LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUTONOMY AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NIGERIA AND UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Abstract

The paper examined a comparative analysis of local government autonomy and democratic governance in Nigeria and USA. The study adopted secondary source of collecting data. It revealed that there is a remarkably difference between local government autonomy and democratic governance in Nigeria and USA. Local governments in USA are far ahead of their counterpart in Nigeria in the area of financial autonomy and elections. Although, in both cases there are no complete financial autonomy because their greater sources of revenue are derived from the state and central governments, It asserted that Nigeria has a lot to learn or gain from the system of governance of Local government in U.S. It therefore recommended that for sustainability of local government autonomy and democratic governance in both countries (USA and Nigeria), fiscal autonomy should be granted so as to enable the local government to have effective service delivery.

Keywords: Local government, autonomy, comparative, democratic and service delivery

INTRODUCTION

A comparative study of Local Government of other countries is very important to the existence of any given state because it helps the state to evaluate itself and improve on what it has, in terms of structure, functions and operations. The goal of comparative analysis is to encompass the major political similarities and differences between countries. The task is to understand the
nature of constraints and variability which characterizes the world’s governments, bearing in mind the national and international contexts within which they operate (King et al., 1994). Munro (1925) observed that comparison broadens our understanding, casting fresh light on our home nation, improves our classifications of political processes, enables us to test hypotheses and gives us some potential for prediction and control. Local government is government at the local level, it is often referred to as the government at the grassroots level. The creation of local government in many countries stems from the need to facilitate development at the grassroots and to decongest the functions and burden of central government, to bring about democratic climate of opinion; to provide valuable political education, to provide two-way communication, to ensure even and rapid development (provide basic socio-economic services), to serve as a hedge against over-concentration of power; to maintain law, and order etc. (Ntiwunka, 2011). It is usually created by a law of the central government in a unitary system, and the law of the state in a federal system of government. Through the Local Government, the work of the government is decentralized on a territorial basis thereby making it possible for the inhabitants of local communities to take part in the management of their local affairs (Oyediran, 1988; Abba, 2008).

The main focus of this study is to compare and contrast the practice of Local Government autonomy and democratic governance in Nigeria and United States of America.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

An American Scholar Wheare (1963) defined federalism as an arrangement where there are two levels of government, the central and the regional, both working directly on the people. These two levels of government are independent and co-ordinate in its sphere. In the distribution of powers between them, issues of national concern are assigned to the central government while issues of local interest are left to the states (Ibid). In general, the characteristics of the federal government are inter alia the separateness and independence of each level of government, mutual non-interference in the distribution of power. The 1976 local government reform in Nigeria made local government as a third tier of government. Section 7 (9) of 1997 constitution provides that legislative powers of local government shall be vested in the local government council. This means that local government has legislative powers just like the federal and state governments. (Nwabueze, 1983).

All over the world, the modern trend in the attainment of good governance and delivery of the dividends of democracy is to decentralize. Decentralization and autonomy bring about sound, efficiency and effective public administration. The International Journal of Advanced Legal Studies and Governance has observed that “autonomy is preferred in most nation-states in order to promote rapid development of the country; this manifests itself in the establishment of local governments (Kupoluyi, 2013).

Available evidence shows that local government as the closest government to the people is not totally autonomous. Its autonomy in relation to other tiers of government has been quite complex and sometimes controversial. There have been concerted and sustained arguments that the 774 local government areas in Nigeria are contributing too little to national development. Overtime, many of our local councils seem not to bother about the statutory responsibilities as contained in the fourth schedule of the (1999 constitution). Although, this is contrary to what happens in the developed countries like United States of America where they build and maintain roads, creates jobs and bring government closer to the people. The Nigerian local government system has
changed from being an organ of bringing government and dividends of democracy closer to the people to an organ for compensating political acolytes of the ruling parties in the states. This has created serious problem and has continually hampered development at the grassroots level. Thus, there is the need to curtail this situation so that local government can fulfill the purpose for which it was established.

This paper tends to examine factors such as service delivery and financial autonomy as indices to measure the level of local government autonomy and democratic governance in Nigeria and United States of America.

