THE CONTEMPORARY COUNCILORS IN THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT
PERISCOPING STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE REPRESENTATION

Professor Emma E.O. Chukwuemeka  
Department of Public Administration Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria  
Corresponding Email: ee.chukwuemeka@unizik.edu.ng  

Martina Okoye  
Department of Office Technology and Management  
Federal Polytechnic Oko, Nigeria

Abstract

In developed countries of the world like the United States of America and Britain, there is strong support for the principle of local self-government. Many developing and particularly African countries give the same strong support to the principle of local self-government. Under the new local government arrangement in Nigeria borne out of 1776 local government reform and 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the role of the councilor is clearly enunciated. The councilor should represent his people effectively to ensure that his people receive a fair share of the democracy dividend. But as astonishing as it is many councilors today serve only themselves. It is on this backdrop that this paper made a broad overview of the local government, the role of the councilors and problems of the councilors. The paper made useful suggestions on the way to assuage the problems. Essentially the councilors should be properly educated through workshops and seminars. The councilor should see themselves as leaders of the people they represent. As leaders they should be like the priest who stands in the gap for his people. Furthermore, the councilor should see themselves as representatives of the people and work for their interest and should not see the people they represent as slaves.

Keywords: Local government, councilor, democracy dividend

Introduction

Local Government is recognized by the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as the third tier of government within the purview of the tripartite federal arrangement which Nigeria operates. The state and federal government occupy the higher echelon and play the roles of funding and supervising the activities of the local government areas. However, the constitution and its makers should be applauded in this regard for according this important level of government its due responsibilities. Thus, local government has been classified as a public sector organization and a tier of government with assigned functions and responsibilities, administrative structure and financial management both for maintaining itself and rendering its statutory functions to its citizens. One of the most underlying imperatives for the creation of local government is for effective and efficient administration of its localities. Nigeria is one among few countries in the developing world to have significantly decentralized both resources and responsibilities for the delivery of basic amenities and services such as health, education etc to locally elected government.
Local Government Administration: taxonomy

Okpata (2011) succinctly opines that the term local government administration in Nigeria has attracted serious attention both nationally and internationally since the great local government reform of 1976. Local government is the closest tier of government to the people of Nigeria, yet the resident population in it is denied the benefits of its existence. The failure of local government in the area of service delivery over the years has made the citizens to lose faith and trust in local government administration as an institution in Nigeria. From historical perspective, modern local government administration in Nigeria can be traced to the British system of local government. But, it should be stated however, that local administration did not start with the advent of British Administration in Nigeria, because some forms of system of local government administration pre-dated the British rule. Local government administration is one of man’s oldest institutions. The earliest form of local government administration existed in the form of clan and village meetings. In fact, democracy itself originated and developed along the lines of local governance initiative in the ancient Greek City States. It should be noted however, that in other parts of the world, local governance was developed along the people’s culture and expectations and the system was tied to the norms and practices of the people. However, four points of historical reference can be identified in the development of local government administration in Nigeria. They are:

1. Colonial rule;
2. Local government reforms in the East (1951) and West (1952) respectively;
3. The military coup of 1966; and

Local government administration in Nigeria has undergone many changes of which the 1976 Reforms and the Constitutions of 1979 and 1999 can be said to be most prominent. Before 1976, local government administration in Nigeria had passed through many changing environments and this has in no small measure influenced its development. Furthermore, before 1976, there was no uniform system of local government administration in Nigeria. Although, there were spirited attempts made to carry out some reforms in the local government system. These attempts were unco-ordinated and haphazard. The 1976 reforms introduced a uniform system of local government administration throughout the country. The reform was a major departure from the previous practice of local government administration in Nigeria. The philosophical basis of the reform lies in the conviction that a strong local authority with clearly defined functional responsibilities in a power-sharing relationship with the states is an institutional safeguard against tyranny. Following the 1976 reforms, local government became recognized as a tier of government entitled to a share of national revenue consequent upon its constitutionally allocated functions (Madubum 2003). The provisions of the 1976 reform document were incorporated into the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Section 7(1) of the constitution provides that: the government of every state shall ensure their existence under a law which provides for the establishment, structure, composition, finance and functions of such councils.

This showed that local authorities were creatures of the state and their relevance, strength and degree of autonomy were subject to the state governments’ control (Iyoha 1997). The power of the state government over local authorities has been wrongly applied to undermine elected and participatory governance and responsibility at the grassroots and this has made operation of the constitution questionable. The situation of local government administration under the 1999 Constitution is also very confusing and complex. Although, the 1999 constitution also guarantees the existence of a democratically elected local government system, it however, like the 1979 constitution gives the states the responsibility to handle issues of organization and structure. Constitutionally and currently, there are seven hundred and seventy four (774) Local Government Council Areas in Nigeria and they are operating a uniform system of local government administration. More so, with the emergence of independence, emphasis shifted from law enforcement to the provision of social services.

Who is a Councilor?

A councilor is one who represents his or her ward in the local government council. He or she is usually chosen through direct or indirect election from the wards (communities) that make up the local government area.

The councilor performs the following functions:
A. Legislative duties: The councilor has as his statutory function, the making of bye-laws for effective administration of the local communities. These bye-laws are made to maintain peace and order in its area of jurisdiction and they are purely made on specific local matters. For example, bye-laws could be made to ban burial ceremonies on Saturdays; the restriction of domestic animals such as goats, pigs, ducks to homes etc.

B. Approval of budget: It is the responsibility of the local government council to debate, approve and amend the annual budget of the local government, subject to the chairman’s veto which may be set aside by two-thirds majority of its local government council.

