that development must happen in such a way that the people do not lose their dignity in the process. Nevertheless, economic development must be understood to be just one aspect. Freedom, on the other hand, implies that development includes freedom from servitude and inability to make choices. It includes political or ideological freedom, economic freedom and freedom from social servitude. Economic development means freeing people from a situation in which their choice is limited.

Social development

According to Teodorescu (2015), development is three-pronged, in that it includes growth in three key areas namely: the economy, environment and social life of a people. Of this tripodal valence of development, social development has been noted to be the most important especially as it embodies the development in the other two areas.

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Social development is essentially about improving the well-being of every individual in the society so that through education, skills acquisition, women empowerment and access to amenities they will reach their full potential. The emphasis here is on the fact that the level of development in a society is linked to the well-being of each and every citizen. Social development then means investing in people. It requires the removal of social, economic and political hindrances so as to allow citizens attain personal dreams and national goals with confidence and dignity.

Social development can be said to have happened when;

- There is less discrimination on the basis of ethnicity or gender
- There is access to jobs and productive engagement
- There is an improved gender relations and gender parity in a society,
- There is access to quality education for citizens irrespective of age, sex or tribe.
- There is reduction in practices that promote illiteracy, violence, corruption or discrimination
- There is access to leisure and work life balance
- There increased access to quality healthcare, safety and security.

Political development

According to Okeke (2009) political development entails strong institutions that have legitimate authority to guarantee equilibrium in the system through proper management of identity crisis, political participation crisis, distribution of resources crisis and national integration. It involves optimum performance of the institutions of state such as the legislature, the executive, the judiciary, the police, the military, etc. In contemporary times, political development is equated with liberal democracy. Thus, countries with matured democratization processes are regarded as having political development. However, experiences have shown that there are countries that do not practice liberal democracy, yet, they have political development. For example, Russia and China have their own special styles of leadership which the West often considers as undemocratic because they are not in consonance with the tenets of liberal democracy. Surprisingly, they have been able to use these leadership styles to achieve good governance which is the hallmark of political development. On the other hand, there are some nations that have been practicing liberal democracy for years, yet they lack political development. A typical

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example is Nigeria. What this shows is that it is more correct to associate political development with good governance than a particular ideology or form of government. Moreover, it is most unlikely that economic development can take place without political development first. This is because it is the political development that provides the needed leadership that would steer the ship of economic development. Political development is characterized by good leadership and political stability (Madubuegwu & Groupson, 2021).

South East, Nigeria

South-east became the name of one of the six geo-political zones in Nigeria in 1995 consisting of Abia State, Anambra State, Ebonyi State, Enugu State and Imo State.

The local language in this region is Igbo.

Abia State – God’s Own State

Abia State was created out of the old Imo State on 27th August 1991 with its capital as Umuahia. The state has 17 Local Government Areas which include Aba-North, Aba-South, Arochukwu, Bende, Ikwuano, Isala-Ngwa North, Isiala-Ngwa South, Isikwato, Umu-Nneochi, Obi Ngwa, Ohafia, Osisoma Ngwa, Ugwunagbo, Ukwa-East, Ukwa-West, Umuahia-North and Umuahia-South. The name ‘Abia’ is an acronym from the first letters of four groups of people – Aba, Bende, Isuikwato and Afikpo, now in Ebonyi State. Abia State is bordered on the north and north-east by Anambra, Enugu and Ebonyi, to the east and south-east by Cross River and Akwa Ibom, to the south by Rivers and to the west by Imo. It has heavy rainfall of about 2,400mm per year between April to October and the most important rivers in the state are the Imo and Aba rivers that flow into the Atlantic Ocean.

Anambra State - Light of the Nation

Anambra State was founded in 1976 from the old East Central State with its administrative capital at Enugu. A further reorganization of the Nigerian federation in 1991 saw the state divided into two states, Anambra and Enugu states with its new capital at Awka. Anambra State is an inland state with its capital in Awka. The people of the state are warm, hospitable and extremely enterprising and could be found engaging in trading all over the country. The state is made up of 21 Local Government Areas.

It is reputed to have the highest population density in Africa with an estimated density of 1500 – 2000 persons per square kilometer. There is also the River Niger Bridge (a gateway between the east and western Nigeria, spanning across River Niger) and Onitsha Main Market (acclaimed to be the largest market in West Africa where all forms of trades are transacted on a daily basis).

Ebonyi State - Salt of the Nation

The capital of Ebonyi State is Abakaliki. The state was among the new additions made by the then Military Head of State, Gen. Sani Abacha in 1996. It was carved out of the old Abakaliki division of Enugu State and the old Afikpo division of Abia State and it is nicknamed “the Salt of the Nation” for its massive salt deposit at the Okposi and Uburu salt lakes. The state is divided into 13 Local Government Areas. Ebonyi is primarily agricultural and stands out as a leading producer of rice, yam, potatoes, maize, beans and cassava. Apart from agriculture, the state also has deposits of crude oil and natural gas. Fishing is also carried out in Afikpo.