**Objectives of the study**
The main objective of the study is to make a comparative analysis of local government autonomy and democratic governance in Nigeria and United States of America. Other specific objectives are:

- To compare the degree of autonomy of local government in Nigeria and United States of America.
- To compare the level of democratic governance at the local government level in the two countries.
- To find out the various sources of revenue of local government in the two countries.
- To determine the link between the programmes executed by the government and the wishes of the people.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**
A Scholar has rightly pointed out that the treatment of concepts is most necessary for an efficient treatment of the research problem, and collection of relevant data (Sanda, 1976:8). For a proper discourse therefore, the two basic concepts that are central to this paper are local government and democratic governance.

**Local Government**
Local government has been conceived and constituted in different ways by various scholars. According to the United Nations Division of Public Administration, ‘local government is a political division of a nation (or in a federal system, a state) which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local affairs, including the powers to impose taxes or exact labour for prescribed purposes. The governing body of such an entity is elected or otherwise locally selected (Ola, 1988).

This definition has been upheld by a number of scholars who have also expatiated on it. For instance, Hugh’ Whalen (1970) has stated that:

> each unit of local government in any system is assumed to possess the following characteristics, a given territory and population, an institutional structure.. a separate legal identity, a range of powers and functions authorized by delegation from the appropriate central or intermediate legislature and lastly within the ambit of such delegation, autonomy subject always.. to the test of reasonableness.

While in agreement with the above conceptions, Oyediran (ibid) underlines the need to distinguish between local government and local administration. In his view, ‘local administration is the administration of local communities essentially by means of local agents appointed by and responsible to the central government, But local government, he says, is government in which popular participation both in the choice of decision makers and
in the decision-making process is conducted by local bodies while recognizing the supremacy of the central government is able and willing to accept responsibility for its decisions.

From the foregoing definitions, we can infer that local government is the lower level of government in a modern state, that it is legally distinct, and has powers to raise revenue and undertake assigned responsibilities under a leadership that is elected and answerable to the local population. It can also be stated that local government exercises power that is decentralized in the form of devolution.

Even though, local government may be seen generally as a legally constituted body for development at the grassroots level, there are different types of local government based on their geographical locations. Thus, we have the traditional, the English, the French and the communist types (Bamgbose, 2011).

The second concept is democratic governance. This concept has become a much abused concept even as it has gained a lot of currency across the globe. It continues to provide legitimacy for an array of regimes across the globe. Ake(1996) argues that democratic governance has been devalued in order to make it convenient and less threatening to those in power or demanding on anyone.

Held (1993), observed that democratic governance has been mired in an unresolved conflict between two meanings. The first conceives democratic governance as some kind of popular power, a kind of politics in which citizens are engaged in self-government and self-regulation. This perspective holds the view that democratic governance has a basic intent and objectives. These intents such as individual liberty, equality of citizens, fundamental rights can be realized within a variety of processes. The second perspective views democratic governance as an aid to decision-making, that is, a means of conferring authority on those periodically voted into office.

The term governance grew out of the Greek word Kupemao which means to steer. From the Greek meaning of the word, it should, be cleared why people hold governance responsible for the apparent breakdown of the state system. Nothing can be steered or propelled in a country without the institution and authority to bring it about (Said, 2000).

According to the World Bank, governance is the exercise of political authority and the use of institution resources to manage society’s problems and affairs. ‘This definition emphasizes the issue of legitimacy and deployment of the resources of a country to solve her problems.

Kaufman, Kraay and Zoido-Lobaton(1999) define governance as ‘the traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised. This includes (1) the process by which governments are selected, monitored and replaced, (2) the capacity of the government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies, and the respect of citizens and the state for institutions that govern economic and social interactions amongst them. Governance captures the Whole dynamic of organizational forms of citizens’ involvement in the management of public affairs for development and growth. Stocker (1998) has put forward five propositions of governance as drawn from the way the term has been used worldwide. According to him, governance:

• Refers to a set of institutions and actors that are drawn from but also beyond government.
• Identifies the blurring of boundaries and responsibilities for tackling social and economic issues.
• Identifies the power dependence involved in the relationships between institutions involved in collective action.
• Is about autonomous self-governing networks of actors.
• Recognizes the capacity to get things done which does not rest on the power of government to command or use its authority. It sees government as able to use new tools and techniques to steer and guide.

Theoretical Orientation
There are different schools of thought that are relevant to this study. These are the Democratic-Participatory school, Systems theory, Integrated theory and Functional theory.

