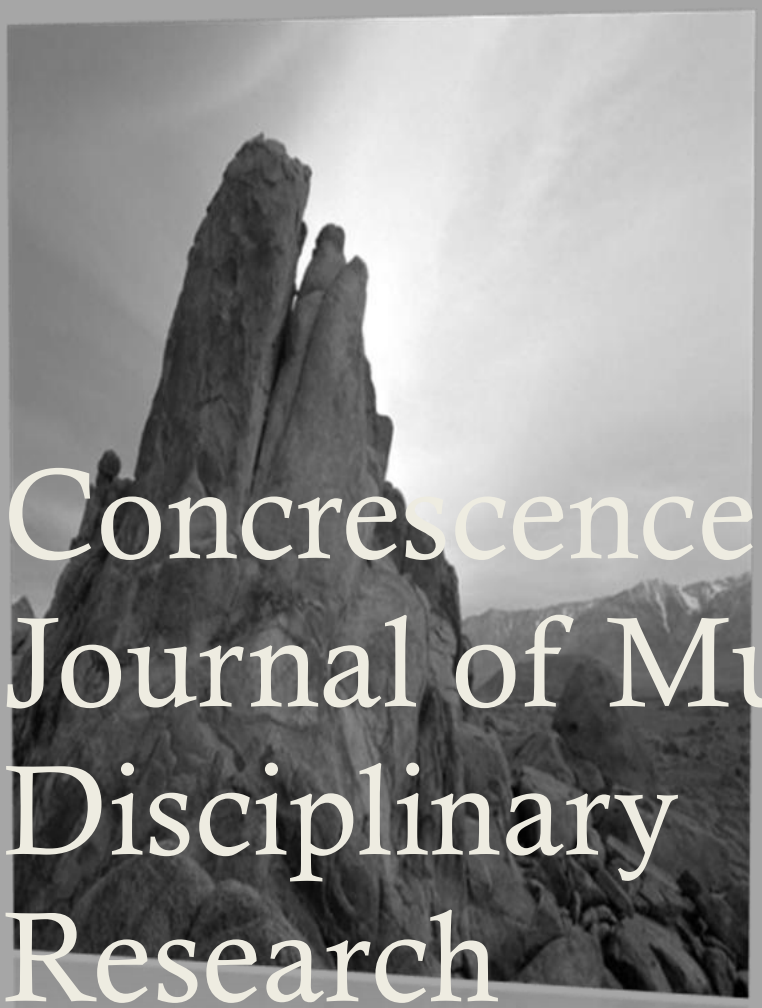

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Local Government Autonomy and the Challenges of Grassroots Development in Nigeria

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Abstract
The question of the autonomy of the local government has dominated many debates as the major limiting factor for grassroots development in Nigeria. This paper, as an exploration of some extensive empirical and theoretical literature on the local government system in Nigeria, reveals that local governments lack financial, political, and administrative autonomy due to constitutional ambiguities as well as the continued subordination and interference in their affairs. For local governments to be genuinely autonomous, a constitutional amendment that emphasizes an autochthonous local government system must be considered. It is also opined that the local government adopt a more strategic internally generated revenue system with a water-tight mechanism for preventing all tendencies of corrupt practices. This paper concludes that the dominant patrimonial and prebendal politics must be eschewed for desirable local government autonomy towards a far-reaching developmental agenda at the grassroots level of the Nigerian polity.

Keywords: Autonomy, Grassroots Development, Local Government Administration, decentralization theory

Introduction

The trajectories of the local government system in most developing countries have been challenging experiences. For decades, Nigeria, like most other countries, has been in search of an independent, responsive, workable, and effective grassroots administration and development strategy that will promote rapid socio-economic development (Tukur, 2022), as evident by the incessant agitations for local government reforms in Nigeria. The current

platform for local government administration started with the 1976 Guidelines for Local Government Reforms. The Guidelines gave the present local government system its basic structure and functions as a third tier of government within the Nigerian federalist arrangement. The primary goal of the reform was to enhance local government efficiency and autonomy. The core mandate of local government is the promotion of grassroots development through efficient service delivery.

