

## **THE ESSENCE OF ETHICS, TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Local Governments were created to serve the immediate needs of the community within their boundaries. As the third tier of Government and in the view of their closeness to the people unlimited socioeconomic benefits are expected to accrue to the society within the environment and the country in general. Local Governments in Nigeria have however not been able to deliver on their functions as a result of unprofessional conducts. This paper concludes that the issues of ethics, transparency, and accountability in Local Government have been compromised and that justified the sectors failure to deliver on their mandate. It is recommended that ethical standard, code of conduct and servicom centers should be established as units of every local government to realizing these objectives.*

**Keywords:** Essence of Ethics, Transparency Accountability, Economic Development.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The structuring of Nigeria into three tiers, i.e. the Federal, States and Local Governments is based on the facts that the devolution of powers brings with it collective participation of citizens in the governance as well as the provisions of societal needs. Local Governments are the closest institutions through which government talks to its people. The Local Governments serves as agents of local services delivery; they mobilize the community, human and material resources needs in response to the aspirations of a community. The World Bank acknowledged that local control provides the flexibility needed for proper integration and timing of activities and the modifications of programmes in response to changing conditions.

It is argued that community involvement which is essential to a sustained development be greatly facilitated by local rather than centralized control. The devolution of power assures community participation which is a necessary ingredient for sustainable development to be facilitated by local rather than centralized control.

The existence of direct mechanisms for gathering the immediate community needs makes it easy for policy administrators to articulate them and make formal plans on the best approach for the attainment of those needs. The combination of authority, responsibility, and accountability can make service delivery more efficient in Local Governments. The strategic importance was aptly captured by the government of Nigeria when it asserted its belief that it is only through structured Local Government System that human and material resources could be mobilized for local development. The 1976 reform not only recognized it as a level of government but it was charged with the function of economic development planning (Yusuf, 2001).

However, despite their important roles, Local Governments in Nigeria have not been able to adequately serve their purpose resulting from frequent administrative changes and

constitutional misinterpretations which have affected the issues of consistency and efficiency to the extent that they have been reduced to the level of units by the State Governments.

This paper discusses factors needed to improve the efficiency of Local Governments for Economic Development. To this extent the paper is broken down into five parts with part one being the introduction, part two conceptual clarification while part three discusses the functions of Local Governments, part four which discusses the issues of Ethics, Transparency and Accountability in Local Government and lastly five, which concludes the paper. The methodology of writing the paper is content analysis. Secondary data was collected through Books, Journals, Pamphlets, etc and analyzed.

## **CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS**

There are lots of literature aimed at defining the concept “LOCAL GOVERNMENT” with each author streamlining his perception of the term in a more acceptable platform. Oyeleye et al. (2011) for example placed his emphasis on functional concepts; he thus defined Local Government as government by the popularly elected bodies charged with the administrative and executive duties in matters concerning the inhabitants of a particular district or place. However, if Oyeleye’s definition is to be accepted in its context, one would be tempted to ask for the source of authority by Nigeria State Governments to impose caretaker committees for Local Government. Nigeria had witnessed both political and military rules, but the right to elect administrative leaders for Local Governments had always been twisted.

Obi (1995) on the other hand is of the opinion that Local Governments can be viewed as “a political authority set up by dispensing or decentralizing political power in the form of decentralization or devolution.” The paper argues that though the definition can be accepted in principle, in practice their authority would be seen to have been usurped by Governors to the extent that they only serve as agents of transmitting the State Governments policies to the community, the existence of too much interference on its functions leaves one in doubt as to whether or not it is a tier of government.

Habibu (1992) views Local Governments as an entity created to meet peculiar grassroots needs of the people. He maintained that Local Governments could be defined as that tier of government closest to the people which are vested with the certain power to exercise control over the affairs in its domain.

There is, however, a rather broad deviating view by Mahuta (2011) who posits that Local Governments are usually positioned to play the role of promoting democratic ideals to the society and coordinating development programmes at the local level as such the Local Government is expected to serve as the basis for socio-economic development in the society.

