

# Councillors as Inevitable Democratic Tools in Community Development and Nation Building in Nigeria

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## Introduction

Local government has come of age and some maturity in the leadership and conduct of government business are expected. It is worthy of note that autonomy is not just devolving powers to local government but also the ability to improve internal revenue generating capacity. It cannot be over-emphasized that allocation of authority to varying sub-units of the polity is the soul of centralization. Therefore authority is about powers, and power is about control of resources, the availability of which determines the quality of lives of the people. Local government should therefore pay attention to the leadership qualities ability to deliver services and to mobilize human, material and financial resources and the way authority is exercised in the name of autonomy. There is no nation in the world today without a system of the local government except that the systems differ. It exists as de-concentrated units in some countries whilst they are described as devolution in others. Local government inevitably has a complex set of roles to play.

It is disheartening to note that governance at the local level in Nigeria has been characterized by weak structures and systems that incapacitate accountable and effective service delivery as well as lack of capacity to effectively deliver on the developmental goals and mandate to the citizens. For local government to function effectively, it must realize its major role in socio-economic environment whilst promoting democracy and participation at the local level. It must think of programs in terms of inputs (resources needed to

run the program, e.g., money, facilities, customers, clients, program staff, etc.), process (how the program is carried out, e.g., customers are served, clients are consulted, children are cared for, power supply is generated etc.), outputs (the units of service, e.g., number of customers serviced, number of clients consulted, children cared for, number of power supply generated) and outcomes (impacts on the customers or on clients receiving services, e.g., constant power supply, increased mental health, safe and secure development).

In view of this, it is the responsibility of councillors, as representatives of the grassroots people to support community development and nation building. When they do not, an apparent and valid threat to the nation building foundation presents itself because Local government/Community Development and Nation Building are closely related concepts; each is primarily concerned with development of the local areas through community effort. The fundamental objective of this paper is to elucidate the roles of councillors in community development and nation building.

## Conceptual Clarification

Let me clarify some concepts prominent in this presentation for the purpose of adequate understanding;

### Who is a Councillor?

A councillor is a representative of the ward or division and the people who live in it at local council. Councillor provides a bridge between the community and the council. As well as being an

advocate for your local residents and signposting them to the right people at the council, you will need to keep them informed about the issues that affect them. Each ward councillor is elected by a specific geographically-defined ward within the local government area. Councillors as representatives of their constituents and their immediate needs, have the responsibility that the decisions they take must address past imbalances and access to services and opportunities. At the same time, councillors need to be conscious of the impact of these decisions on future generations. This is a large responsibility and needs to be made within a democratic framework that relies on frequent consultation with community members, ward committee members, organized interest groups, and close co-ordination amongst all levels of government from local to state to federal.

### **Nation Building**

Nation building is synonymous with National integration. National integration refers to the process of bringing together culturally and socially discrete groups into a single territorial unit and the establishment of a national identity. In this sense national integration presumes the existence of an ethnically plural society like Nigeria, in which each group is characterized by its own language or other self-conscious cultural qualities, but the problem may also exist in a political system which is made up of once distinct independent political units with which people are identified. National integration thus refers specifically to the problem of creating a sense of territorial nationality which overshadows- or eliminates-subordinate parochial loyalties, Weiner (1971). At this point it is important to ask why new nations with pluralist social orders require more national integration/national building. There is the usual temptation to reduce the meaning (albeit incorrectly) to: national integration, national development, political development, or national consciousness. The term includes all these but to reduce it to any of them is to commit the “reductionist” fallacy. Simply put, it can mean the systematic process of making a people, who hitherto

are from different cultural, ethnic, religious, racial, or national backgrounds, to feel they belong together under a nation. Karl Deutch, in his book *Nation Building* identifies five stages of achieving this “systematic process”. First, the group exists as a tribe, with its distinct language and proud culture, and will resist any attempt to integrate it with other groups. The next stage is to incorporate them forcefully into other group with the use of naked force. The third stage is for them to minimally accept, often with the use of force or threat of it, the new arrangement by cooperating minimally. At the fourth stage, their level of resistance is reduced to the minimum and their cooperation and obedience have risen astronomically, though they still keep their cultural identities intact. The fifth is when the group becomes almost indistinguishable from other groups within the state. This is when total assimilation is achieved. The last two stage will require minimal use of force. As a post-colonial nation, the first three stages ended with colonialism. The last two have proven difficult either due to deliberate colonial policy or shameless neglect by Nigerian leaders since independence.