Further to this, the local government serves to complement the state and federal governments in the effective discharge of governance and essential services to the grassroots. Consequently, Nigeria's federalist model also explains the distribution of authority and responsibilities from the central authority down to other lower levels of government, that is, the state and local governments. In addition, the 1979 and 1999 constitutions, as contained in the Fourth Schedules, carefully prescribed the functions of local government, thus granting constitutional recognition to local government as the third–tier of government in congruence with the federal structure. Furthermore, Sections 7 (1-6) and 162 specified the relationships between local government and other tiers of government. However, from the standpoint of the state-local relationship, the question of local government autonomy remains an important issue of intellectual discourse. The search for autonomy has continued to generate the problem of major concerns faced by the local governments in Nigeria till date (Anyebe, 2017).

Incontrovertibly, local government performance in Nigeria has witnessed a complete departure from its intended core mandate as an agent of grassroots development. This paper, therefore, aims to interrogate the compelling question of the declining state of development at the grassroots level of the Nigerian polity vis-a-vis local government autonomy under Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

Conceptual Discourse

The Concept of Local Government

Local government, just like many other concepts in political science, lacks any universally acceptable definition. For instance, the United Nations Office for Public Administration defines "local government as a political sub-division of a nation, (or in Federal system of a state) which is constituted by law and has substantial control over local affairs including the power to impose taxes or to exert labour for prescribed purposes. The governing body of such an entity is elected or otherwise locally selected" (U.N. 1976). This definition sheds some light on the explanations of local government as a government that must be established by law with certain responsibilities and powers to serve the local populace. The crux of the above definition lies in the identification of the local government as a level of government that must be run and directed by the people, either through election or selection. However, the Nigerian local government system could not be qualified from this perspective. The assertion that local governments have the authority to impose taxes or levies can be controverted based on some of the emerging realities regarding the autonomy of the local government and the unconstitutional hijacking of some of the duties of local governments in Nigeria.

Local Government refers to government by the communities, which also suggests that local government is an independent jurisdiction that facilitates the social, political, and economic activities of the community in which it supports in order to serve the needs of the

grassroots populace (Oladosu, 2014). It is, therefore, not an extension of the state government but rather a local government that functions independently on its own in those areas of need to the local populace. The local government is considered to be a distinct level of government. It functions as a level of government without necessarily being subjected to the control of other levels of government.

Ikeanyibe (2014) explains local government as a system of government at the local level which is exercised or operated through a locally and democratically elected representative council and enjoys substantial autonomy in the exercise of specific powers over its area of jurisdiction, as it performs a range of functions and responsibilities assigned or allotted to it by law. One of the most obvious aspects of the aforementioned definition is the crucial concern of the "autonomy" held by the elected council in the exercise of its authority and in the performance of the duties assigned to it by law.

Oyedele et al. (2017) assert that the local government refers to the transfer of substantial decision-making powers and responsibilities to legally dependent units outside the control of the central government. This definition of local government as a product of federal practice qualifies for a relationship between coordinates and equals, which upholds the Whearean description. Abegunde (2019) argues that local government is generally seen as a veritable agent of development and grassroots participation in the democratic process. Some of the essentials of local government are highlighted by this viewpoint, but it ignores the place that autonomy plays in promoting development and grassroots democracy.

Bello-Imam (2007), as cited by Akhakpe (2011,) sees local government as a unit of administration with defined territorial boundaries and powers, as well as the administrative authority with some degree of relative autonomy to operate independently. However, as earlier pointed out, these are also far from the realities of governance as could be seen within the Nigerian federalist arrangement, mainly considering the subject matter of the local government autonomy and the subordination of the local government system within the Nigerian governance system.

