

Local Government Autonomy and Grassroots Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Grassroots development remains one of the principal arguments for the existence of local government across the world. The role of local government as agent of socio-economic development in Nigeria becomes more imperative considering a number of factors such as gross shortage essential services, the country's large geographical size, diverse nature of the population, among others. It was perhaps, based on this argument that the role of local government as provider of services at the grassroots became a constitutional matter in Nigeria since 1979. The Amended Constitution, 1999 also provides for a litany of responsibilities for the third tier of government Nigeria in its Fourth Schedule. However, the capacity of the local governments to play their constitutionally assigned responsibilities and by extension agent of grassroots development has been weakened by the encroachment of state government into the financial, administrative, and political life of the local government institution. It is against this background that the article interrogates local government autonomy as imperative for effective grassroots development. The paper further emphasized the need for a significant degree of autonomy as imperative for grassroots development. The paper advocates constitutional amendments to free local governments from excessive control by the state governments and restore the third-tier status of the grassroots government in the country.

Keywords: *Decentralisation, Local Government, Local Government Autonomy, Development, Grassroots Development, Third-Tier Government*

Introduction

Grassroots government remains a universal phenomenon notwithstanding the forms and systems of governance adopted by states. Powers and responsibilities of government are as a matter of necessity decentralized whether in a unitary or federal, autocratic, or democratic societies. The system of local government is therefore both theoretically and practically crucial for grassroots development. It deepens democracy, enables more responsive governance, promotes transparency and accountability, improves public service delivery, promotes inclusion and national cohesion by giving diverse communities a stake in governance. However, there is no consensus on the required degree of freedom; autonomy is necessary for grassroots governments to make local self-government meaningful. It is on this basis that argument on local government autonomy has gained traffic in academic writing. It was for this reason Aiyede (2025) observed that local government autonomy has continued to gain emphasis in discussions on multilevel governance.

Autonomy within the context of the local government institution focuses on the latitude with which the financial, administrative, and political responsibilities of local governments are conducted. According to Olowu (2001), local government autonomy refers to the degree of self-governance granted to local authorities to manage their affairs, including financial, administrative, and political functions, without undue interference from higher tiers of government. Meanwhile, the powers and degree of freedom granted to local governments in the performance of their responsibilities vary across political systems. In recent years, a good number of federal systems have constitutionalised powers of local governments, thereby granting them the status of a tier of government with the ultimate hope of ensuring their autonomy; powers and freedom required for self-government. For example, Argentina, Brazil, India, South Africa, Mexico and more recently, Nepal though its September, 2015 Federal Constitution have promoted local government autonomy through constitutional means.

Conversely, the federal constitutions of a number of countries, for example, the United States, Canada, Germany did not provide for local government as a distinct tier of government, yet local authorities through provincial authorities, and or their constitutions are granted considerable autonomy in the exercise of their responsibilities. Interestingly, unitary constitutions of the United Kingdom, China, Japan among others did not guarantee local authorities with powers and responsibilities constitutionally, yet these countries are examples of unitary states with substantial autonomy granted to local governments.

Nigeria, through the 1967 Local Government Reform elevated her local government institution to the status of distinct tier of government, thereby, turning the federation into a three-tier structure. Yet, the question of local government autonomy continues to occupy center-stage of discussion on grassroots governance in the country. the major objective of this paper, therefore, is to re-examine the question of local government autonomy and grassroots development in Nigeria.

Concepts and Literature

Local government

The term ‘local government’ has over the years been conflated with several other terms such as grassroots administration, local administration, native administration among others. In fact, there is always the temptation to use these terms interchangeably. Meanwhile, the ‘grassroots’ remain the center of actions in these related terms but the point of departure among them is that local government, unlike others, carries a political authority while others do not. Although attempts to construct a universally acceptable definition of the term local government have remained futile, its meaning embedded in two different words, namely: ‘Local’ and ‘Government.’ The word ‘Local’ is derived from a Latin word “locus” which means a place, a nearby, neighborhood or a sub-division of a larger community. On the other hand, government represents a political instrument for the determination, expression, and implementation of policies towards addressing issues of common concerns. Put differently, government connotes a group of people with the authority to govern a country or state or any other such establishments. From the foregoing, local government conceptualised as an entity with authority to determine and implement collective decisions over certain common issues at the grassroots level. In other words, local government represents the mechanics and structures through which the objectives of government at the grassroots level are developed, articulated, and implemented.