### **Community Development**

Community development according to Ajayi (1995) is a social process by which human beings can become more competent to live with and gain some control over local conditions and the changing world. Sustainable community development cannot take place through force or order, but is most likely to happen when all actors participate and share their ideas, visions and responsibilities equally and democratically in steering and implementing their community or village development projects (Ajayi and Otuya, 2006). According to Orapin (1996), one approach in creating sustainable rural development is through giving the main actors (villagers living in the community) an equal opportunity to think and plan their own future. This underpins the need for effective leadership at the local community levels in order to harness the efforts of the rural people towards their own development. Usually, community development programmes aim at

creating awareness of rural possibilities; providing information on resources, inputs and infrastructure; deploying technical assistance; skills acquisition and development; increasing literacy levels; improving productivity and productive systems; adapting appropriate technology in agriculture; sensitizing potential.

### **The Goals of Community Development in Nigeria**

The goals of community development should be to improve people's productivity and enable them to participate in their social, political and economic life into the future. This would give them more confidence in managing their own affairs and help to protect their environment. Indeed it is morally binding on the local government managers to do everything possible to achieve the goals. (Odiong 2003). Every community is made up of both the individual as well as the house hold which shares the collective "we" feeling and thus, works cooperatively to attain self-fulfilment in the area of growth and development in all ramifications. As a corollary, it is a place where ideally comprehensive services of both socio-economic political and human development can be provided by the people especially with the aid of either government or unofficial bodies. Because we find peace, joy, love, happiness etc in the community where we live, it therefore follows that all and sundry should participate in order to advance their social organization In the light of the above, the principal objective of community development is for human, material and infrastructural development through effective mobilization of both human and material resources and by the active involvement of the rural populace. Out of the four principal objectives of the 1976 local government reform, in Nigeria, two were devoted to achieving the objectives of community development viz: "To make appropriate services and initiatives by devolving or delegating them to the local representative bodies; "To mobilize human and material resources through the involvement of members of the community in their local development" In line with the above, Olowu

outlined the possible contributions of local government to the development process to include; political integration and nation building; Training in citizenship and political leadership; promotion of accountability, governance; and provision of social and economic development. This study however, contends that the role of local government in the community development process stands in the triadic function of

1. As agent of mass mobilization,
2. As accelerating force for massive economic growth and development and;
3. Agent of socio-economic equity.

These triadic functions are not only of a great essence but also a sine-qua-non for sustainable community development. It is therefore safe to anchor every other function in the above trinity role of local government in community development.

### **Local Government and Rural Development**

The local government is essentially created as a viable political and administrative organ for the transformation of all communities and for delivery of essential services to the citizens. The primary purpose of the local government and the basis for its existence is to create a mass development impetus to the grassroots transformation (Adeyemo, 1995). Importantly, the local government is also to act as the training ground for a higher level of administration and for the inculcation of the philosophy of people-oriented development. Its capacity is to act as training ground for breeding the grassroots democracy and act as a catalyst for national development, which cannot be over emphasized (Adeyemo, 1995). It, therefore, provides political education that ensures direct participation at the grassroots level in the issues that directly affect their lives. The closeness of local administration to the people affords them the opportunity to meet with their local representative, one on one, and present their problems for possible and immediate solutions. This may not be possible at the other level of governments because of the distance and administrative bottlenecks. Essentially, the local government is saddled with the

responsibility of guaranteeing the political, social, and economic development of its area and its people (Enero, Oladoyin, & Elumilade, 2004) The local government, being the government nearest to the rural populace, is one of the best institutions for generating motivation and encouraging mobilization for self-help, as well as inducing the much needed wider participation of the local population in the decision-making process at the local level. It is estimated that rural local governments account for about 80 percent of the entire Nigeria population, and it is plausible to argue as pundits do, that the so-called third world is a rural world where any meaningful discussion of rural development really means not only talking of overall national development, but also because it is in the rural areas that the problem of inequitable distribution of resources or a marked lack of purchasing power and of grinding poverty in which the wretched members of society stagnate and stare one in the face with brutal clarity. To guarantee the satisfaction of basic social needs, therefore, local responsibility and co-operation must be encouraged and that can best be developed through the participation of the local citizenry, not only in the affairs of their local government, but also in their own community affairs. It is important to observe that the existence of the third tier system of government in Nigeria should at least, halt the deteriorating living conditions in the rural areas of this country. An effective local government will be better disposed than the state or federal governments not only to stem the grim reality of the “rising tide of rural poverty”, but also better placed to evoke the spirit of “local co-operation”, thereby being more able to galvanize and mobilize the support of local citizenry in participating in all the programmes that may affect them.