The 1976 Local Government Reform document defines local government as “Government at local level exercised through representative council established by law to exercise specific powers within defined areas. These powers should give the council substantial control over local affairs as well as the staff and institutional and financial powers to initiate and direct the provision of services and to determine and implement project so as to complement the activities of the state and federal government in their areas and to ensure, through the active participation of the people and traditional institutions, but that local initiative and response to local needs and condition are maximized”. (FRN, 1976).

One of the key objectives for creating local government is to promote grassroots development, and such remains the principal factor as a government mainly put together by the local populace to serve their interests. Ezeani (2012) identifies these key elements that are present in the above conceptualization and are essential to it: localness; legal existence as guaranteed by the constitution; a significant amount of autonomy; existence within a defined territory; exercise of authority over a specific population; performance of functions in accordance with the constitution; Council made up of elected local representatives; local government is made up of departments, divisions, and units that help it accomplish its goals, objectives, and functions. It is evident that the majority of the aforementioned

characteristics existed more in violation of the constitution, with the exception of a brief period. This explains why the Nigerian local government system lacks autonomy.

The Concept of Local Government Autonomy

Few scholarly works have attempted to clarify local government autonomy. Ibietan and Ndukwe (2017a) posit that local government autonomy refers to the degree of freedom, authority, and power or command that a local authority can exercise in the management of its affairs without deferring to the state or federal government. Local government autonomy is also posited to be measured by the degree of freedom that a local government enjoys as regards the following: taking local strategic decisions without a veto from higher-level governments; developing its local government autonomy, economic plans, and development; determining its operating budget/estimates; and making capital-project decisions. If local governments enjoy the ability to realize all of these without any interference from the states or the federal government, then the autonomy and a favourable environment to generate development at the grassroots are considered to exist. This perspective explains autonomy as having broader freedom as well as the disposition to manage resources and local circumstances without interference from other tiers of government. In the light of Nigerian intergovernmental relations, this is more of an illusion than verity. It could be noted that the emphasis on intergovernmental relations within the federalist structure and the recourse to the three governmental levels to be interdependent precludes the possibility of complete autonomy. These must have prompted Ibietan and Ndukwe's (2017a) assertion that local government autonomy refers to the degree of freedom accorded to the third tier of government with respect to legal, administrative, and financial independence within constitutional limits.

Odoh (2004), cited in Ibietan and Ikeanyibe (2017), in a seminal contribution to the theory and operationalization of the concept of local government autonomy in Nigeria, contends that theoretically, autonomy is conceived as a derivative of decentralization and intergovernmental relations. Indeed, it is a co-terminus with power, especially power as a resource base and power as the relationship between governments. This also offers the conclusion that democracy, legal/administrative competence, and finance are the three main spheres of power or autonomy of the local government.

The ability and viability of local governments based on these three characteristics are strengthened by autonomy, which also lends credence to our earlier positions. The concept of autonomy is further argued to become realistic based on the following devolutionary characteristics: local government must be an organized entity with corporate powers; display governmental character with its principal officers elected or appointed by the local people, who they are in turn accountable; and enjoy substantial autonomy over its administrative, budgetary, revenue, and fiscal matters. It is impossible to overstate the necessity of a law recognizing the corporate existence and character of a government and identifying the functional areas and powers of local government in carrying out those functions. Based on these, it could also be argued that the resources at the disposal of local government also serve as the basis for autonomy and the degree of control over these resources in terms of legal, political, or administrative instruments to harness and deploy these resources, are what local government autonomy depends on. Similarly, Odo (2014) contends that autonomy in the context of local government administration is the ability and the capacity to act towards defined goals. The goal-value of local self-government is to grant

the people the opportunity to participate in the political process in which they can also determine their own affairs and development.

