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LOCAL GOVERNMENT
ADMINISTRATION IN NIGERIA:
CURRENT PROBLEMS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

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CHAPTER 5

THE ENVIRONMENTS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NIGERIA

by

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Introduction

Like living organisms, the local governments and, indeed, other bureaucracies are conditioned by their environments, and the conditioning is naturally mutual. As Ferrel Heady correctly stated:

bureaucracies, as well as other political and administrative institutions, can be better understood if the surrounding conditions, influences, and forces that shape and modify them are identified and ranked to the extent possible in order of relative importance and if the reciprocal impact of these institutions on their environment is also explored (Heady, 1979:64).

The above perspective is at times referred to as the ecological approach to the study of organizations. The ecological approach involves a systematic effort to relate public administration to its environment. This approach is traceable to John M. Gaus (1947) who drew from the work of sociologists who were concerned with the interdependence of human life and its surrounding environment and from botanists and zoologists who were interested in explaining how plant and animal organisms adapt to their environments. In his work, Gaus sought to identify the primary ecological factors which impinged on American public administration. These key factors ranged from people, place, physical technology and social technology to wishes, ideas and personality.

The ecological approach has also been utilized by Fred Riggs in the *Ecology of Public Administration* (1961) and his *Administration in Developing Countries: The Theory of Prismatic Society* (1964). In this work, Riggs conceptualizes the prismatic model of administrative system which deals with a range of social phenomena and behaviour which influence the political and administrative aspects of life in developing countries. The ecological approach in public administration focusses attention on the dynamic relationship between a public administration system and its total environment; physical, cultural, historical, economic and political.

These variables, to a large extent, singly or collectively determine the content direction, and consequences of policies and policy implementation in the local government. Consequently, the impacts made, and the extent to which the local government achieves its pre-stated goals is contingent upon these variables. It is against this background that we want to devote this chapter to the exposition of the critical environments of the local government in Nigeria, namely, historical, political, social, economic and physical environments. Some

accompanying comments would be made but the full impact of these variables on the local government administration will be treated in chapters.

The Historical Environment

One sure way of understanding the local government is by taking a look at its historical environment. As Professor Ayoade (1992) noted, the origin of modern Nigerian local government is deeply embedded in the colonial period. The British administration established what has been variously called indirect rule, Anglo-African governments, etc. Whatever name it was called, it was a form of local administration in which the British officer superintended the administration. The structure of the administration was interesting. The British resident supervised the traditional ruler who was in direct contact with the people. However, the traditional ruler never had legislative powers. The policies were made by the British colonial officers.

The policies were transmitted to the traditional rulers who hardly understood the logic and rationale of the policies. Nevertheless, they transmitted those policies to their people and expected compliance. Thus, there was no local government in the colonial period. What existed was local administration which, to all intents and purposes, was not more than the activities of the central government at the local level. It was, therefore, a system of relay administration in which policies originated at the top of the colonial administration and the traditional ruler was no more than an administrative courier. It is obvious to say that it was not a democratic arrangement because the people had no say in how they were governed.

The colonial government took a paternalistic view of local government and delivered government from the top. The traditional rulers were collaborators in this administrative deal and thus incurred the wrath of the western educated elites who were effectively excluded from local governance. But even the traditional rulers who were christened native authorities (NAS) were neither native nor authoritative. They did not represent the traditions of the people nor did they understand the administrative messages which passed through them. However, they were comfortable because they were shielded from the western educated elites who wished them denied of these powers.

That was the situation up to the last decade of the colonial period when the British government approved a system of internal self-government. Thus, in 1951 the western and eastern regions passed local government laws which whittled down the powers of the traditional rulers by opting for elected local councils. This was the first opportunity for Nigerians to have a say in the running of their own local affairs. It must be said though that the arrangements made the technocrats very significant in the system. Thus, the council secretary and treasurer were very critical to the running of local governments. In addition to the powers and influence of technocrats, the central government also exercised an undue influence on the activities of local governments. The central governments could create and abolish local governments, dissolve erring elected local governments and must approve the annual budgets of local governments before they can be implemented.

Thus, local governments were effectively subordinated to the central government. Local governments were not autonomous and were, more often than not, agents of the central government at the local level. The only gains of the reform were the reduction of the powers of the traditional rulers and the election of the councillors.