Local government is a product of decentralization through devolution. According to Orewa (1991) refers to the arrangement by which the management of the public affairs of a country is shared by the central/state/provincial and the local governments in such a manner that the local government is given reasonable scope to raise funds and to use its resources to provide and enhance the welfare of those residents in its area of authority. For example, the United Nations Office for Public Administration (1984:14) defines local government as a “political subdivision of a nation or state, which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local affairs, including the powers to impose taxes or to exert labor for prescribed purposes. The governing body of such an entity is elected or otherwise locally selected.” Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that definitions of local government are as many as the writers on the subject matter, it can be easily deduced that the idea of local government autonomy is central to the corporate existence while its essence is to authoritatively address local sensitivities in the way preferred by the local people (Oyewo, 2018).

Local Government Autonomy

The concept of autonomy within the precinct of local government administration has remained very contentious. First, the concept, autonomy does not lend itself to a clear-cut definition like many other

concepts in the social and management sciences. Second, there is no agreement on the degree of freedom needed by subnational governments such as local governments to effectively fulfill their responsibilities. For example, the concept is sometimes deployed as a synonym complete self-rule or independence. The polemic nature about autonomy with respect to grassroots governance becomes more problematic each time attempt is made to delineate its contours. Nwabueze (1983), for instance, opines that autonomy connotes a condition under which each government enjoys a separate existence and independence from the control of the other governments.

Similarly, Avila (2024) opines that autonomy stands for the ability of an entity to administer itself and the right to dictate rules of self-government and be governed by democratically elected authorities. However, while it could be said that separate existence of each of the tiers of government in a federal polity is a constitutional possibility, the issue of 'independence from the control of other governments' is not an operational reality within a system of inter-governmental relations, particularly, with respects to the local government. According to Romeo (2012), genuine local governments are bound to operate in a dual mode. On one hand they function as agents of the central and state government in their jurisdictions, and, in the process, they may bring their comparative advantages to bear on the efficient design and implementation of central policies and programs in the localities. On the other hand, they function as agents of a local political constituency and should be able to develop and implement their own policies and programs in direct response to the needs and priorities of the local polity. Therefore, freedom in the context of local government operations cannot be said to be an absolute reality.

Local governments all over the world exist as a subnational entity and therefore, its autonomy does not preclude it from administrative, financial, and other forms of control by higher levels of government. It was for this reason that Davey (1991) opines that local government autonomy is primarily concerned with the question of responsibilities, resources and discretion conferred on the local authorities. As such, discretion and responsibility are at the core of local government. It presumes that local government must possess the power to take decisions without external control within the limits laid down by the law. It must garner efficient resources particularly, of finance to meet their responsibilities, put differently, local autonomy is the freedom to take actions on clearly defined issue areas, as well as separate legal identity from other levels of government (Adeyemo, 2005:7). Clerk (1984) provides a deeper insight into the concept of local government autonomy. According to him, local government autonomy involves a combination of powers of initiative and immunity from higher levels of control. He maintains that local government autonomy involves two basic issues. First, power to initiate actions and regulate the interest of their own constituencies and, Second, a degree of immunity from the authority of higher tiers of government with respect to opportunity choices and implementation modalities.

Therefore, whether local government exists as a constitutional body or created through statutory powers of higher levels of government, its autonomy does not confer status of independence from, or lack of cooperation with higher levels of government. It was, on the strength of this reality, that the defunct Centre for Democratic Studies sees local government autonomy as a relative discretion which local governments enjoy in regulating their own affairs. In a similar but insightful dimension. Local government autonomy, therefore, more than anything else, implies the degree of freedom with which the objectives of local administration, whether nationally or locally determined, are pursued.

Concept of Grassroots Development

The idea of grassroots development is premised on the idea that local communities should function as active agents of change rather than passive beneficiaries. It focuses on mobilizing local resources, knowledge, and institutions to address social, economic, political, and environmental challenges. Meanwhile, rather than focusing on attempting to construct a universally acceptable definition for the

concept of grassroots development, literature on the subject matter has focused on it as a problem-solving approach. For example, Robert Chambers (1997) argues that conventional development often overlooks the realities of the poor, whereas grassroots approaches prioritize “putting the last first” by valuing local knowledge and lived experiences.

According to Pretty (1995), grassroots development emphasizes participation of community members in identifying problems, planning interventions, implementing projects, and evaluating outcomes. Similarly, Sen (1999) sees grassroots development from the empowerment and capacity building point of view. For him, grassroots developments as an approach to development aims to empower marginalized groups such as women, rural populations, and ethnic minorities through various steps such as building skills, confidence, and collective voice of the grassroots people.