Thinking differently, Abdullahi (2011) cites the 1976 Local Government reform definition 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 its institutional and financial powers to initiate and direct the provision of services and to determine and implement projects so as to compliment the

activities of the state and federal government in their areas and to ensure through devolution of these functions to those councils and through the active participation of the people and their traditional institutions, that local initiative and response to local needs and conditions are maximized.

Notwithstanding all the other definitions cited, this paper seeks to adopt the definition of the 1976 Local Government reform given its broad coverage of the areas relevant to the issues raised by the topic. The issues of control, financial functions and ability to initiate and direct the provision of projects and services are aptly captured in principle. However, in real terms, the capacity of the Local Government to discharge these issues has been stultified.

## **FUNCTIONS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

The Local Government is the third tier of government with clearly spelled out functions. These functions give it authority and control over issues within its boundaries. Segun (2003) posits that Local Government performs the functions of making economic development plans of the state with particular reference to the area of authority of the council, making recommendations to the state commission on economic planning as well as collection of rates, licenses and taxes and the provision of essential needs to the community under its jurisdiction. Ugwu (2003) says that the functions of a Local Government are as spelled out in the Schedule of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. These functions include the following among others;

- a. The consideration and making of a recommendation to a state commission on economic planning or any similar body on:
  - i. The economic development of the state, particularly in so far as the Areas of authority of the Council and the state are affected; and
  - ii Proposal made by the said commission or body;
- b. A collection of rates, radio and television licenses.
- c. Establishment and maintenance of cemeteries, burial grounds, and homes for the destitute.
- d. Licensing of bicycles, trucks, other mechanically propelled trucks, canoes, wheel barrows, and carts.
- e. Establishment of slaughter houses, slaughter slabs, markets, motors parks, and conveniences.
- f. Participation of such counsel in the government of a state as regards to the following matters:
  - i The provision and maintenance of primary, adult and vocational Education.
  - ii. The development of agriculture and natural resources other than Exploitation of minerals;
  - iii. The provision and maintenance of health services;
  - iv. Such other functions as may be conferred on a Local Government council by the House of Assembly of the state.

More elaborately, Abdullahi (2012) opines that the functions of Local Government can be grouped into four, that is; The Executive, Concurrent, Mandatory and Permissive functions. He suggested that those functions in the concurrent list are performed by the Local

Government jointly or with either tiers or a non-governmental organization. He posits that Local Government can assume responsibilities which are not primarily theirs but necessary to improve the standard of living of the rural populace.

The preceding literature on the functions of Local Governments indicates that if they are allowed to play out their roles, they would undoubtedly have a positive stimulus on the economy. Financial authority by the Local Government and their involvement in the management of community affairs not only leads to the improvement in the wellbeing of communities but also pave ways for their Economic Development. Nevertheless, it is opinions of the writer that for Local Government to function well, it is necessary that measures in the form of Ethical Standard, Accountability and Transparency should or ought to be put in place.

The next section in this paper discusses Ethics, Transparency, and Accountability as a stimulus for development in local government and highlights the relevance of these factors in local government administration.

### **Ethics, Transparency, and Accountability as a Stimulus for Development in Local Government.**

Ayee (1998) argues that the term 'ethics' had no one accepted definition but suggested that it relates to character and conduct being morally accepted by society. It is a distinction between what is accepted as morally good or bad, right or wrong behavior. Ssonko (2010) cited that Chapman (1998) defines ethics as the core principles of the right action and rules of conduct. Ethics deal with moral obligations, acts, attitudes or behavior that is in tune with practices commonly applauded, within a given society, organization or environment. Ethical conduct varies from one society or environment to another. Dwivedi (1978) cited in Ikotun (2004) that unethical practices in the public service manifest themselves whenever public servants use their positions in a way which compromises public confidence and trust because of conflict of loyalties or values, or as a result or attempts to achieve some form of private gain at the expense of public welfare or common good. These assertions presuppose the use of public office to act contrary to expected public good covertly. Unethical conduct does not only relate to selfish interest of the office holder or his pecuniary interest, but also certain actions using his position to satisfy his mentor or cronies, kin, kith, race, religious affiliations, etc against the public good. Ekpe (2012) also posits that unethical conduct can only be determined in relation to an act, attitude or good behavior adjudged contrary to the practices commonly advocated by a certain state at a given time in the field of political and administrative morality.