Democratic-Participatory School. The school advocates that local government exists essentially for bringing about democracy to afford opportunities for political participation to the citizens, as well as educate and socialize them politically (Adamolekun, Olowu and Laleye, 1988). This means that local government is to foster representative and participatory democracy at the lower level, Mills (1964) work on Utilitarianism, liberty and representative government has greatly influenced this school of thought. Mills asserts that local government is a prime element of democracy and demonstrates the intrinsic values of democracy irrespective of the service it produces in it that local government offers’ the, closest thing to widespread consultation and participation. Studies carried out by Keith Lucas revealed that a large number of British members of parliament who had served on local government demonstrated the importance of local government as a recruiting ground for the British parliament. An analysis of the 1964 general election by Davis Butler revealed that 53% of the labour members of parliament and 45% of the defeated labour parliament candidates had been one time Local Government Councillor (Noun. 2010). Mackenzie (1954) supported this when he produced a data proving that more than half of the deputies and about the same proportion of senators in Italy had had political education in the local government. A very important part of this democratic role is the opportunity it creates for political activity and social interaction. Such a forum helps to inculcate the ideal of democracy like election or selection of local committees and boards, public debates, pressure and interest group activities (Afegbua, 2011)

Systems Theory. This is a multi-disciplinary approach to the analysis of political events. It presumes the existence of other components which make it a whole, and which are also in constant interaction and interdependence: A system’s theory is a conceptual framework and methodology for understanding the operation of a system where there are two or several actors that are essentially components of the whole. Systems theory is therefore defined as a series of statements about the relationship among independent variables in which changes in one variable is accompanied or followed by changes in other variables. In a functional democracy, the application of the system theory cannot be over emphasized. This is because it addresses the issues of interdependence, dependence and interactions of variables. Notable scholars in systems theory include Anatol Rapoport, Talcott Parson and Dario Easton.

Integration Theory. This is concerned with making a whole out of the components that make up a nation state. Integration theory is a process that links a given nation state to others. Integration helps to catalyse the process of: interaction between and among states in nation state. Indeed, political integration has been 'linked to functionalism. It holds the view that the society as system is made up of inter-related parts. All do interact on the basis of a common value system or consensus about basic values and common goals (Ndolo, 2005). Practically, every social custom and institution is seen as having a function in ensuring that society works efficiently. The
maintenance of political integration are maintenance of peace, attaining greater multi-purpose capabilities, accomplishing specific task and gaining a new self-image and role identity.

**Functional Approach.** This is an approach to the study of democratic governance propounded by Gabriel Almond. According to Anifowose and Enemuo (1999), taking Easton’s analysis as a starting point, Almond looks for the functions which he included among the input acid output functions of ‘all political systems. On input, Almond stated the functions of rule making rule, rule application and rule adjudication. Since every system ensures it maintenance and sustainability, it becomes imperative that, there should be system maintenance and adaptive, functions through political socialization and recruitment of people to ensure the workability of democracy and good governance. A functional democracy would necessarily ensure good governance and nation building. Critics of Almond have contended that the system cannot distinguish between the deliberate aims of participants and what takes place.

Functional school would be adopted because it has been recognized as a major existing tool for genuine comparative analysis of political systems.

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION IN NIGERIA**

Local administration at the grassroots level in Nigeria had always been in operation since time immemorial among the various people now christed Nigeria, even before the colonial masters set their feet on the soil of Nigeria (Awofeso, 2004:14). Put differently, it is not debatable that the history of local government system in Nigeria is older than the advent of the erstwhile colonial masters. Colonialism, however, helped to widen the course of history of Nigerian administration systems as it contributed significantly to the evolution of modern local government in the country (Fatile, 2011). There had been traditional local administration in Nigeria before the introduction of the British system of local administration. Prior to Colonization, there were in existence in most Africa enclaves, local administrative machineries founded upon traditional institutions (Agbakoba and Ogbonna, 2004 :). According to them, in the area known as Nigeria today, the existing tribes that make up the geographical areas had already had one form of local administration or the other.

In the Northern part of the country, the Hausa/Fulani practiced a highly centralized form of government with the Emir at the head as both the political and religious leader. The Emir, however, delegated his power to District heads (the Magajis) to oversee the districts that made up the emirates. Cla and Tonwe (2003) noted that the Hausa emirates had developed a well-organized fiscal system, a definite code of land tenure, a regular scheme of local rule through appointed district and village heads, as well as trained judiciary which administered the Islamic laws.