Equally, grassroots development emphasizes the use of local knowledge and resources towards addressing the needs of the people. According to Chambers (1983), this approach ensures that development solutions are context-specific, culturally appropriate, and environmentally sustainable. In the same vein, the World Bank (2000) argues that grassroots approach to development offers hope for sustainable development. The bank further argues that when initiatives are community-driven, they are often more sustainable in the long term.

Discussions

Local Government Autonomy in Nigeria

Representative local government system in Nigeria began in the 1950s as a subject on whom second-tier government like states and regional government have exclusive legislative authority. According to Professor K.C Where (1964), dual federalism, otherwise known as binomial federalism, is assumed to be the standard structural model of federal states and under this arrangement, only the federal and states or regional or provincial governments are known to the constitution.

The need to guarantee local government autonomy in Nigeria after the aborted First Republic became inevitable as regional governments previously turned local government institution into political instruments rather than agents of socio-economic development. Several strategies including political, constitutional, administrative slants were considered in the bid to give local government institution in Nigeria its own life. However, the hallmark of efforts to grant sufficient autonomy to local government institution in Nigeria and correct mistakes of the past was its adoption as the third and a distinct tier of government as proposed in the 1976 Local Government Reform.

The idea of local government being a tier of government is recent a recent phenomenon and not popular on a global scale. According to Suberu (2023), elevation of local government to the third tier of government started gaining currency after the Second World War. Local governments in Nigeria as a tier of government was a borrowed initiative from Brazil which has earlier introduced similar arrangement in 1946 (Olowu, 2006). With this development, local governments in Nigeria became a constitutional matter. This means that certain areas of local government system in Nigeria attracted a constitutional backup for the first time. To this effect, section 7(1), subject to section 8 of the 1999 Constitution provided for the existence, structure, composition, finance, and functions of the councils.

Local government in Nigeria became a level of government with full political authority for the first time through the 1976 Local Government Reform. Until this period, local governments in Nigeria only served as instrument of local administration whose roles and responsibilities were subject to the whims and caprices of regional/ state government through the minister of local government. However, as provided

for in the 1976 Local Government Reform and enshrined in the 1979, '89, and '99 Constitution as amended, the idea of local government as a tier of government implies that:

- a. Existence of local government became a constitutional rather than mere statutory matter. Local government institution as a tier of government in Nigeria for the first time had its fate tied to the Federation. In this direction, the 1999 Constitution Section 3(6) says "there shall be seven hundred and sixty-eight local government areas in Nigeria.... and six area councils). This provision, therefore, makes it impossible for any of the tier of government in Nigeria to unilaterally change the fate of local government either by increasing or reducing their numbers.
- b. Elevation of local government to the tier of government also has implication for its structure. Until the 1976 Reform, local governments across different regions of the federation have different structures. For example, local governments under the regional governments in Nigeria were based on a multi-tier arrangement and multi-purpose arrangement. Under this system, there were several authorities like districts, municipals districts, etc. They were recognized by the law and related appropriately by the regional governments that established them. In the Eastern Region for example, the local authorities included: the county councils, urban county councils, and municipalities. However, the Local Government Reform of 1976 unified the structure of local governments across the country. Only single tier and multipurpose local government structure was recognized by the 1979 and 1999 Constitution.
- c. Local government became a direct beneficiary of revenue from federation accounts. As a third tier of government, the local government became entitled to the federally collected revenue because of the 1976 Local Government Reform. The 1979 Constitution therefore stipulates that 15 percent of the revenue accruable to the federation was meant for the 301 local governments across the country. This was in addition to the 10 percent of states' internally generated revenue to which they are also entitled. The percentage of revenue allocated to the local governments in Nigeria currently hovers above 20% of the revenue in the federation account.
- d. Local government could raise revenue through taxes and exert labor. The local government as a tier of government was empowered to levy taxes (e.g., community tax etc.) and its functions and sources of revenue were listed in the constitution.
- e. Local government also became a role player, not only in inter-governmental fiscal relations but on arrays of other national issues. The local authorities became a key player in many national issues in terms of policy formulation and implementation aside from financial relations. For example, the local governments in the country assumed a pivotal role in the implementation of national policy on health and education.
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Local Government Autonomy and Grassroots Development in Nigeria

