

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE CHALLENGES OF COMMUNITY BUILDING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Successive national constitutional and reform handbooks in Nigeria have made the local government the third tier of government closest to those many Nigerians that reside at the grassroots. In this regard, the local government is ab initio and uptill today assigned function of initiating or facilitating community development which comprise provision of social infrastructure, neighbourhood regeneration and community building (sense of belonging, togetherness and solidarity). While it could be argued that the local government under successive administrations in Nigeria make significant impact through provision of social infrastructure, it has on the other hand, made little or no efforts to foster community building among the various communities that make up a given local government area. The result has been several cases of intra or inter-community conflicts or feuds in most local government areas which invariably impede community development. This paper examines the various platforms, directives, arrangements or provisions available to the local government in Nigeria as channels for fostering community building and how it has failed to live up to expectations. The paper also identifies the challenges facing local government in Nigeria with regards to fostering community building and proffers some recommendations to address such challenges.

Introduction

The expediency for the creation of local government anywhere including Nigeria stems from the need to facilitate community development at the grassroots. This community development thrust of the objective of creation of local government or its actual function involves provision of social infrastructure to enhance the quality of lives of those residing at the grassroots. These infrastructure which the local government in Nigeria is known to have been involved in its provision include rural electrification, access roads, health centers, schools, motor parks, market stalls, portable water, and so on (FGN, 1999; Udentia, 2007: 287; Anikeze, 2010). Whether the local government under successive administrations in Nigeria has so far lived up to the expectations of the successive constitutions and that of people as far as provision of social infrastructure at the grassroots or not has remained debatable among commentators and outside the purview of this paper.

According to Udentia (2007: 282-283), in addition to provision of social infrastructure to the people, the community development function of the local government in Nigeria also involves fostering of community building or sense of togetherness or oneness among the people of the constitute local government Area. As Yusuf (2011:1) puts it, "the importance of local government is a function of its ability to generate sense of belonging, safety and satisfaction among its populace".

Infact, all forms of regime or political system have so far striven towards attainment of this goal. Whatever is the mode of government, local government has been essentially regarded as a veritable path to, and guarantor of, national integration and group oneness and common development.

In Nigeria's socio-political context marked by multiplicity of culture, diversity of languages and differential needs and means, the importance of such tier of government in fostering the needed group consciousness, unity and relative uniformity of purpose and cohesion as well as preservation of peculiar diversities cannot be over-emphasized. Central to the idea of creation of local government, however, is its ability to facilitate an avenue through which any government and its people can intermix, relate, and more quickly than any other means resolve issues that may have heated the system. In fact, local government has been perceived more so in a multi-culture Nigeria as a panacea for the diverse problems of the diverse people with diverse interests, needs or means.

The objective of this paper are, therefore, to examine the gaps or failures of the local government in Nigeria to utilize the various available channels or platforms prescribed notionally or officially for fostering community building as part of its community development challenge. The paper also attempts to proffer some recommendations on which local government can leverage to build peace, togetherness and sense of oneness in its area of jurisdiction towards attainment of a much more robust community development.

The Concepts of Local Government, Community Development and Community Building

Local Government

The concept of 'local government', broadly speaking involves a philosophical commitment to democratic participation in the governing process at the grassroots level. This implies legal and administrative decentralization of authority, power and personnel by a higher level of government with a will of its own and performing specific function within the wider national framework (Yusuf: 2011: 3). According to Apadorai (1975: 287), local government is defined as government by the popularly elected bodies charged with administrative and executive duties in matters concerning the inhabitants of a particular district or place.

To Odenigwe (1977: 19), local government refers to "a system of local administration under which local communities and towns are organized to maintain law and order, provide some limited range of social services and public amenities and encourage the cooperation and participation of the inhabitants in the joint endeavour towards improving their living condition". It is also along the foregoing conceptualization that the 1976 Local Government Reform and the present 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria define local government (FGN, 1976; FGN, 1999).

Community Development

Community Development like any other form of development began as a largely fortuitous human enterprise in the days gone by. Today, it has become deliberate and more planned with various mechanisms and strategies put in place to realize set goals (Udenta, 2007: 279). To this end, while community development could be tackled with different strategies, it nonetheless has one central meaning. According to Eze (1999: 7), community development denotes "various strategies and interpositions through coordinated actions of the community members in order to usher in for the people social and economic development". The author in another breath conceptualizes community development as "an effort geared towards achieving the solution to the community problems, raising their standards of living and promoting social welfare, justice, community cohesion, and the development of their material and human resources to the fullest". To harmonize all the cacophony of definitions by different authorities, the United Nations Organization (UNO) in 1945 came up with an international definition which stated that community development connotes "the process by which efforts of the people themselves are united with those of the governmental authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural life of the people in order to integrate the community enable them to contribute fully to national progress". In Nigeria like in most developing countries, the governmental authority usually involved in community development is the local government which is the closest level of government to the people.