### **Why Is Nation Building Appearing So Difficult In Nigeria?**

In a pluralist society like Nigeria, challenges (pitfalls) of nation building are enormous. We take just a few for constraints of time and space.

**1. Tribalism.** Firstly and perhaps most importantly, is the scourge of tribalism. Tribal sentiments and loyalty is placing emphasis on where you come from as a prerequisite to getting appointments, other than your core capacities, competencies, potentials and abilities. It kills productivity, excellence and merit. The fact that it is even enshrined in our Constitution under the so-called Federal Character principle makes it even more tend to impunity. Though well-intended, the results arising from its abuse by politicians and tribal bigots has been monumental in defacing attempts at nation building.

**2. Leadership Problem.** The next is the lack of strong, patriotic and clear headed leadership. Tanzania has Nyerere and has maintained him in power even in death; China has Mao tse-Tung who provided the ideological focus for them; South Africa has Nelson Mandela who is still been revered even in death; in Zambia there is the legendary Kenneth Kaunda; Singapore will never forget Lee Kwan Yew; Ghana has Kwame Nkrumah; India holds Jawaharlal Nehru in a position of near saint. In the case of Nigeria apart from having tribal lords, whose contributions are only revered by their tribal groups, very little they did outside their tribes, with due respect to their contributions. Well, some may say we have Murtala Muhammed as an embodiment of discipline, prudence, patriotism, and leadership. Could we maintain him in power? Do we even celebrate him even in death? The divisive tendency, planted by the colonial masters under the so-called “divide and rule” strategy, has deeply filtered through into the ranks of the masses from a deeply divide political leadership. Unfortunately, the political leaders benefiting from a divided populace, did (and doing) nothing to avert this malignant, ugly trend.

**3. Absence of Core National Values and Ideology.** The next is the absence of core national values and ideology. That Nigeria has no official working ideology is an open secret and that should be a source of worry to every lovers of Nigeria. The absence of national values is another bizarre note. Though the constitution states our core values to be

“unity in diversity enshrined in justice and fair play” is at best on paper just for the records. What is working in the country is the prevalence of regional and ethnic values. This is a major obstacle to nation building. It is like trying to build a house without an architectural design.

**4. Unpatriotic Attitudes.** We also have selfishness and unpatriotic attitudes among our leaders and the people, providing another impediment to nation building. The presence of these vices explains the prevalence of such vices: corruption, nepotism, mediocrity, indiscretion, statism, religious bigotry, impunity, and general breakdown of traditional values and morals in our national life.

**5. Religious Bigotry.** Arising from tribalism is religious bigotry. In a country where some people can be more Catholic than the Pope, one must be careful in discussing religion else you are an “anti-Christ” or “insulting the holy Prophet”. This was the case when huge sum of money was being smuggled into South Africa with an aircraft belonging to an influential clergyman in Nigeria. You could almost see the “religiousness” in the argument of the so-called analysts in their sordid defence of this clergyman, if he is no properly so-called. This same people will go to high heavens to seek “justice” if such a plane had belonged to a leader of another religion. In fact some religious leaders get state protection through their godsons holding influential positions in Government. Maybe this also accounts for the recent sudden revitalization of “religious” qualifications in contesting for elective positions in recent times, rather than competence, potentials or abilities.

### **The Councillors’ Role in Nation Building and Community Development**

A local government councillor will have numerous roles and responsibilities to play in nation building and community development. Having acknowledged the fact that such a role is a wide ranging and onerous one, it could be performed as stated below;

#### **1. Councillors serve as true representatives of the people**

Councillors sit in council on behalf of their constituents. The elected councillors need to interact with each other as every councillor is mandated by their respective voters. It can be a challenge for councillors to work together and cooperate in the interests of their country as a whole and therefore mandated as elected representatives to make decisions that would ensure nation building and grassroots development on behalf of their constituencies.

In this case, councillors need to carry out their duties in a transparent and accountable way. This means that councillors do not act as individuals and do as they wish. Their actions must be visible to the public so that the public (or party to which the councillor belongs) is able to object when they feel their interests are not being adequately represented. In order to find out what is happening at council level, the public has the right to attend council meetings, and get records and reports provided by council.

#### **2. Councillors serve as facilitators of community/constituency input**

Councillors are expected to be in close contact with their constituencies ‘on the ground’ and to keep council informed of the real experiences and views of the residents within the municipality. Local government legislation has in several places emphasised the importance of public participation as a means to influence council processes. This means that elements of a participatory democracy are also in place in Nigeria since 1999. The citizens are meant to influence their councillors to represent their views on any topic that affects them. Councillors have a duty to be accessible to the public to allow for that input.