Discussions on local government autonomy and grassroots development in Nigeria should begin with a focus on the polyglot nature of the Nigerian state. Former British Colony, Protectorates, and the British League of Nations mandate territory of the British Cameroons (Southern Cameroon) were part of the entities brought together to form the most populous country, and sovereign state, Nigeria in 1960. Although, the English-speaking people of Southern Cameroon later joined their Northern counterpart after a United Nations referendum in 1961, nevertheless, the status of Nigeria as the most populous and most diverse country in Africa remains. In the words of Suberu (2002):

“With an estimated population of 220 million in 2021, and an annual population growth rate of 2.5 per cent, Nigeria is expected to displace the US as the third most populous country in the world by 2050. This population includes three major ethnic groups (the Muslim Hausa-Fulani in the north, Christian Igbo in the south-east, and religiously bi-communal Yoruba in the south-west), more than 200 smaller ethno-linguistic communities (the so-called ethnic minorities), and about equal numbers of Muslims and Christians”. (Suberu, 2002: 398)

The size of the Nigerian population and its diverse nature have significant implications for governance in the country hence, the justification for decentralization. According to Oyewo (2018), local government system (decentralization by devolution) becomes essential for its potential to serve local menu according to local taste. It is for this reason that debate on local government, particularly in terms of structure, functions, and finance is yet to show any form of abatement. Having experimented with different systems of local government without concomitant positive effect on grassroots development under the different regions in the country, Nigeria returned to a national system of local government through the 1976 Local Government Reform. The reform, among others, elevated the status of local government to a constitutionally recognized third tier of government, provided for statutory allocation to the local governments from the federation account, unified conditions of service of local government staff across the country. Thus, Nigerian local government is akin to breaking down the powers of government to

reflect, as much as possible the demand of polyglot Nigerian society. It is, for this reason that Section 14(4) of the Amended 1999 Constitution, FGN mandate the government(s) and its institutions to reflect the diverse nature of its population in composition and conduct of its affairs.

Meanwhile, the capacity of the 768 local governments and 6 (six) area councils of the Federal Capital Territory to perform their assigned responsibilities has been hampered by unabated onslaught against local government autonomy by more senior levels of government in the country, especially state governments. Whereas, as pointed by Ayee (1996) Smoke (2003), and Oyewo (2023) autonomous local governments are better positioned to provide more responsive, tailored public services, and enhance citizen satisfaction and trust in government. Furthermore, local government autonomy encourages greater citizen involvement in decision-making processes, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability. Similarly, autonomy allows local governments to create conducive environments for local economic activities, supporting small and medium enterprises and promoting economic growth. Preservation and promotion of local cultures, traditions, and languages are according to Smith (1996), also important derivatives of autonomous local government.

The inability of local governments in Nigeria to leave up to expectations, particularly to carry out the functions assigned to it in the Fourth Schedule of the amended 1999 Constitution, FGN has been linked to the various assault on this level of government as a distinct third tier of government in the country which has eroded its autonomy. Although, the fate of the local government institution in Nigeria appears to be sealed by the same 1999 constitution that breathe life into it under the current political dispensation. A number of constitutional provisions affect the autonomy of local governments in the country and these manifest in administrative, political, financial, and legislative dimensions, among others. the erosion of autonomy of local government and its capacity to serve the grassroots effectively.

a. Administrative Dimension

Local governments in Nigeria are supposed to function as autonomous entities capable of managing their affairs, but constitutional provisions often place them under the control of state governments, thereby undermining their administrative autonomy. First in this dimension is Section 7(1). The section provides that "the system of local government by democratically elected local government councils is under this Constitution guaranteed; and accordingly, the government of every State shall, subject to section 8 of this Constitution, ensure their existence under a law which provides for the establishment, structure, composition, finance, and functions of such councils" should be "as prescribed by the House of Assembly of a State." This provision places local governments under the administrative control of state governments. Similarly, sub-section 6 (b) of this section also provides that "the House of a State shall make provisions for the statutory allocation of public revenue to local government councils within the State.