This system remained until the military took over the reigns of power in January 1966. For ten years under the military, different experiments were conducted with local governments. The emphasis was on making local governments development-oriented in order to improve the lots of the local population. However, the civil war which lasted from 1967-1970 made any serious reforms impossible. Local governments were tied closely to the central administration to ensure a proper and speedy prosecution of the war.

Thus administrators were appointed to local governments from the central government to manage their affairs. Perhaps, understandably, local governments lost whatever measure of autonomy that they had acquired. The development, transfer, promotion and discipline of these administrators were centrally controlled, thus making them responsive to the central government rather than the local people over whom they presided.

But that was a passing phase that was necessitated by the war situation. Two main factors accounted for the spate of reforms that took place after the war. The first was the division of Nigeria into twelve states which had the consequences of creating more local governments in the states of the federation. This, therefore, meant smaller, more manageable local government units and consequently creating some political nearness between the people and their local governments. This was a very important psychological change because the people became more aware of governments because their daily lives were touched more by the pronouncements and actions of local government. The development of such political interest, therefore, meant some commitment to the efficiency and efficacy of local government.

The second factor that catalysed local government reforms was the civil war. The civil war had occasioned an immense socio-political dislocation which necessitated a post-war reconstruction. As part of the reconstruction local governments were also reformed in order to equip them for the reconstruction of the economy and the society. Consequently, the western region adopted the council manager system patterned after some American model. The objective was to expedite development at the local level by the appointment of a local chief executive who could take appropriate and prompt decisions. However, as it turned out, it did not succeed because the council manager was appointed by the central government and posted out to the local government. At best the council manager operated like an administrator because his loyalty was to the central government. This, therefore, turned the local government into an administrative outpost of the central government. The power to hire, fire, promote, transfer or discipline the council manager resided in the central governments. Council managers, therefore, tended to be unresponsive to local needs and demands. This happened because some council managers saw their posting as punitive, while others saw it as a waiting period until a suitable vacancy exists in the civil service. A good number of the council managers, therefore, concentrated their attention on developments in the central government rather than in the local areas. Consequently, many of them spent much of their time commuting between their local government headquarters and the state capital. In fact, a good number of them did not live in the local government area and thus missed the opportunity of experiencing the local needs at first hand (Ayoade, 1992).

The second variant of the response to the socio-economic dislocation was the introduction of development administration in the Cross River state. As the name implies, the objective was a rapid development of the localities. However, it was difficult to concretize

the objectives, and development administration turned out to be a laudable idea with little executive capacity to match the objectives. In fact it turned out to be a fad that had little more than a semantic notice.

That was the mood and the situation until 1976 when the Murtala/Obasanjo regime carried out the most fundamental reform of Nigerian local government system. More states had been created to bring the number of states to nineteen and attention then turned to local government. In a fairly radical departure, the regime declared its intention to make local government the third tier of the Nigerian federal system. Thus, the intention was to move the locality to the level of a government characterized by the autonomy of decision-making, autonomy and certainty of funding as well as responsibility for and responsiveness to its local clientele. Thus, in 1976, the federal military government created 301 local government areas whose population ranged between 150,000 and 800,000. By 1991 the number rose to 589.

The Political Environment

One of the most critical local government environments is, perhaps, the political environment. Given the history of local government in Nigeria whose important highlight is the 1976 Local Government Reforms, it is clear that local governments are creations of the central government. According to Amucheazi (1984), in the past, local councils were seen either as agencies of state governments established to provide simple facilities and amenities at the local level and, therefore, with severely limited autonomy or in fact merely an extension of the state administration *per se* and thus denied any initiative. However, with the firm establishment of the local governments as the third tier of government, local governments have now assumed the characters of other tiers of government, rather than being mere state agencies.

Local government invariably has been the responsibility of the state government, the federal government apparently having a little role to play in the affairs of the local governments, but in a federal set-up like Nigeria the central government possesses a universal jurisdiction and, therefore, has a superintending role in the set-up. This superintending role is far-reaching, be it during a military regime or civilian regime; the aim being to ensure that the impact of the political party in power is felt in the states.

A consistent way in which federal government encroaches on the powers of state governments is through politicization of government bureaucracies. As the administrative machineries of federal government expand to coordinate the functions of its agencies in the states, they interfere directly or indirectly with the powers of state governments. The appointment of the controversial presidential liaison officers (PLOs) during the second republic is a clear example of interference of the federal government in the states.