A critical examination of local government autonomy in Nigeria appears more of a theoretical concept than a reality. In reality, local governments in Nigeria appear more as agents of the states. They are subject to the whims of the state governments and the somewhat tendencies of their image as mere administrative appendages (Ibietan and Ndukwe, 2014a; Chukwudi, Samuel, & Isaac, 2013; Uketor, 2009). Therefore, it is not surprising to note that Ronald Wraith (1964), a renowned authority on local government, once titled his book "Local Government in Africa" to "Local Administration in Africa."

The Concept of Grassroots Development

The concept of grassroots development is a multi-dimensional process involving agriculture, health, education, provision of grassroots infrastructures, social life, political and economic issues, commerce and industry, among others, and their integration with the national economy. Since the scope of the concept is wide and it is the pivot on which a sound national development in all its ramifications can be effectively achieved (Ikechukwu, 2013).

Bello-Imam (1998) defines grassroots development as spatially sectional but determined and conscious attempt to focus on the general upliftment of the living conditions of people at the grassroots. Grassroots development in Nigeria entails the process of making life more satisfying and fulfilling for the millions of Nigerians who live in the grassroots areas. The totality of the grassroots populace and his surroundings are both involved in the multifaceted process known as grassroots development. In this respect, development essentially refers to the advancement of the fundamental human well-being as well as the environment.

Ezeah (2005) opines that grassroots development is a component of development that seeks to enhance the quality of life in the grassroots areas by providing basic infrastructural facilities. Indeed, reducing poverty and raising people's standards of living, particularly in rural regions, are the fundamental goals of grassroots development.

The term "development" is used in both developed and developing nations, and as peculiar with most concepts in the social sciences, the concept has no single widely accepted definition. Joseph (1999) explains development to connote the transformation of the society and its transition from the traditional way of thinking, as well as the shift from the traditional method of production to modern methodology. Chamber (1997) also defines development as the transformation of citizens' lives through the provision of a better quality of life. Drawing from these two explanations, development can be summed up as the process of deliberate movement or shift from a state of disadvantage to one of advantage. For Todaro and Smith (2006), development could be seen as both the physical reality and the state of mind in which society secures the means of obtaining a better life for its general well-being. The ultimate goal of achieving a better life for the citizenry can be achieved through either immaterial factors like self-esteem and human capital potentials or materialistic threshold of the improved infrastructure and wealth creation, as could be further elucidated.

Okoli and Onah (2002) equally argue that development involves a deliberate progression and the movement toward the advancement of realizing tangible or positive objectives. They opined further that such movement should essentially be predicated on both the material and non-material aspects of life at large. In essence, development is limitless and extends beyond economic and social indicators in the inclusion and the enhancement of human resources as well as the positive change in their behaviour.

Development, as seen through the lenses of the aforementioned definitions centered on the expansion of access to necessities, including clothing, food, shelter, and security. It also emphasizes issues that go beyond private and individual demands, like raising the national income, respecting cultural norms, and enhancement of educational and medical facilities. The ultimate goal of development is to deliver people from extreme poverty, ignorance, and slavery. Resultantly, the concept of development entails society acquiring a combination of social, economic, human, and institutional processes. Development is a people-centered concept, and its ultimate objective is the attainment of people's welfare. Sen (1999) also provides additional insightful remarks on the concept of development. To him, development is equated with freedom and implies the extension of potentials. Development necessitates sufficient state and societal empowerment in order to effectively discharge their complementary roles, as much as institutional and governmental stability, and increased state capability.

Omotola (2007) argues that individual community members can only find fulfillment in terms of the needs of life within such a framework. When development is understood as freedom, it necessitates a high degree of autonomy for both the political community and each of its constituent parts, as well as for each member. It is further argued that, in the aforementioned situation, the degree of public participation, as determined by the number and quality of participation, plays a critical role. Omotola (2007) maintains that, wherever democratization is defined as the process of transition to a stable/consolidated democracy, that could be a harbinger of development. Similarly, development is unlikely to occur unless accountability and transparency are built into effective governance. According to the World Bank (1992), this is considered to be equivalent to sound development management.