In the South West zone of Nigeria where Yoruba is the principal ethnic group, the unit of administration in the various communities centered on the chiefs. Organizationally, the hierarchical structure of the Yoruba pre-colonial political system was such that, the Oba and his Senior Chiefs were collectively responsible for major decisions and administration t the centre, the headquarters or the empire’s capital (Oyeweso, 2004)

The Igbo are the major ethnic group in the Eastern part of Nigeria. And as Awofeso (2004 %0) has noted, that the Igbo pre-colonial political system has been described as acephalous, republican, fragmented and segmented. There was no sort of central authority, what they had was a diffusion of political authority into different groups (Anyaele, 2003 ).

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The local government administrative system during the colonial era started with the introduction of Indirect rule by Lord Lugard. Ola and Tonwe (2003) asserted that the idea behind the introduction of indirect rule was to preserve the authority of the local rulers, local institutions, traditions and habits rather than attempt to impose totally new and unfamiliar ideas from outside. The Local Government ordinance of 1950 democratized Native Administration in the sense that about eight percent of the Councillors were elected in the Eastern Region. The law took effect in the West in 1952. The structure of Local Government differed in both regions. The Eastern and Western regions had a three tier local government system—the county district and local council in the East fashioned after the British system of Local Government (the County Council was abolished in 1958), and Divisional, District and Local in the West. Both the regions discarded the concept of native authority. In the North, the Native Authority Law of 1954 merely consolidated the native authority and the native and emirate councils were in place (Abba, 2008; Lasisi, 1997).

The local government administration under the military was greatly influenced by the military orientation and socialization which formed hierarchical order and centralization of authority (Awofeso, 2004). The military abolished all Local Councils and appointed Sole Administrators. Between 1966 and 1976, local governments in Nigeria went through various reforms at both regional and state levels but the 1976 reform was the major one. The reform introduced the single-tier local government system throughout the country and established 301 local governments based on a given population range of 150,000 and 800,000 with equal status and powers (Abba, 2008; Lasisi, 1997; Igbuzor, 2007).

THE STRUCTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NIGERIA

The structure of local government in Nigeria is in two folds:

(a) Political

The political structure consists of all elected officials such as Local Government Councillor and Chairman, the Committee and Supervisory Councillors. It is principally composed of the Legislature, the Executive, Committee, and the Secretary to the local government. Under the presidential system of government, the post of Secretary to the Local Government became a political appointment. The Secretary was appointed by the Chairman and never enjoyed the power of the former secretary under parliamentary system (Ntiwunka, 2011).

The legislative arm of the local government is referred to as the legislative council with a leader as the presiding officer. He is assisted by a Deputy leader. A clerk is also appointed for the legislative council by the local government service commission. Majority and minority leaders are appointed along with the chief whip. Then the rest of the councilors who represent various wards in the local government constitute the legislative council (Adejobi, 2011). Apart from making byelaws, they also supervise the revenue collection and expenditure of the local government (Lasisi, 1997).

(b) Administrative council

The Executive arm of the local government is made up of the Chairman, Vice-Chairman, and the Supervisors. The Council is responsible for the day-to-day running of the local government. It also decides on the implementation of policies and recommends byelaws and capital projects to the legislative council for approval. The Chairman is elected through a universal suffrage in all the wards in the Local Government.
At the head of the Administrative Council in Nigeria is the Secretary of the Local Government who is answerable to the Chairman. Under the Secretary are departments that are headed by Heads of Departments. The number of departments in a Local Government depends on the law, setting up the Local Government. They are classified into; service and operational departments. The service departments deal with the personnel management and finance that support service delivery.

The operational departments on the other hand deliver the services on the field with the help of a structure called field or extension workers (technical, professional, and administrative in nature) who is answerable to the head of department (Course Guide, National Open University).

Adejovi (2011), observed that the points of interaction between the executive and legislative organs in the local government may include:

i. When the chairman has approvals to be made by the legislature such as the appointment of secretary, supervisors etc;

ii. During the presentation of annual budget;

iii. Approval of major contracts;

iv. Approval for the appointment of junior staff. However, the local government services commission gives the final approval for such appointment to ensure the laid down rules and regulations of the local government service are followed;

v. The chairman can also meet with the councilors whenever the need arises.

