

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Volume 4, Number 1, June 2005

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*Published in cooperation with the
Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Uyo, Nigeria.*



Good Governance, Empowerment and Rural Development in Nigeria: A Study of the Nexus

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Accepted 18th June, 2005

ABSTRACT - The arguments in contemporary political discourse point to the fact that sustainable rural development is predetermined by the enthronement of good governance and subscription to democratic values such as accountability and transparency. In addition to these therefore, studies have shown that sustenance of effective participation of the people at the grass root level where majority of Nigerians live has also constitute another major prerequisite of rural development. And for people to participate actively and effectively in governmental process that leads to development, we have argued for the need for their empowerment and emancipation. To this end therefore, the thrust of this paper is an examination of the nexus between good governance and empowerment towards ensuring a sustainable rural development.

KEYWORDS: Good Governance, Empowerment, Rural Development, Democracy, Transparency, Corruption, Accountability etc.

INTRODUCTION

In every political discourse in present day Nigeria, it has been observed that the major obstacle to rural or community development is traceable to lack of political empowerment, a corollary of which is bad governance. Hence, in virtually all political discourse including seminars and workshops, the problem of rural development vis-à-vis democratic governance in Africa has been a recurring issue. In the case of Nigeria, since the ascension of the present civilian administration, the task ahead of both the government and

the governed is how to sustain the democratic values and ensure political and economic developments. Over time, the country has experienced the woes of bad governance, massive corruption, human rights abuses and economic deprivations from greedy civilian political leaders and military dictatorship including a total neglect of rural community emancipation. In the words of Nnamani (2001:65).

Nigeria is a country perpetually great, almost permanently in crises, regularly threatened with disintegration, prolongingly plundered and mismanaged, forever talking about democracy and development but retreating from democracy.

Successive administrations have performed woefully in terms of good governance and empowerment. This is manifested in pervasive culture of poverty everywhere especially in the rural areas. For these reasons therefore, this paper is essentially appropriate at present especially when majority of Nigerians, including rural community dwellers, are now overwhelmingly convinced that the root cause of their dilemma include the absence of good governance and total lack of respect for democratic values.

The paper is divided into four sections beginning with the introduction. The second part attempts a classification of variables involved while the third part attempts to establish the interlink between the variables. The fourth part concludes with some policy recommendations.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

It is important at this juncture to clear the ground by indicating at the outset just what our variables imply in the contexts of this paper. The aim is to avoid ambiguity.

(A) Good Governance

Governance is perhaps not a new expression in the extant political science literature and in every political discourse, which is generally referred to as the task of running a government or any other organized entity. But the attempt to make conceptual use of the expression was made popular in the literature by the World Bank (1989), which saw the African political and economic crises as a *crisis of governance*. Scholars have so far made series of attempt even though inconclusive to define governance, but the attempts are only subject to individual perception especially as it relates to their private social, economic and political endeavour.

Governance according to Okpaku (1995:13) is 'the fundamental process by which the lives and dreams of people are jointly pursued, by deliberate and systematic strategies and policies for the attainment of their

maximum potential. It is the combination of responsible leadership and enlightened participation'. Governance rather than being perceived in political term as institution, he contended broadly that it is "the management of the lives of the people in a systematic, organized way for the best possible results, using the consensus of the people's will, vision and wisdom". With this definition, Okpaku is not restricting governance to political institution as would have been envisaged, but to include all human collectively as expatiated by Bello – Imam (1997:3) who view it as:

The mechanism whereby an institution or organization (be it family, the nation-state or elements of it) incorporate the participation of relevant interest groups in defining the scope and content of its work including capacity to mediate among these interests when they enter into conflict and the means whereby it demonstrates accountability to those who support it.

Governance in a broader perspective refers to the function undertaken by a government in maintaining a unified state, defending the territorial integrity and running its economy i.e. an effective and efficient functioning of government towards securing the well being of its citizens. In the words of Brendalyn (1995), it is a "political process whereby those in authority make decisions for the benefit of the citizenry" this means every political process that confers authority on leaders to make decision must be for the benefit of the citizens.

If governance embraces all of the methods – good and bad – that societies use to distribute power and manage public resources and problems, good governance is therefore, a sub-set of governance wherein public resources and problems are managed effectively, efficiently and in response to critical needs of society (UNDP, 1997:9). Effective democratic forms of governance, the UNDP report says rely on *public participation, accountability and transparency*. According to Healey and Robinson (1994) it implies "a high level of organizational effectiveness in relation to policy formulation and the policies actually pursued, especially the conduct of economic policy and its contribution to growth, stability and popular welfare", good governance to them also include openness and the rule of law.

Good governance in this context therefore involves a normative judgment which indicates a preferred relation that should ideally govern relationship between state and society and between a government and a people. A newspaper reported that, it is "the positive actions undertaken by a government to promote democracy and achieve social justice" (*New Nigeria*,

October 3, 2000:8). By implication democracy and social justice are preconditions to good governance.