Pursuant to section 7(1), State governments in Nigeria maintain control over local government staff. The establishment and operations of Ministry of Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs across the thirty-six states of the federation constitute the biggest instrument of administrative control over the local governments in the country. In addition to the human resources responsibility in respect of the senior staff of the council, the ministry carries out compliance tests on the local government in sundry areas. Similarly, many states, governors appoint heads of local government councils (often called caretaker committees), especially when elections are delayed or not conducted. This undermines the ability of local governments to operate independently and administer their functions without undue state interference. An example is seen in many states where local government elections have not been held for years, and caretaker committees appointed by the governor manage the affairs of the councils. For example, this was the situation in Anambra State for over 20 years. Similarly, section 7(6b) which empowers the state Houses of Assembly on revenue of the local government revenue has been deployed as administrative

instrument. Houses of Assembly have become clearing houses for local government estimates and projects from #500,000 and above.

b. Political Dimension

The political autonomy of local governments is often compromised by the influence of state governments over local electoral processes and political appointments. Section 7(1) As mentioned earlier, and 197(1b) allow state governments to determine the framework for local government elections, which can be manipulated to favor certain political interests. State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs) established under Section 197 and provisions of Part II(b) of the Constitution, empower the SIECs to conduct local government elections. However, SIECs are often subject to the control of state governments, which influences the fairness and outcomes of these elections. State governors and ruling parties in various states often exert significant influence over SIECs, leading to a lack of credible local government elections. In many cases, the ruling party in the state wins all the local government seats, as seen in states like Oyo, Lagos, Rivers, and Kano, where opposition parties have raised concerns about the fairness of local elections.

c. Financial Dimension

Financial autonomy is crucial for local governments to execute their mandates effectively, but constitutional provisions and practices significantly limit their control over resources. Under the overwhelming influence and control by the states, local governments in majority of the states of the federation could hardly spend a dime without a formal or informal approval of governors. Section 162(6) & (7): These sections establish the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA), into which all allocations from the Federation Account to the local governments in a state are paid. The distribution of funds from this account is controlled by state governments, which often leads to delays and deductions that limit local governments' financial independence. The management of the SJLGA system has generated a lot of furors and criticisms. It has become the wings through which statutory allocations of local governments travel to unknown destinations. In many instances, local governments are left with insufficient funds to carry out developmental projects. For example, in states like Ogun, Ekiti and Abia, there have been allegations that state governments siphon funds from the SJLGA, leaving local councils financially handicapped. Recently, the Chairman of Ijebu East Local Government, Wale Adedayo accused Governor Dapo Abiodun of Ogun State of diversion of council fund (Punch, August 29, 2023).

d. Legislative Dimension

The legislative autonomy of local governments is weakened by constitutional provisions that grant state assemblies the power to define and modify the functions and powers of local governments. Section 7(1) which empowers state Houses of Assembly to determine the functions and powers of local governments, subjecting local councils to the legislative control of state governments and section 8(3) which gives state assemblies the power to create new local governments or alter existing ones, further tightening state control over local governance structures have over the years been used in many ways that affect the ability of local governments to endogenously determine and carry out their assigned responsibilities. Local councils in Nigeria have very little legislative autonomy as their powers are circumscribed by state assemblies. This means they cannot independently enact laws or policies that reflect the specific needs of their communities without state approval. In several states of the federation, for example, Oyo, Ogun, Cross Rivers, among others, local governments have often found themselves restricted by state laws that dictate what they can or cannot do in areas such as revenue collection and infrastructure development.

Concluding Remarks

Despite its several benefits, the institution of local government has not been able to respond to the challenges of socio-economic development in several states of the federation because of the crippling influence of senior levels of government. Socio-economic development at the local government as noted by Romeo (2012) transcend the question of 'where' but more of 'how', and by 'who'. Autonomous local government is expected to render services through local initiatives through a mixture of local resources and those from higher levels of government. This, however, is not the case. Many local governments in Nigeria are no longer agents of grassroots development, and where they provide some services as in the case of Oyo, Ogun, Kano Cross Rivers among others, they do so under the strict directives of the state governments.

Local governments in most cases have become financially crippled by state governments and hitherto lack financial autonomy to carry out any of their responsibilities. Similarly, political interference, for instance, through control over local elections, appointments, and policy decisions, system of accountability is no longer matter of discussion at the grassroots but exclusively between state governors and appointed/pseudo-elected local governments officials. According to Olowu and Wunsch (2004) this practice promotes corruption and mismanagement which are significant obstacles to local government effectiveness. Furthermore, the overwhelming influence of higher levels of government in the management of the affairs of local government negatively affect manpower at that level of government. The administrative capacity of the local government is also prone to decline because of lack of patronage. Put differently, lack of autonomy in the operations of local governments erodes public trust, discourages local initiatives and participation, promotes political corruption and fosters dependency syndrome. The article, therefore, recommends further amendment of the Nigerian Constitution to restore the third-tier of local government in letters and spirit, and remove areas that empowers state government to cripple local government operations which has reduced their capacity to function as agents of socio-economic development at the grassroots.

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