In the same way, the state governments are also guilty of adopting such strategies in their relationship with local government councils. Some states are known to have appointed liaison officers to the local governments. They were also known to have politicized the local government staff by recruiting party loyalists and political associates. It is also incontrovertible that the local government service commissions of the state consist of politicians and other individuals deemed to be loyal to the ruling party. The local government service commission, of course, is the controlling outfit put in place by state governments for the

local governments. What is being said here is that politics at the federal and state government level informs the politics of the local governments to a large extent. It, therefore, follows that the political culture at these levels is also germane to local governments and hence their political environment.

Anderson (1975) defines political culture as widely held values, beliefs and attitudes concerning what governments should try to do and how they should operate and the relationship between the citizen and government. Political culture, according to Egonmwan (1991), like the wider concept of culture, is learned. Political culture is not only inculcated through transmission of politically relevant values, beliefs and attitudes from parent to child over successive generations, it is also social, that is, it is shared by human beings living in organized groups and kept relatively uniform by social pressures. It is, in short, part of group habits. The political culture in Nigeria is that of violence and instability, dissipation of scarce human and material resources on coups, counter coups, election rigging and political wranglings at the expense of development schemes.

Nigeria has witnessed eight successive governments from the time of independence in October, 1960 to date, out of which were two civilian governments and six military administrations. The effect of such unstable political system on the local governments in Nigeria is obvious. It creates problem of succession to offices and leadership of the local governments. Such frequent successions reduce the ability of the state machinery of government to cope effectively. Today it is the executive chairman, tomorrow it is the sole administrator, the next day it is the caretaker committee. Existing projects are, in consequence, usually abandoned and new ones begun as a result of policy dichotomy. The attendant waste of resources from such discontinuity is usually colossal.

Worthy of mention as part of the political environment of the local government is the phenomenon of traditional rulers. There are various types of traditional rulers whose degrees of influence in the society vary from area to area. There are the emirs in the north, the obas in the west and the igwes/ezes in the east. Although their roles in the local governments are not clear constitutionally, it is generally understood that they play advisory role. But we know that some of them, especially the powerful emirs and obas influence to a large extent the leadership of the local governments, thus bringing to bear on them their own political orientation. They are also known to have been consulted during appointments of local government administrators or caretaker chairmen in the absence of executive local government chairmen. Traditional rulers, therefore, constitute significant factor in the political environment of the local government where they command some significant followership, for example, the emirs. The leadership of the local government where such obtains has no choice but to dance to a dictated tune.

of scarce human and material resources on coups, counter coups, election rigging and political wranglings at the expense of development schemes.

The Social Environment

A predominant character in the Nigerian social environment is its heterogeneity. There are upwards of 400 language groups; varying cultures and modes of production; multiplicity of ethnic groups; perceptual and psychological distance between groups; and uneven educational development. Sometimes this has brought about pronounced sensitivity and tribal affiliation and has often been responsible for suspicion and disunity. Thus, the local governments do not have and operate in a uniform social environment.

The population of Nigeria is also a significant social factor in the society today. Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa. The World Bank Population Reports (1992) estimates of Nigeria's population is 100 million. The concentration being in urban areas, high growth rate (3-3.5% per annum), high fertility rate (5.86%), high number of youths and high rate of unemployment are other major characteristics of Nigeria's population. Although the expectation is that local governments should have population of not less than 150,000, some local government areas in the urban areas have three to eight times this number because of the high growth rate.

Religion is another relevant social factor in Nigeria today. Religions are many and diverse, but the two major religious groupings are the Christians and Muslims. Islamic religion is more predominant in the northern part of Nigeria, while Christianity is more in the south. Religion has been known to have affected politics, education attitudes and perception in Nigeria. It has also been associated with violence in the country. Religion has had a significant impact on social and economic development in the country. For example, Christianity was the vanguard of western education in the country, particularly in the south. In contrast, the Islamic religion, as practised in the northern part of the country, appears to have been a major stumbling block to the spread of western education, especially at the early stage, the consequence of which has been a significant educational gap between the south and the north.