C. The monitoring and implementation of projects and programmes in the budget of the local government council

D. Examine and debate monthly statements of income and expenditure rendered to it by the local government.

E. Perform such other functions as may be assigned to it from time to time by an Edict or law of the state (See Enugu State Local Government Law, 1999 vi, section 30 (a,b,c and e).This may vary from state to state in Nigeria.

F. Mobilisation of the communities for development purpose: The mobilisation of the communities for development purpose is one vital function of the councilor. This is because the councilor serves as the eyes and ears of the local communities, which they represent. For instance, the councilor can through the Town Unions, community Development Committees, Student Unions, Age grades etc, organize launchings for development projects. Through his help, the local government can be involved in aiding and facilitating development projects of these communities by providing funds, and other infrastructural facilities. He acts as a bridge between his people and the local government. Thus the chief executive (Chairman) should be open and receptive to information, views, requests, demands, suggestions and opinions coming from these councilors about the people or even make approvals necessary to alleviate the problems of these communities.

Political Education

The councilor educates and enlightens his people through close interaction, information dissemination, holding regular meetings etc about current socio-economic and political developments and dispensation in the local government and the country in general. This is because communication is an essential element in any democratic and cooperative setting. Adequate information will reduce rumour mongering, gossip and suspicion.

Dispute Mediation/Conflict Resolution

In local communities there are inter and intra community feuds and conflicts such as political disputes, land cases, chieftaincy disputes etc. The councilor is expected to try to the best of his/her ability to make peace among the parties involved in the conflicts/feud. This he can do through hearing from the parties involved and being objective and transparent in his judgments.

Social amenities

A Councilor makes honest effort to attract social amenities to his ward. This he can do by influencing the local government council’s decisions in providing certain essential amenities in his wards, such as electricity, roads, water etc. This is achievable through persuasion, good public relations, dialogue, credible arguments and also by pushing forward their demands eloquently to the local government council for their response and possible implementation. A visionary councilor also secures employment opportunities for people from his ward in the local government where vacancies exist.

Participation in General Administration

A councilor participates in the administration of the local government by assisting the chairman, directly or indirectly through discussions, meetings, constructive criticisms and advice to ensure effective administration of the local government. This will make him more effective and useful to his people and the local government in general.

(k) A councilor has to share in the values and beliefs of the ordinary citizens, remain sensitive to their needs and strive to activate the apathetic citizens. This can be achieved by living by example and being emphatic.
There must be a synergy between the councilor, the traditional ruler and the town union government to ensure effective administration of the local communities.

The councilor is also expected to contribute to the welfare of the staff of the local government council. This he can achieve by influencing policies which are favourable to the welfare of the staff. For instance councilor can approve and pay fringe benefits, allowances and other welfare packages to the staff.

**Approval of appointment**

It is the responsibility of the councilors to approve appointments of supervisors and secretaries to be appointed by the chairman. The Enugu State Local Government law confers such powers on them.

**The Councilor, The imbroglio**

The councilor is inundated by a plethora of problems. The problems include:

The failure of the 1999 constitution to provide statutory responsibly for councilors constitutes a big set back to the practice of democracy at the grassroots.

**Rivalry between the chairman and the councilors**

There is always mistrust, suspicion, among the councilors and the chairman of the councils. If not checked it can degenerate to verbal confrontation and petition writing, which eventually boil down to bad blood between or among the parties involved.

**Inadequate finance**

Lack of finance flowing from economic recession is also a problem which faces the councilor at the local level. Most local governments are impecunious and depend on federal allocations to pay salaries and carry out routine general administration and other capital projects.

**Over ambition**

Some councilors go beyond their constitutional responsibilities to hold nocturnal meetings and make surreptitious efforts to frustrate and unseat their chairman without justifiable reasons.

**Political instability**

The general political instability which has characterized our recent past has affected the political psyche of our politicians. Thus each time they are in power, they are in a hurry in order not to be cut short by some uncertain possibilities. Therefore, they are not grounded in what they are doing.

**Lack of adequate knowledge of expected roles:**

Some councilors are not properly aware of what their roles are or even the operational organizational frameworks of the local government system. This hampers his or her effectiveness.

**The last word**

The limiting factors were also identified. It is very sad that after 41 years of the first major local government reform in Nigeria, the local government has not contributed meaningfully in rural development in spite of the huge sums of money allocated to it in the name of statutory allocation. Indeed, it is very sad to say the least. Therefore the Government of Enugu State and Nigeria at large should as a matter of urgency reposition the local government to cause it to contribute in national development. The opinion of this paper if adopted will go a long way in assuaging the development quagmire in various communities across Enugu State. Therefore the paper suggests as follows:
(a) A thorough reexamination and possible amendment of the relevant provisions of the 1999 constitution which affects the local government system, especially the area which affects the establishment, composition, structure and finance of the local government. This is to ensure uniformity in the operation of the local government.

(b) Also the local government has to be extricated from the state control of its finance to enhance its effectiveness and usefulness.

(c) The councilors need to be properly educated on the structure of the local government and their functions as councilors. This can be done through regular workshops and seminars.

(d) Local government chairmen should to a reasonable extent take the councilors into confidence about the programmes and activities of the local government. This is to reduce suspicion, conflict and mistrust.

(e) Councilors should see themselves as leaders of the people they represent, as leaders they should be like priest who stands in the gap for his people. They should also lead by example (modelers), pay the price before the prize. They should also leave above suspicion.

(f) Councilors should see themselves as representatives of the people and work for their interest and should not see the people they represent as slaves.

References