Community Building

As earlier on noted in this paper, community development encompasses both provision of physical, social infrastructure, neighbourhood regeneration and community building. What is then the meaning of community building? Community development as community building goes beyond mere provision of physical social infrastructure to include large dose of psychological involvement of the people in the activities pertaining to improvement of the people's social, economic and conditions of life. This is true because cases abound whereby a person or persons may physically be engaged in an activity with complete alienation or psycho-social distance (i.e. without psychological attachment).

Udenta (2007: 282) illustrated this situation with a child in a catechism class who copiously recites the catechism lines being taught like a parrot without any psychological attachment.

To this end, Udenta (2007: 283) defined community building or cultural re-orientation to mean the activity that involves “creation or institutionalization of a sense of common or shared destiny, common or shared purposes, ... attitudes of togetherness, oneness, fraternity, unity and frameworks marked a common values which reinforce the sense of community”. In Nigeria as well as most other African countries, a local government area is usually made up of several different communities or towns with different interests or needs that are carved into one political entity. Obviously, as a consequence of the failure of the local government to deliberately or dutifully implement strategies for community building, there exist many cases of interpersonal as well as intra or inter-communal; conflicts, alienation or feuds marked by high doses of social disturbance among the people. For example, in the author's Igbo-Etiti Local Government Area of Enugu State, the current state of alienation arising from complaints of marginalization has become so high that no first time visitor to the area needs an information that all is not well community building in the area.

Measures and Arrangements Available to Local Government in Nigeria for Fostering Community Building

As earlier on stated the practice of community development by local government anywhere in this world is no longer fortuitous but has become deliberate and planned. To this end, therefore, a number of official measures or strategies have been formulated for the local government to deploy towards fostering community building as part of its implementation of community development within its domain. One of such measures is the provision of such physical infrastructure to foster interpersonal or intra and inter-community intercourse. For example, while assigning functions to local government, the Fourth Schedule of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria stated that the local government shall construct roads to link communities and shall also establish markets and public places like stadium playgrounds that can bring people from communities that make up such a local government together.

Local government is also assigned the function of neighbourhood regeneration as one way to foster community building in its area of jurisdiction. Neighbourhood regeneration refers to renovation or renewal of existing infrastructure which out of obsolescence or decay require to be put into a new shape for re-use. According to Eze (1999), though neighbourhood regeneration strategy is more effective in developed countries than in the developing world, recently the strategy is increasingly becoming a popular and useful tool for achieving or enhancing a sense community in Nigeria. The neighbourhood regeneration strategy has become very important these days when hoodlums, thieves and vandals go all out to cannibalize such public installations like boreholes, school buildings and health facilities provided to communities across a particular local government. Renovation or rehabilitation of such amenities when vandalized, no doubt, gives the people of a given community in any local government a sense of belonging.

Another strategy mostly used to foster community building by local government is appointment into certain political offices such as Secretary to the Local Government, Supervisors or Special Assistants. In the effort to achieve community building, a responsive Local Government Chairman tries to ensure that political appointments into positions in his administration are equitably distributed across the communities or political zones that make up his local government council. This is one way to enhance a sense of belonging across the constituent communities. Furthermore, the Handbook on Local Government (FGN, 1991:7) stipulates that during the composition of such standing committees as security committee, police...,the strategic political zones or parts of the local government shall be represented. The expectation here is that such composition shall give the communities or zones a sound sense of belonging or feeling of oneness in the scheme of things in the council.

Again, local governments in Nigeria are expected to be involved in organizing intercommunity sports competitions such as football tournaments, intercommunity cultural jamborees, debates and quiz competitions. No doubt, the community building potential of such platforms is considered to be enormous and invaluable. What is needed here is the ingenuity for proper co-ordination, monitoring, supervision and continuity under the appropriate units of the Local Governments such as the public relations unit or Sports Department etc. Such platforms provide the appropriate framework that helps to breakdown social barriers and isolation while at the same time offer meaning to both personal and collective existence (Udenta, 2007: 290).

Finally, local governments in Nigeria are also expected to go into joint project implementation with its component communities through their town unions or Community –Based Organizations (CBOs) as an avenue for community building. It is expected that when a community enters into agreement with the local government to undertake a project, such is capable to give the former a sense of belonging and togetherness.