This makes education another critical social factor in the country. There is uneven educational development in the country, with the north trailing behind the south. This is, at times, as mentioned above, as a result of religion and other times occasioned by culture. For instance, females in the north are still constrained by religion and culture to be placed under seclusion on marriage. Besides, early marriage and polygamy make it rather difficult for the females to remain in school for as long as they want. The 6:3:3:4 system of the national policy on education is also known to have started later in the north, hence the lack of uniformity in educational system in Nigeria. Part of the implication of such situation is the turning out of citizens with varying orientations, expectations, values and perceptions.

Another social factor worthy of mention is the place of women in the society. Considering the existing culture in the country, it appears that there is gender bias. This bias is against women. There exist some discriminative policies against women which have led to their marginalization, hence some recent efforts for their emancipation and empowerment. The consequence is that women who constitute more than 50 per cent of the population are not offered equal opportunities in the society. Females are not known to have as much right to their parents' properties as males, neither does the forced early marriage help matters in terms of right to their self-determination. Unless some of these issues are carefully looked into, human resources development will be uneven at the local government level.

The Economic Environment

Nigeria has a mixed and dual economic system in which the ownership of means of production is shared between private and the public sectors, with the latter having become increasingly involved in the modern industrial sector in recent years. Nigeria is one of the countries in Africa which is richly endowed with resources, ranging from fertile land, through countless minerals, to promising human resources. Time was when the problem

was what to do with surplus oil revenue. There was, therefore, balance of payments. This was so up till the middle of 1970s.

By the late 1970s, the balance of payments problem had assumed crisis proportions, destroying any semblance of a social contract between rulers and the ruled. The country is now experiencing crisis of liquidity and indebtedness. As at October 1990, Nigeria's foreign debt stood at U.S. \$29.43 billion. Nigeria has leadership problems no doubt but the World Bank (IMF) induced structural adjustment programme (SAP) has had a devastating effect on the country's economy. SAP is essentially a strategic management option adopted in the face of declining economic fortune. SAP has led to worsened conditions. Poverty has increased, and it no longer sounds radical to describe the process taking place in Nigeria as underdevelopment. The quality of life has declined as prices have risen, as infrastructure have crumbled and services have deteriorated and as employment opportunities have been reduced. Almost everyone has suffered, but the rural peasant, urban slum dwellers, female-headed households and children of rural poor have felt the negative effects of adjustment most severely.

The local governments in Nigeria depend on the federal government for financial allocations. The local governments also depend on the citizens, now pauperised by SAP, for rates, etc, in other to keep going. But we know that the federal government is now constrained, given a situation of adversity and the citizens also hard up. The local governments have, therefore, found themselves in a tough economic environment. Besides, state governments which exercise considerable control over them are at times known to be tapering with local government grants.

The implication of the hostile economic situation for the local governments is that reasonable development projects are stalled, with the exception of perhaps areas that get the feel of oil and mineral producing area development commission (OMPADEC). A further implication is the difficulty in attracting and retaining skilled personnel because the existing staff meet their basic needs with difficulty.

The Physical Environment

Like the social environment, the local governments exist in varying physical environments. Nigeria is a very large country, occupying a geographical area totalling approximately 923,769 square kilometres. Local governments in the northern part of the country have large expanse of land. Some local governments in Delta and Rivers states are in the riverine areas. Others are in topographically difficult areas. A good number of the local government areas are linked to the state capitals and other local government areas by earth roads. Others are linked by tarred road, now poorly maintained because of the declining state of the economy.

As expected, most local governments located in urban areas enjoy considerable infrastructure like schools, electricity, markets, pipe-borne water, etc. This situation contrasts pitifully with what is obtained in the local governments located in the rural areas. Example, Dasin' Hausa, covering about 22 square kilometres in Fufore local government area of Adamawa state has only nine (9) primary schools, no secondary school, and only one (1) hospital. The situation is the same in many other parts of that state (Asadu *et al.*, 1994). The infrastructure in the rural areas in Nigeria are generally poor, with the springing ones

being out of community efforts, most of the time.

Conclusion

The environments of any political or administrative institution determines, to a large extent, its effectiveness and its ability to achieve set goals. The local government case is typical. We have, in this chapter, discussed some critical environments of the local government in Nigeria namely, historical, political, socio-cultural, economic, and physical environments. We find all of them impacting sufficiently on the life of the local government. They form basis for comparing and assessing different local governments. The performance of local government depends on these critical variables. Nevertheless, the performance of the local governments affects some of the variables also (e.g. culture, infrastructure) because of the reciprocal character of administrative institutions and their environments.

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