For Gana (1992), people, not goods, should always be at the center of development initiatives if the ultimate purpose of development is to guarantee the general well-being of the population through continuous improvement in their living situations. Similarly, Ologbenla (2003) contends that, local governments are ideally suited to act as development centres since development is best aided by the full and active participation of the populace. Development, however, entails the fundamental rationale for the establishment of local government, as noted by Tony (2011). The role of enhancing democratic participation and delivery of efficient and effective social service is development-oriented. This could be used as a framework for evaluating the local government system bordering on autonomy and the challenges of grassroots development.

Theoretical Framework: Decentralization Theory

There are arrays of theories that explain the nature, structure, and operations of the local government system. Nevertheless, given the orientation of this paper, the decentralization theory is considered to be applicable and relevant for the interrogation and evaluation of the complex relationships between local government autonomy and grassroots development in Nigeria.

This theory explains the transfers of authority and responsibilities to the subordinate or sub-national governments in the discharge of those assigned duties. The theory has received a multitude of contributions from a lot of writers and scholars, such as Alexis de Tocqueville (1820), Maurice Block (1863), Leopold Kohr (1957), Alvin Toffler (1970), Diana Conyers (1983), among others. The core principle of the decentralization theory is that local governments, which are sub-national governments, must be granted autonomy over their existence and development. Decentralization entails that the sub-national governments do not take up the federal government's responsibilities and, therefore, manage and oversee their affairs as assigned by the Constitution.

Oyugi (2000) remarks that decentralization has several desirable objectives, the most prominent being increased efficiency in resource allocation and service provision, increased transparency and accountability in the management of public affairs, reduced bureaucracy and red tape at the centre, broadening and deepening civic and administrative competence among the population, and broadening democracy through increased participation by the population in making decisions over development priorities and allocation of resources.

Relating this theory to our assumptions here reveals that Nigeria, like many other developed and developing states, practices political and fiscal federalism. Consequently, the need to decentralize various components of public functions and authorities to the sub-national governments is required. Similarly, the sub-national governments of which local governments are a part should be granted sufficient freedom or autonomy to perform and exercise their duties. However, when placing decentralization theory in the context of Nigeria's current political realities, and as with the focus of this discourse, the question of the autonomy of the local governments has called for some interrogations as it is necessary for grassroots development and the overall well-being of the Nigerian state.

The Challenges of Grassroots Development in Nigeria

Though the local government is the third-tier government based on the federal constitution and federal practice, Nigeria offers a troubling case of federal practice in actuality. In reality, it shows a unitary federalism rather than a decentralized federalism in which the centre or higher levels of government are extremely powerful thus, as noted by Anichukwu (2012), fiscal relations are confined to “feeding bottle federal practice.”

The reinforcement of centralization, which has resulted in the emasculation and strangulation of local government in Nigeria, is evident in the subversion and subjugation of sub-national autonomy and the denial of certain responsibilities of local government by higher levels of government. As it could be argued, only a decentralized authority embodied in local government has the property, peculiarity, and drive for resource allocation and mobilization for the realization of grassroots development and overall national development. Such is also imbued with the capacity for broadening democracy through increased citizens ‘participation and involvement in the decision-making process (Oyugi, 2000).