**SOURCES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT REVENUE IN NIGERIA**

Nchuchuwe (2011) stressed that local government in Nigeria derive their revenues or finance from a number of sources. Broadly speaking, the sources can be categorized into two: Internal and External.

The internal sources otherwise known as (IGR) are those sources from which the local governments generate their resources within their territories or boundary. These internal sources include taxes, rates, licences, fees and fines, social charges, rent on local government’ properties, interests and dividend on investments, miscellaneous etc. These sources are largely exclusive preserves of the local governments in Nigeria. However, with them, most if not all the Local governments in Nigeria generate less than 10% of their total revenue from internally generated revenue.

The external sources of local government revenues are those sources through which revenues are accrued to local governments outside the local community in which they are situated. In Nigeria, these sources’ include allocation from federation account, allocation from the state governments, stabilization and generation ecology fund, income from value added tax, income from privatizations/Global System Mobile proceeds, grants from federal and state governments, donations, loans, foreign grants, aids and assistance, derivation funds etc. It is the bulkiness of these revenues that has given rise to the low interest of the local governments in efforts at internally generated revenues.

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORMS IN NIGERIA**

We can identify three (3) phases of local government reforms. These are the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial reforms.

In the pre-colonial period, we can identity changes that took place in the pattern and forms of political ‘organization and processes. But, the point that needs to be underscored here is the key
purposes these reforms served (Akhakpe, 2011). The Report of the Political Bureau (1987) provides us with graphic details of the high-points of these systems:

...governing and governance were guided by clearly defined principles in the pre-colonial times. Among these were balance between power and authority on the one hand and accountability and service, on the other; open and direct participation of the population in governance through consultation, and emphasis on consensus; emphasis on merit, performance and characters in the choice and sustenance of rulerships, and an unambiguous definition and acceptance by all the rulers and the ruled, of the purpose of governance as the promotion of the well-being of the people and the entire community.

From the above, it is obvious that there were some elements of democracy in these pre-colonial administrative systems.

In the colonial era, the British administrators found in the northern region, an existing Native Authority System that was both cost saving and convenient for their philosophy of government. Thus, the British administrators left almost intact the political framework and philosophy of the northern region with the exception that the new government was under the supervision and control of the colonialists (Akhakpe, 2011).

The eastern region introduced a multi-tier local administrative system that was made up of county councils, district councils and local councils. This reform marked a watershed in the development of local administration in this region because about 80 percent of their members were elected either directly or indirectly.

In the Western region, the local government ordinance of 1957 abolished the multi-tier council format. It brought more elected representatives of the people to the newly structured council administration.

The 1976 reform was the most important reform because it involved all the Local Governments throughout the federation. Its objective was to make appropriate services and development activities responsive to local wishes and initiatives by devolving or delegating them to local representative bodies; to facilitate the exercise of democratic self-government close to the grassroots of our society, and to provide a two-way channel of communication between local communities and government. The reform was intended to decentralize some significant functions of the state to the local level in order to harness local resources for rapid development (Guidelines for Local Government Reform: 1976).

The above reform made local government the third tier of government in Nigeria and made it possible for 75% of members of the council to be elected through the secret ballot while the remaining 25% were to be appointed by the state governor.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

In the early days of the United States, communities were idealized as civic republics. In a civic republic, community government is based on the principle of mutual consent. Citizens share fundamental beliefs and participate in public affairs (Kincaid, 1987). An economically inspired conception of community that of the corporate enterprise gradually emerged. These two theoretical orientations, the community as a civic republic and the community as a corporate enterprise, remain viable. A new orientation has emerged, however—one that portrays the community as a consumer market (Kincaid, 1987). In a consumer market, citizens is consumers of public services and governments are providers.
United States of America operates general-purpose and single-purpose local governments. General-purpose local governments are those that perform a wide range of governmental functions. These include three types of local governments: counties, municipalities, and towns and townships. Single-purpose local governments, as the name implies, have a specific purpose and perform one function. School districts and special districts are single-purpose governments. Thus, local government in United States of America is classified into five types: These are Counties, Municipalities, Towns and townships, School districts and Special districts.

County Government: State governments have carved up their territory into 3,033 discrete, general-purpose subunits called Counties (except in Louisiana, where counties are called parishes, and Alaska, where they are called boroughs). Counties exist everywhere, with only a few exceptions: Connecticut and Rhode Island, where there are no functional county governments. Counties were created by states to function as their administrative appendages. Their basic set of functions included property tax assessment and collection, law enforcement, elections, record keeping and road maintenance. Also, counties handle health care and hospitals, pollution control, mass transit, industrial development, social services, and consumer protection. (Hoene, Baldassare, and Shires: 2002).