#### **3. Councillors serve as a communication link between council and community**

Every council will be involved in various planning and policy-making processes, and specific programmes or projects that are being implemented.

The council will also conduct information campaigns on issues affecting the community. Councillors need to communicate these activities to the public in the interests of increasing transparency and promoting public involvement in these activities.

#### **4. Councillors help monitor the performance of the Local Council**

Councillors act as a key feedback mechanism for monitoring:

- whether the council's plans and programmes are achieving the intended effect
- whether services are being provided in a way that is efficient and fair
- whether capital projects as committed to in the budget are actually taking place according to plan within a reasonable timeframe.

As ward councillors in particular often receive complaints from the public on specific problems they are in a good position to advise the public on how to resolve their issues. They can also assist their constituents in making formal complaints or petitions, as may be appropriate, for submission to the council, and can help follow up on the concerns brought to them.

The councillor is also given reports on various service delivery issues and the progress of capital projects, and should pass this information on to the community at every opportunity. While a councillor cannot directly instruct an official on how to do his or her job, councillors do have a right to expect officials to meet accepted standards of service and can raise any serious concerns within council for attention by the relevant department.

#### **5. Community leadership**

Community leadership is at the heart of modern local government. Councils work in partnership with local communities and organisations – including the public, voluntary, community and private sectors – to develop a vision for their local area, working collaboratively to improve services

and quality of life for citizens. Councillors have a lead role in this process.

#### **6. Developing council policy**

Councils need clear strategies and policies to enable them to achieve their vision of community development for the area, make the best use of resources and deliver services that meet the needs of local communities. As a local councillor you will contribute to the development of these policies and strategies, bringing the views and priorities of your local area to the debate. How you do this will depend on the committees and forums you are appointed to. However, the council's policy framework must be signed off by full council, on which every councillor sits.

#### **7. Planning and regulation**

Councils are not just service providers, they also act as regulators. As a councillor you may be appointed to sit on the planning and regulatory committee, considering issues such as planning applications and licenses for pubs and restaurants and ensuring that businesses comply with the law. In these roles, councillors are required to act independently and are not subject to the group/party whip. Most councils arrange special training for this.

#### **8. Code of conduct and standards**

As a councillor you will be required to adhere to your council's agreed code of conduct for elected members. Each council adopts its own code, but it must be based on the Committee on Standards as stipulated in the constitution.

#### **Conclusion**

Generally, local government administration is an important segment of any nation-state, and play significant role in nation building and community development. It has evolved over the years in different forms and different climes. It is considered to be the closest form of government to the people. Councillors as representative of the rural people at the council have all it takes to provide the needed developmental apparatus as it affects persons living in the rural areas and the local communities in

particular. It is pertinent to state at this juncture, that both the federal and state governments should shed their direct involvement and financial expenditure in favor of local government. Rather the two tiers of government should only allocate funds for the use of local government and leave the latter to run its own programmes with minimal over-sight function. The issue of Joint State Local Government Account should be abrogated. All the control measures and mechanisms put in place by both the States and States Houses of Assembly should be reduced to allow the local government councilors in Nigeria focus on concrete developmental programmes devoid of incessant interruption.

**Recommendations** The challenges facing local government in community development process are many and have led to the advancement of many solutions by other experts in the field. Therefore, the under listed suggestions for councillors are not absolute and sacrosanct.

- A. Councillors has responsibility in ensuring there is steady improved economic growth and developments through the provision of rural infrastructure, other basic necessity of life and good governance to enable the rural masses cope with the problem of poverty and thus perform their civic obligation
- B. Councillors should always stand for equitable distribution or re-distribution of common wealth through the instrument of distributive and regulatory public policy
- C. The Joint State Local Government Account should be abrogated. The other two tiers of government (State and Federal Government) should ensure provision of sufficient fund to the local government as well as the local government diversifying her revenue base through taxation, levies and rates. Here councilor must make sure that this money is judiciously spent on developmental project
- D. Councillors should embark on campaign for attitudinal change through value re-orientation to their constituent people especially with regards to government work,

property and public life. The current perception of government work and property as no man's business must be discouraged at all cost to foster nation building and grassroots development

- E. Councillors should do everything possible to promote rural participation in local governance through effective and efficient dissemination of information to sensitize and arouse the interest of the rural masses in community developments.

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