Enugu State- the coal city

Enugu State was founded on August 27, 1991, with the city of Enugu as its capital. In 1967 when the Gowon administration created twelve states in Nigeria, Enugu remained the capital of the East Central State of Nigeria, one of the three states carved out of the old Eastern Region. The state is an inland state with its capital in Enugu city. It derives this name from the capital city, Enugu (translated ‘top of hill’) which was recognized in 1912 as a small coal mining town but later expanded to become the capital of the former Eastern Region of Nigeria. The state shares boundaries with Abia, Imo, Ebonyi, Benue, Kogi and Anambra and it has 17 local government areas

Imo State - The Eastern Heartland (Land of Hope)

Imo State, which derives its name from Imo River, was created by Gen. Murtala Mohammed in 1976 and is also known as “Eastern Heartland”. Owerri is its capital and largest city. The state is divided into 27 Local Government Areas. The area known as Imo State today was originally part of the defunct East Central State. Imo State got its name from Imo River which originates

from the Okigwe/Akwa upland. Imo State covers an area of around 5,100km². It is bordered by Abia State to the east, by the River Niger and Delta State to the west, by Anambra State to the north and Rivers State to the south. The state is rich in natural resources including crude oil, natural gas, lead, zinc, iroko, mahogany, obeche, rubber trees and oil palms. The rainy season begins in April and lasts until October with annual rainfall varying from 1,500mm to 2,200mm. The dry season includes two months of Harmattan from late December to late February. The hottest months are between January and March (Asengu, 2022).

Local Government and socio-political development in the South East: The Way Forward

1. Local government should invest in healthcare facilities, equipment and training programs for healthcare professionals to ensure access to quality healthcare services for all citizens. This can contribute to improved health outcomes and overall social development (Adebayo & Uthman, 2017).
2. Local governments can focus on improving infrastructures like roads, electricity, water supply, housing, transportation services, e.t.c. This will enhance the quality of life of the people, attract investors, create job opportunities and stimulate economic growth, thus contributing to social development.
3. Promoting social welfare programs: Local governments can establish and support social welfare programs aimed at addressing poverty, unemployment and social inequalities. These programs can provide financial assistance, skill development and employment opportunities to vulnerable groups, promoting inclusiveness and social development. (Fatoki, 2018).
4. Local government can facilitate community engagement and participation in decision-making processes by allowing citizens to actively contribute to the development of their communities. This can foster a sense of ownership, collective responsibility and social cohesion (Lalor, 2019).
5. According to Ibukunoluwa & Ogunseye (2020), local governments can design and implement poverty reduction programs that target vulnerable and marginalized populations.

These programs can include social safety nets, vocational training and microfinance initiatives to improve livelihoods and alleviate poverty.

6. Local governments should ensure the provision and maintenance of access to clean water and sanitation services. This will not only improve the health of the people of the locality but will also promote sustainable development and social well-being.

Another way that local governments can contribute to social development in the South East is by investing in education and providing quality educational facilities and resources. By doing so, they can improve the inhabitants literacy rates, empower individuals with knowledge and skills and ultimately enhance overall social development of the Region. Research conducted by Okonkwo and Osanubi (2018) highlights the importance of local government in promoting education and social development. The study observed that increased investment in education by local governments resulted in higher literacy rates, improved socio-economic outcomes and enhanced community development. Others are;

Enhancing Participatory Democracy:

Local government can contribute to political development in the South East by enhancing participatory democracy. Through mechanisms such as town hall meetings, community development associations and participatory budgeting, local governments can engage citizens in decision-making processes and foster active participation in governance (Olowu, 2003).

Strengthening Grassroots Representation

Local government can contribute to political development by strengthening grassroots representation. By electing local government officials through democratic processes, citizens have the opportunity to choose representatives who understand their local needs and can advocate for their interests (Aboyade, 2017). This enhances political inclusivity and ensures that the voices of marginalized communities are heard in the decision-making process.

Promoting Good Governance

Local government can contribute to political development by promoting good governance practices. By adhering to principles of transparency, accountability and rule of law, local governments can set an example for effective governance (Lawal, 2015). This fosters trust in the political system and encourages citizens' active participation in political processes.

Facilitating Service Delivery

Local government can contribute to political development by facilitating effective service delivery. By being responsible for the provision of basic services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure at the local level, local governments can improve the quality of life for citizens and strengthen their trust in the political system (Adeyemi, 2017). This contributes to political stability and development.

Conclusion

Local governments can play a significant role in the socio-political development of the SouthEast region by enhancing participatory democracy, strengthening grassroots representation, promoting good governance, facilitating effective service delivery, e.t.c. These contributions are essential for building a strong, robust and inclusive system that meets the needs and aspirations of the people in particular and Nigerians in general.

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