The structure of county government is based on an elected governing body, usually called a board of commissioners or supervisors, which is the central policy-making apparatus in the county. The board enacts county ordinances, approves the county budget, and appoints other officials (such as the directors of the county public works department and the county parks department). One of the board members acts as presiding officer. However, the board is not omnipotent because several other county officials like the county prosecutor, the county clerk, the county treasurer, the county tax assessor and the sheriff are elected to form a plural executive structure.

Municipal Government: Municipalities are cities; City is a legal recognition of settlement patterns in an area. Residents of an area in a county petition the state for incorporation. The area slated for incorporation must meet certain criteria, such as population or density minimums. In Alabama, for instance, 300 people are the population threshold necessary for incorporation; in Arizona, the number is 1,500. In most cases, a referendum is required. The referendum enables citizens to vote on whether they wish to become an incorporated municipality. If the incorporation measure is successful, then a charter is granted by the state, and the newly created city has the legal authority to elect officials, levy taxes, and provide services to its residents. Like counties, cities are general-purpose units of local government. But unlike counties, they typically have greater decision-making authority and discretion. In addition, cities offer a wider array of services to their citizenry than most counties do. Police and fire services, public works, parks, and recreation are standard features, supplemented in some cities by publicly maintained cemeteries, city-owned and operated housing, and city-run docks, city-sponsored festivals, and city-constructed convention centers. Municipal government picks up garbage and trash, sweeps streets, inspects restaurants, maintains traffic signals, and plant trees.

City governments operate with one of three structures: a mayor-council form, a council-manager form, or a city commission form. In each structure, an elected governing body, typically called a city council, has policy-making authority, what differentiates the three structures is the manner in which the executive branch is organized.
Mayor-Council Form: In this case, the executive functions such as the appointment of department heads are performed by elected officials. This form of government can be subdivided into two types, depending on the formal powers held by the mayor. In a strong-mayor-council structure, the mayor is the source of executive leadership. Strong mayors run city hall the way governors run the statehouse. They are responsible for daily administrative activities, the hiring and firing of top-level city officials, and budget preparation. The weak-mayor-council structure limits the mayor’s role to that of executive figurehead. The council (of which the mayor may be a member) is the source of executive power and legislative power. The council appoints city officials and develops the budget, and the mayor has no veto power.

Council-Manager Form: This emphasizes the separation of politics (the policy-making activities of the governing body) from administration (the execution of the policies enacted by the governing body). Under this structure, the council hires a professional administrator to manage city government. The administrator (usually called a city manager) appoints and removes department heads, oversees service delivery, develops personnel policies, and prepares budget proposals for the council (Svara, 1990).

City Commission Form: Here, legislative and executive, functions are merged. Commissioners are both policy makers and policy executors. One of the commissioners is designated as mayor simply to preside over commission meetings. The commission form of government was created as a reaction to the mayor-council structure. Its origin can be traced back to the inability of a mayor-council government in Galveston, Texas, to respond to the chaos caused by a hurricane in 1900 that demolished the city and killed 6,000 people.

Towns and Townships: These are general-purpose units of local government, distinct from county and city governments. Many New England towns continue their tradition of direct democracy through a town meeting form of government. At a yearly town assembly, residents make decisions on policy matters confronting the community they elect town officials, pass local ordinances, levy taxes, and adopt a budget. In other words, the people who attend the town meeting function as a legislative body. Although the mechanism of his town meeting exemplifies democracy in action, it often falls short of the ideal, primarily due to the relatively low rate of citizen participation in meetings (Desantis and Hill, 2004).

School Districts: They are a distinct kind of special district. The trend in school districts follows the theory that fewer is better. Before World War II, more than 100,000 school districts covered the countryside. Many of these were rural, one-school operations. In many small towns, community identity was linked to the local schoolhouse. Consolidating schools can be a political hot potato, as the former governor of Arkansas, Mike Huckabee learned. In 2003, Governor Huckabee proposed a consolidation plan that would eliminate school districts with fewer than 1,500 students (Ehrenhalt, 2003). In effect, it was an efficiency issue. The governor’s plan meant eliminating two-thirds of the school districts in the state and merging them to create larger districts.