For governance to be considered good however, scholars have come out with the following attributes: accountability based on the notion of popular sovereignty and public choice, a legal framework that guarantees the rule of law and due process, popular participation in decision-making processes based on political and social pluralism; ability of people to solve their problems their own way; freedom of association and expression, uniform application of rules, and rationality of organizational structure (Bello-Imam, 1997:3).

(B) Empowerment

As described by Whetten et al. (1996:19) empowerment is inclination of people to experience self-importance and self-liberation in which people have control over their own affairs. They also identified five qualities which must be engendered in those they intend to empower or which empowerment is expected to produce. These are; a sense of self-efficacy, self determination, personal control, meaning and, trust in the people (Whetten et al 1996:23). The first creates the feeling of confidence that they possess the capability and competence to perform a task successfully while the second creates the feeling of having a choice in initiating and regulating actions. The third implies ability to influence a change in desired direction while the fourth implies having a value and sense of appreciation for the task being performed. The last quality, trust, represents a sense of assurance of fair and equitable treatment by those in authority as well as a sense of security individually and collectively.

When applied to the task of rural/community development, empowerment becomes a piston in the engine of development. Equally, onus of the task of empowerment which includes both political and economic depends largely on the governments and to what extent government has uphold the practice of good governance. As will be demonstrated in due course, all these variables impact directly on rural/community development. But first, lets examine the concept of rural development.

(C) Rural Development

Contemporary studies on rural development are often hampered by a lack of clarity on the exact meaning of the term. The use of the terms "rural development", "local development" or "community development" (used almost interchangeably) does not assume a uniform aspect because different people have viewed and described the term in different ways. Perhaps we may begin first by examining separately, the two variables involved. Rural area can be viewed as a settlement dominated by extensive use of land mostly

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for agricultural purposes but lacking in basic infrastructure. Development on the other hand represents a process of transforming the whole social system in order to enhance capacity of each member of the society to realize his inherent potentials and to cope effectively with the challenges of life (Mabogunje 1978). Thus, rural development may be conceived of, as mechanism of improving the living standard and socio-economic condition of the vast population of rural communities. This endeavour necessarily requires availability of enough resources at hand. To Aslam (1981), rural development consists of a system of approach involving, in a mutually interactive and supportive process, the integration of economic and social components necessary for sustainable development. These components include physical infrastructures such as roads, electricity and other desires of life; social infrastructures such as co-operatives, community development associations etc. and; administrative infrastructures such as the local government authority, rural development agencies and community development oriented NGOs.

Nevertheless, while rural development appears to have different conceptions for different people, its mode of operation as opined by Adewole (1987:7) involves two essential elements.

- (i) The participation of the grassroot people themselves in efforts to improve their standard of living with as much reliance as possible on their own initiative and,
- (ii) The provision of technical and other services in ways which also make them more effective.

The stress laid therefore, is on the need to encourage rural communities to identify their own wants and needs, and to work cooperatively at satisfying them. These two elements of cooperation are reduced to the form in which rural development is conceptualized as “almost any form of local betterment which is in some way achieved with the willing cooperation of the people (Adewole 1997).

It has also been argued that the focus of rural development should be at organizing and developing available human and material resources in such a way that rural dwellers would be able to meet the basic needs of life viz: food, clothing and shelter as well as possess some reasonable facilities for education, interaction and health (Seniyi 1998:183). Thus three components are identified in this regard – economic, social and political components. While economic component derives from the fact that sustained increase in agricultural production, which requires investment input and trained manpower, is what can make the people meet their needs; social component requires that they should have opportunity to meet their basic needs and that

the distribution of income and assets should be equitable. On the other hand, the political component

Involves improvement in the socio-economic relationship to create a healthy society characterized by mass participation at the local level. This also involves the decision-making process and the organizational set up that are important to successful rural development (Seniyi 1998:183).

Rural or grassroots development with its emphasis on betterment of peoples lot, popular participation and the provision of technical and other services necessarily involves a dynamic interaction between the government, particularly at the local or grassroots level and the various communities. Rural development in Nigeria (as in most of the developing countries) has become an instrument for forging a more constructive tool for government in development by helping on the one hand, to establish a better relationship between the rules and the ruled within the local community, and between the central government and the local authorities on the other. As recognized by the United Nation Economic and Social Council (1955). "The term rural/ community development connotes the processes by which the efforts of the people themselves are united with those of the governmental activities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of communities, to integrate these communities into the life of the nation and to enable them to contribute fully to national progress". The next section is devoted to explanation of the interconnectedness between the variables that have been explained viz, Good Governance, Empowerment and Rural Development.