Obstacles Facing Local Governments in Nigeria with Regards to Fostering Community Building

Why is it that in spite of the veritable platforms and innovative arrangements at the disposal of local governments in Nigeria, they have been finding it difficult in fostering much community building among communities within their jurisdiction? The answer is that local governments in Nigeria are faced with a number of obstacles. Chief among these obstacles is that of low quality leadership. For quite some time now, most local governments in Nigeria have not been blessed with leaders, particularly Chairmen and Councilors gifted with high quality leadership acumen capable enough to provide an administration that can foster community building across the communities within their respective domains. This is the reason why there has been several instances of social distance and isolation on the part of most communities. Other obstacles' is that of paucity of funds. In Nigeria, most local governments have poor or narrow revenue base and as a consequence have to depend largely on funds from federal or state allocations (Ogunna, 1996: 119). Given this poor revenue base, most local governments in the country lack the funds to construct link roads or markets that offer communities that sense of belonging. They also lack the funds with which to undertake neighbourhood regeneration such as renovation of dilapidated or vandalized public facilities that do foster community building among the communities. Furthermore, there is the issue of corruption ravaging the Nigerian leadership. If there is any sector the cankerworm of corruption is more prevalent, it is at the local government level (Agbese, 2011). To this end, the very little resources or funds that come to most local governments in Nigeria are pilfered away by successive Chairmen and their lieutenants into their private pockets at the expense of implementation of public projects that give the communities a sense of belonging.

Another obstacle confronting local governments in Nigeria is that of widespread poverty and unemployment among majority of the people of the component communities that make up local governments in Nigeria. As a consequence of the high rate of poverty and unemployment, majority of the people have become vulnerable to criminal and disruptive tendencies. This most often gives rise to psychopathological complexes that involve grievance against the community or government to the point of hatred and anarchic activities (Udenta, 2007: 293).

Finally, the frequent insurgence of intra or inter-communal conflicts or feuds incapacitates most local governments to foster community building. This is true because such forms of conflicts breed turbulence or disruption against community cohesion or solidarity. At times, the damage inflicted by such conflicts takes much time to heal to the detriment of community building process.

The Challenges Facing Local Governments in Nigeria in Fostering Community Building within their Domains

There is no doubt that many obstacles face local governments in Nigeria particularly as it concerns implementation of community development. It is a fact that many instances of high rate of social distance feelings of isolation and anomie on the part of most communities that make up the local government abound in the country.

Given this scenario, there is, no gainsaying the facts that enormous challenges face the local governments in Nigeria in the implementation of community development, particularly as community building is concerned. First and foremost, now that we have identified the major obstacles militating against effective implementation of community building by most local governments in Nigeria, it is therefore, left for the authorities of the said local governments to squarely address these obstacles. It is worth remarking here that to successfully address those obstacles the authorities of the said local governments require much political will and courage.

Secondly, local governments should strive to involve their constituent communities in their development planning. This is because experience has shown that much power is inherent in community involvement in development planning, initiatives and policy making (Udenta, 2007: 293). Such involvement, no doubt, creates a sense of belonging, elicits the commitment of the communities, and imbues the programmes or policies with legitimacy. This approach is completely different from the present remote and paternalistic approach known as "top down" arrangement which involves only the local executive and the councilors in policy-making. Such paternalistic strategy impudently ignores community power and base in policy formulation has since been discredited as being counterproductive.

Thirdly, local governments should involve their communities in the maintenance and protection of public facilities provided to them in their neighbourhoods such as electricity, pipe-borne water, school buildings, health facilities, etc. Such community involvement has the potential of creating an enormous sense of commitment, dedication and belonging among people of those communities. This is where the present idea to establish neighbourhood watch groups in each of the 441 autonomous communities in Enugu State to assist in provision of security to life and property is quite commendable.

Again, authorities of the various local governments in Nigeria should embark on programmes of attitudinal or value re-orientation aimed at purging the people of their domains of feelings of social of stained, isolation and lack of patriotism. Such programmes might involve formulating sets of anthems and pledges that can be recited after the national anthem to flag off any official ceremony. Others include the need for the local government authorities to always identify with the respective communities during celebrations by sending delegations, goodwill messages and gift items and by sympathizing with them during community losses or crises; organization of periodic colloquia, traditional sports competitions, cultural fiestas and establishment of joint business ventures like community banks, markets and recreation centers.

Finally, every local government should ensure that a community relations office is established, funded and staffed at the council headquarters. Such office shall serve as an effective liaison platform that can maintain regular contact with the communities to ascertain their respective needs, feelings, grievances, current threats against the corporate unity or security of life and property, etc.

Conclusion

It is the view of this paper that community building is a vital aspect of the community development function of the local government in Nigeria. Any local government that overlooks it is failing in its fundamental responsibility. It is, of course, contention of this paper that a high dose of anomie, social distance and isolation exist in local governments in Nigeria today. This situation is coupled with the existence of many instances of interpersonal, intra-communal and inter-communal conflicts or feuds. These two situations represent tell-tale evidence that most local governments in Nigeria are not living up to expectation in fostering community building as part of their community development function in spite of many official measures and arrangements made available to them. This is another evidence of the general poor performance of successive local government administrations (Udenta, 2007: 291; Okoli, 2000).

The above failure of the local government have been attributed to a number of obstacles ranging from lack of funds, corruption, lack of leadership acumen, poverty, and unemployment, among others. It is therefore recommended that mustering enough political will on the part of the local government authorities to squarely address the identified obstacles is the biggest challenge facing them as they grapple with fostering community building among the communities in their respective domains.

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