Special Districts: They are supposed to do what other local governments cannot or will not do. They are established to meet service needs in a particular area. Special districts can be created in three different ways:

- states can create them through special enabling legislation,
- general-purpose local governments may adopt a resolution establishing a special district,
citizens may initiate districts by petition, which is often followed by a referendum on the question. Some districts have the power to levy taxes; others rely on user fees, grants, and private revenue bonds for funding. Taxing districts typically have elected governing boards; nontaxing districts—called public authorities—ordinarily operate with appointed boards.

**SOURCES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT REVENUE IN UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

Cities, counties, and other local governments enjoy their own sources of revenue such as property taxes, user fees, and business license fees but they depend on the states for the bulk of their income. They suffer the frustration of having to cope with rising expenditure demands from their residents while, their authority to raise new monies is highly circumscribed by state law, No wonder they turn to their “grandparent” —to bail them out when times are tough. Thus, the single largest source of local revenues is the state. About 40 percent of all state expenditures go to local governments. Like federal grants-in-aid, however, state grants come with lots of strings attached. Most state dollars are earmarked for public education and social welfare. Other state assistance is earmarked for roads, hospitals, public safety,. And public health. The result is that local governments have little spending discretion. Naturally, great diversity characterized the levels of state assistance to local jurisdictions, much of which is related to the distribution of functions between a state and its localities. Highly centralized states such as Hawaii, South Carolina, and West Virginia fund and administer at the state level many programs that are funded and administered locally in decentralized states such as Maryland, New York, and Wisconsin.

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND NIGERIA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS.**

United States of America practices multi-tier system of Local Government. There are five types of local government system. These are the Counties, Municipalities, Towns and townships, Special districts and School districts. The number of local government varies from state to state. For example, Pennsylvania had 4,871 local jurisdictions. The state contains 66 counties, 1016 cities, 546 townships, 1728 special districts and 515 school districts. On the other hand, Nigeria operates a single-tier system of Local Government. This is based on a given population range of 150,000 and 800,000 with equal status and powers. As a third tier of government, it receives statutory allocations from federal government. Today, Nigeria has a total of 774 local governments.

Local government has no status in the American constitution. State legislatures created local governments, and state constitutions and laws permit local governments to take on some of the responsibilities of the state governments (Wilbern, 1971). In United States, local governments always want legal capacity to raise additional revenues themselves, especially through local option sales and income taxes. A share of gasoline, tobacco and other, tax benefits is greatly appreciated. In Nigeria, section 2 of the fifth schedule of the constitution strengthened the financial resources of local governments through federal allocation to local governments.

The idea of Electoral College is unique to America. A candidate may lose in the popular vote and yet win through the Electoral College (America, ibid). In Nigeria, State Independent Electoral
College conducts all elections into local government councils at different periods. The system of direct election is used by the electorates to elect their leaders.

**SIMILARITIES**

Below are the peculiar characteristics that are common to Nigeria and United States:

Both are set up by laws of the state. Section 7 of Nigerian 1999 constitution states “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”. In United States of America, regardless of the purpose of local government, we must remember that it has a lifeline to state government. In short, state government gives local government. its legal existence.

In USA, local authorities rely heavily on intergovernmental relations transfers. In general, local government responsibilities have increased but their own revenue sources have kept pace. Therefore, intergovernmental transfers have filled the void. Also, revenue patterns by the local governments vary in both countries. In US, revenue patterns by the local government type, diversity of purpose, delegated authority and outside financing. Counties and municipalities are general purpose units (as opposed to special districts that are limited to specific purposes and revenue sources related to them (Fahim, 2009). Likewise, in Nigeria revenue patterns vary depending on the geographical zone of the local government councils. For example, in Northern Nigeria, cattle tax is imposed on the cattle rearers but in Southern Nigeria taxes are paid on agricultural products.

Both states lack financial autonomy. Most of the local governments in Nigeria do not possess viable sources of generating funds; they therefore depend heavily on the allocations from the federation account for purpose of carrying out their basic responsibilities (Nchuchuwe, 2011). As Ekweremadu(2009) puts it, over dependence on the federal allocation is the bane of most local governments in Nigeria today. Also, section 162, sub-section 6, of the 1999 constitution of Nigeria provides for a state-local government joint Account. This has been grossly abused by some state governments as a result of unlimited and inordinate influences exerted by states on local government funds (Nchuchuwe, 2011).