Although ethical behavior entails all the norms, values, standards, criteria and what is adjudged to be good or bad by a community, organization, political, economic and social spheres. Compliments to ethical standards are the concepts of transparency and accountability leading to good governance in the local government system.

In the views of Chapman (2000) cited in Ssonko (2010) Transparency involves openness, communication, and accountability. He maintained that when applied to public service it means that holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict

information only when it is in the best public interest. Okeke (2004) is of the opinion that transparency implies openness, meaning that information should be made to flow freely. He added that it includes the capacity to trust all that work for the system. Izueke (2010) is the view that transparency is not restricted to being open but also strict adherence to due process. He believed that transparency ensures that information is readily available that can be used to measure the authorities performance and guide any possible misuse of power.

Ibeogu and Nwekede (2016) posits that accountability is the responsibility to account for stewardship to an authority or people. They argued that accountability is in tandem with good governance. Accountability is necessary for efficient function of society. Accountability is a term which revolves around policies put in place to regulate political management, ethical standards, finance, performance, local democracy, community leadership, and partnership. It implies giving an account and holding to account of one's stewardship it serves as a quality control instrument in a functional system. Nura (2013) cited that Olowu (2012) sees accountability as a term which refers to being answerable for one's action or behaviors. It involves the development of objective standards of evaluation to assist the owners of an organization in evaluating the performance of duties by individuals and units within the organization. In furtherance of his view, he sees accountability as that term which entails crucial elements of responsibility, reporting mechanism, the system of evaluation, rewards, and sanctions. One example of accounting for steward is the community interactive session by elected representatives. It signified the need to give an account of the government decision and discuss issues affecting those electorates which are no doubt synonymous to accountability. Accountability is a social responsibility to render an account of stewardship, and that justifies the doctrines of separation of powers in the Constitution.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The paper concludes that local governments are real tools for economic development of a nation. Their functions as enshrined in the Constitution show that they are propellants of positive change from underdeveloped to a developing system. However, the current status of local government indicated a near comatose system, degraded and down sized by unethical conducts, the absence of accountability and transparency.

The paper, therefore, posits that ethical conducts, transparency, and accountability should be strengthened. The establishment of a code of conducts units and servicom, as well as punitive measures for errant officers, are necessary measures that should be put in place to reposition the system.

It is recommended that with a view to strengthening ethics, transparency, and accountability the following suggestions should be put in place:

- a) A National Ethics Awareness  
It should be in the form of an enlightenment campaign through the media, and it should be included in the curricula of studies from all levels of study
- b) Constitutional amendments  
This is with a view to limiting the excessive control of Local Governments by States, and the removal of state electoral commission would allow the quality managers to be elected by their constituents

- c) Establishment of Anti-Corruption Agencies in Local Government Headquarters’  
These agencies serve as watchdogs of the society. The fear of intimidation would make officials live within a reasonable limit
- d) Strengthening of Inspectorate and Audit Divisions  
There should be constant checks, reports and follow ups to ensure compliance with ethical behaviors.
- e) Motivation In many instances, the Local Government workers were neglected and always left beside on issues that require motivation. Their salary is more often delayed and not adjusted in tune with realities of the time. Hardly does any senior government official go for a visit except during campaigns, so they were left with their conscience to judge them. Periodically officials should follow up to inspect their registers and books of account as well as see projects being executed.

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