ESTABLISHING THE INTERPLAY

As already noted, integrated rural development programme remains the best option for development in the rural areas. Thus, a combination of factors such as the right technology, education, access to physical inputs and attractive markets for rural products (i.e. empowerment) are essential (Seniyi 1998;185). But beyond this, an active and sustained participation of the rural masses in such development projects is as well essential. This requires that the people must be fully aware and carried along by government rather than a progressive alienation and marginalization of the people, if the development exercise is to come to fruition. Unfortunately however, most African countries have often neglect this main object and means of development (i.e. human beings) in their development aspirations. As noted by Ake (2001:19), there is less inclination on the part of most African leaders to see their people as the engine room of development. Reason being that they assume that what

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development requires is known and clear: their own leadership and the passive acquiescence of the masses. Thus, leaders are obliged to look outside for aid, investment, technical assistance etc. rather than tap the energy of the people. Consequently, the government and the rural masses further become alienated from each other, a situation that makes sustainable rural development to continue to be a mirage.

The connection between empowerment and development in the rural areas can equally be established at both the political and economic levels. But a common underlying theme here is that the people should be conceived as the means and end of development. Firstly, it should be noted that development is related to and driven by social will in the context of democracy. Democracy here is conceived in terms of 'specific manner of organizing and exercising power in accordance with certain universal norms and principles'. Some of these principles relevant to our purpose here include; the idea that legitimate power or authority emanates from the people, who exercise it either directly or indirectly through their elected representative; the principles of accountability of rulers to the ruled and; right of citizens to participate in formulating ideas and policies (Nzogola-Ntalaja 1997:13 – 14). It is only in this context that the people can be means and ends of development, a necessary pre-condition for rural development take off. Unfortunately, this situation has eluded Nigeria and many other African countries thus constituting an obstacle in the way of rural and even general development.

Equally, economic empowerment of the masses has a direct link with rural development. Economic empowerment makes the people less dependent and less susceptible to external pressures thereby, creating a conducive atmosphere for them to be veritable agents and end of development. One major means of achieving economic empowerment is through acquisition of basic skills and education in specific areas of endeavour. A more relevant area to the rural area in terms of skill acquisition is in agriculture. This is because, a major feature of most rural areas in Africa generally is that not less than 70% of the population are into Agriculture (Audu 2003:173), it is therefore not a misplacement to link empowerment with rural development and perhaps agricultural development. This explains why Ake (2001:142) opined that:

If people are the agents, the means and the end of development, then development has to be construed initially as rural development generally and more specially as agricultural development.

Democracy is a prerequisite for good governance. If this is so, then we can appreciate the relevance of the latter to grassroots/rural development when we consider what usually obtains in the absence of democratic rule i.e. under authoritarianism. Ibrahim (1992:6) while drawing from Ake, noted that under authoritarian regimes the human being; the instrument and object of development itself are excessively abused.

Repression has led to an enormous waste of human resources, the very engine of development. At the level of the community, people have been subjected to such arbitrariness and harassment that even their traditional capacity to cope has been undermined, and for the most part, many of them are in different stages of confusion, withdrawal, despair etc. (quoted in Ibrahim 1992:6).

Considering such scenario therefore, one is left to wonder how development at whatever level can take place.

At another level, the value of good governance in general development and indeed rural development may be better appreciated when we consider the effect of the direct opposite, that is, bad governance. In an extant literature, Odunuga (2001) writes that where people are massively affected through bad governance, there can be no development. This assertion derives from the fact that people will not always exert their energies at the service of a state that continues to alienate the provision of basic amenities engendered by good governance, the people learn to open new horizons and unlock new possibilities. In other words, there is a drive and an urge for sustainable development.

Equally, good governance subsumes the qualities of probity, accountability and transparency. It therefore becomes compelling for any development oriented institution to uphold these virtues. But unfortunately, the entire levels of government in contemporary African and indeed Nigeria have been permeated by corruption, lack of accountability and financial recklessness. According to Idowu (1998:272), "corruption makes nonsense of all fiscal planning and budgeting" (including budgets for rural and other developments). It wastefully depletes the nations inadequate resources, promotes inequality and renders it almost impossible for citizens to address the objectives of equity and justice in their society. Consequently, corruption and lack of accountability will forever remain an obstacle to sustainable development at whatever level.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper has tried to establish the nexus between good governance, empowerment and the task rural development. In doing this, it is realized that effective rural development depends largely on enthrone of good governance and subscription to democratic values such as accountability and transparency and, sustenance of effective participation of the rural masses that constitute the engine room of development. This further creates the need for political and economic empowerment of the people so as to be able to effectively and objectively participate in governmental process and embark on self-help projects. It is however realized that this practice, much as it is desirable still meet with obstacles in most of African countries therefore sustaining a perpetual state of rural under development. In the light of this, it is recommended thus:

1. The government at all levels must as a matter of necessity interact with and incorporate the rural dwellers into the main stream of policies aimed at rural development.
2. The rural dwellers need to be empowered in order to make them useful assets in the development project.
3. There must be deliberate efforts on the part of government to enthrone good governance and its concomitants in order to instill confidence in the people.
4. Rural dwellers on their part need to be more alive and active in community self-help projects. This can be facilitated through formation of community based developmental organizations.
5. A functional relation must be created and sustained between the government especially at lower level and community based development organization.

It is expected that where all these are done, a sustainable development can be assured at the grassroots.

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