In United States of America, localities always go to the states to have more control over how money is spent and the independent power to raise it. They have both experienced reforms in their local governments. In the early years, the American cities like the English boroughs functioned under a form of “council government”. In other words, local governmental powers were vested in the council. The reform in the 20th century introduced the Mayor Council, the Commission and the Council, and Manager Plans. In Nigeria, the major Local Government reform was 1976 reform which made local government a third tier system of administration and introduced a democratically elected Local Government council.

Also, the most essential characteristic of local government in both countries is the element of autonomy or self-government. In other words, local authorities, whatever they may be, are permitted certain powers independent of external control. In Nigeria, the functions of local government are contained in the fourth schedule of 1999 constitution. According to Professor William Anderson, “a unit of local government in the United States can be defined as one which has a defined area and resident population, a separate and continuing governmental organisation
of its own, the legal power to raise revenues and some elements of autonomy and usually of popular participation in the handling of local affairs (Odoh, 1985).

**WAY FORWARD**

In order to promote local government autonomy and ensure effective democratic governance in the two countries (i.e. U.S.A and Nigeria) there is the need for local government to look inward and tap internal sources of revenue generation rather than depending on the allocations from the federal and state governments that are neither adequate nor delayed unnecessarily. In addition, local government should be empowered to generate revenue from other internal sources like taxes. Effective service delivery of local government is a function of financial autonomy of local government. The more revenue local government can generate on its own, the more autonomous and confident it can become particularly in relations with other tiers of government (Oyediran and Gboyega, 1979).

Encroachment in the affairs of local government is a threat to local government autonomy and democratic governance. Therefore, the constitutional provision that made local government an autonomous body must be respected by all and sundry. Thus, the different states under which the local government was set up must not encroach on the revenue base or the territory of their local governments.

Autonomy deals with self determination or self-governance, therefore, state and central governments should shed their direct involvement and financial expenditure of local government. Thus, the central and state governments should only allocate funds for the use of local government and leave the latter to run its own programmes.

For local government autonomy to be possible there is need for fiscal sustainability, so that future revenues are stable, predictable, and adequate for service needs (Chapman, 2008). Local governments are to provide full budget transparency so that interested citizens have online access to spending and taxing data. The online data bases in Iowa, Kansas and Texas encourage public understanding of financial complexities and solicit interaction through budget calculators and simulations (Kimball, 2009).

Furthermore, the introduction of direct allocation by the federal government will reduce the incidence of ‘zero allocations’ to the local governments as a result of the practice of ‘deductions at source’ by the states’ chief executives.

The sacking of elected council executives by the states’ chief executives in Nigeria without observing the rules for reasons that more often than not border on sheer politics should be revisited constitutionally. In addition, elections into all the local government councils in Nigeria should be fixed by the constitution.

Finally, election of officials at the local government level must be democratic. Therefore, participation of the citizens in local affairs should be the basis of choosing local government officials. The idea of “Godfathers” in politics at the local level should be discouraged.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper has attempted to look at local government autonomy and democratic governance in United States of America and Nigeria. It is evident that Local Governments in U.S.A are far ahead of their counterpart in Nigeria in the area of financial autonomy. Although, there is no complete financial autonomy in the two countries because their greater sources of revenue are derived from the state and central governments, nevertheless, allocation from the state and
central governments are insufficient, they should seek revenue from other sources that are yet to be tapped.

In United States, elections at local government level are more democratic than in Nigeria. Therefore, Nigeria has a lot to learn or gain from the system of governance of Local government in U.S. Elections into local government councils in Nigeria must be fixed constitutionally like the case of U.S.

For sustainability of local government autonomy and democratic governance in both countries (U.S.A and Nigeria) fiscal autonomy should be granted so as to enable the local government to have effective service delivery. Since local government responsibilities have increased tremendously, new revenue sources need to be tapped so as to reduce overdependence of local governments on the state governments.

Finally, since local government councils have become too political, fundamental structural changes that would reduce partisan politics by the local government officials are necessary for effective democratic governance at the grassroots level.

References


Merriam V. Moody’s Executors, 25 Iowa 163, 170 (1868). Dillon’s rule was first written in the case of City of Clinton V. Cedar Rapids and Missouri Railroad Co.