The Nigerian experience is a negation of this ideal as several studies have shown (Asaju, 2010; Abdulhamid and Chima, 2015; Agba, Ocheni and Nnamani, 2014; Idike, 2014; Ebiziem and Obi, 2015; Osaghae, 2017; Akinsanya, 2017). As noted above, there are constitutional infractions that have placed the creation of local government, boundary adjustment, and financial regulation under both the federal and state governments, respectively. The

constitutional lacuna, which also brought about the subordinate status of the local government in relation to other higher tiers of government, has equally been noted in the superintendent role of the state governments over the financial control of the local government with the existence of the State-Local Government Joint Account. Section 162 (5-8) of the 1999 constitution completely removes any benefits that the local government system may have received from the inclusion of section 7 (1) to the constitution. This provision has deliberately left the local government under the tutelage of the state governments. Consequently, the asymmetric nature of Nigeria's intergovernmental relations has created a serious challenge for local governments to effectively and efficiently carry out their expected constitutional mandates of grassroots development. It could be emphasized that the challenges of inadequate financial resources on the part of the local governments have been linked to the usurpation of responsibilities of the local governments by higher levels of government, particularly the state governments, coupled with the problem of corruption and financial recklessness at the level of the local government.

The eroding political values and the undemocratic practices in the affairs of the local government as a fallout of the hegemonic tendencies of the dominant political elites have equally contributed negatively to the challenges of the autonomy of the local government in Nigeria (Tukur, 2022). It is noted that the lack of strong opposition political parties or the dominance of a party system across the major states of the federation, in addition to the political meddlesomeness of state governments in the endorsement, nomination, appointment and elections of local government officials in chairmanship and councillorship contests at this level through the instrumentality of the State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs) have undermined the true essence of grassroots democracy and its development (Tukur, Thovoethin and Fatai-Abatan; 2023). The well-intended position of the constitution, as regards the political autonomy of local government with the existence of a democratically elected local government council, has been severely defeated by the prebendal nature of Nigerian politics. The continued manipulations of the dominant political elites and the patrimonial tendencies have equally contributed to the poor performances and the lack of accountability on the part of the elected local government functionaries.

The inability of the local governments to challenge the state government's undue interferences regarding the question of autonomy has a much more intricate relationship with the already established patron-client relationships and the prebendal arrangement that is developing. Similarly, in what Ariyo (2017) termed elite capture, the affairs of the local government system in Nigeria are indeed under the control of those who are not necessarily part of it, as compelled by the prebendal nature and the dynamics of Nigerian politics.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The basis of decentralization is to enable development flow from the centre to the local level. The rationale for the establishment of local government system in Nigeria, as in any part of the world, is not far from the realities of enabling the desired developmental agenda, as well as the enhancement of popular participation of the citizens in their affairs at the local level. The argument here is that only a decentralized system of governance has the property, particularity, drive, and capacity for engendering democracy, effective and

efficient resource allocation, and mobilization for the promotion of grassroots development and overall national development in Nigeria.

With the landmark ruling delivered by the Supreme Court of Nigeria on the 11th of July 2024, the Nigerian local government system is undoubtedly on the threshold of its autonomy. The thorny constitutional issue of the autonomy of the local government in Nigeria might have been finally laid to rest following the bold intention of the President Tinubu led administration to effect a change in the trajectories of the Nigerian intergovernmental relations as reasonably demonstrated in its many reforms-agenda.
The full implementation of the local government autonomy following the Supreme Court's judgment should be a threshold to effective and efficient service delivery while achieving accelerated development for the well-being of the grassroots populace and, by extension, the overall national development.

Based on the above submissions, this paper recommends the following:
1. Adequate autonomy is necessary for local government to function as the third tier of government and an efficient agent of grassroots development, and this can be realized through a necessary constitutional amendment.
2. Local governments should consider diversification strategies, as determined by the peculiar dynamics of their socio-economic milieu, to improve revenue generation and create jobs for the local populace.
3. For any meaningful developmental agenda to be realized, corruption and other tendencies of official graft must be appropriately eschewed within the local government.
4. The State-Local Government Joint Account operations should be abolished to ensure some degree of political and financial autonomy, enhance transparency and accountability in the local government's affairs, and facilitate effective grassroots development.
5. Tendencies of patron-clientelism and patrimonialism must also be discouraged from the local government system, which is ideal for participatory democracy at the grassroots.

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