

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION AS CATALYST FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

Over the years, the Local Government Administration in Nigeria serves as agent of mass mobilization and as instrument of conflict management. This research uses secondary information to examine the historical evolution of the Local Government Administration, the major causes of conflict and the conjugal methodological ways of managing such conflict at the Local Government level. It recommends the review of the autonomy of the Local Government Administration, tolerance, education and adequate training of employees, and Conducive working conditions as effective ways of removing conflicts.

Introduction

All over the globe, the Local Government Administration is seen as a veritable instrument for the sustainability of the affairs of the majoritarian populace in the local government area. It emerged from the Pre-island native administration, such as obtained in the Emirates mostly in northern Nigeria, Oba in the Mid Western Nigeria, and the village/clannish self-government that was practiced in the Eastern part of Nigeria. Also, the local government dates to the colonial period of the British indirect rule system of administration. Basically, the Local Government system and the indirect rule system are synonymous, both in theory and practice.

In 1976, the Federal Government took positive steps to reform the Local Government system by making it politically, economically

and administratively autonomous. Inherent in this arrangement is the transfer of the power to manage conflict and other powers. The sustainability of the Local Government Administration depends on the instrumentality used in managing the various forms of conflict that tend to mar the progress of grassroots administration.

Using available secondary information, this paper reviews the historical development of the Local Government Administration, causes of conflict, and ways of managing conflicts in the Local Government system in Nigeria.

Conceptual clarifications

There are indeed as many conceptions of what the Local Government represents as there are scholars and institutions. By the legal dimension, Local Governments are seen as the third administrative tier of government that is constitutionally recognized and given the responsibility to administer the rural areas as well as to cater for the immediate needs of the people in the area. This arrangement or system is considered very important because both the federal government and state government within the federation are located far away from the people and the communities that make up the local government area, hence their incapacitation to address qualitatively and quantitatively the needs, demands and problems confronting the people in the rural communities constituting the local government areas.

Obikezie and Obi (2004) observed,

That the Local Government Administrations are agents of mass mobilisation and development has always given rise to series of scholarly postulation.

Also, according to Odenigwe (1971),

Local Government is a system of Local Administrations under which local communities and towns are organized to maintain law and order, provide limited range of social services and public amenities, and encourage co-operation and participation of the inhabitants in joint endeavours toward the improvement of their condition of living.

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that Local Government Administration is characterized by the involvement of the people in administration of their own area in terms of rural development and other issues.

The term, catalyst, means a person or thing that stimulates a radiation of change in a person, thing, community, society or state, etc.

Conflict is a common inevitable phenomenon in all human life. Watson (1992) sees conflict under a dysfunctional canopy, by saying that,

Conflict is synonymous with words, like battle, fight, clashes, discord or dissension.

Despite the divergences, these scholarly definitions of conflict and Local Government Administration have witnessed multifarious conflicts, which tend to affect the goals and objectives of the realization of both the political administration of the rural majoritarian populace. For purposes of this paper, conflict is seen as antagonistic interactions, which occur to either block an ambition of some other goals' realization. Conflict management is seen as simply method of handling conflictualities.

Research questions

- (a) What are the prevailing causes of conflict in the Nigerian Local Government Administration?
- (b) What are the basic mechanisms of handling such conflicts?

Purpose of study

The purpose of this study is to examine the possible causes of conflict in the third tier of government as well as suggest possible ways of curbing conflict situations in Local Government Council.

The Development of Local Government in Nigeria

The Local Government system in Nigeria has passed through different historical epochs. Each epoch has been characterized by the exigencies of the period, philosophical pre-occupation of the reformers and their intentions and purposes. The earliest development of Local

Government Administration dates back to the origin of colonial administration when the Native Authority or Indirect Rule System of administration evolved. It was simply a native administration system based on the indigenous institutions. This system was first experimented in 1903 in the Northern Region. Later, it spread to other regions as a result of the shortage of manpower (British officials) and lack of funds and knowledge of the vast areas making up Nigeria and the desire by the British rulers to develop and protect indigenous institutions.

From 1951, starting from the Eastern Region, and later Western Region in 1952, a new system of Local Government Administration came on board. The reason for this was that the Regional Governments at Enugu and Ibadan, following the 1951 Macpherson Constitution, were not comfortable with the Indirect Rule system, which alienated the people especially in the area of political participation as practiced in the Western world. Consequently, the new reforms assigned to Local Government Councils the role of promoting representative Local Government System. The participatory Local Government system practiced in the Eastern and Western Regions were butchered by the first military coup d'état of 1966.

In 1976, the new Local Government system introduced by Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo marked another watershed of the Local Government in the country. Most regions in the country have been following the structure and administrative prescriptions of the reforms.

The Origin of Conflict in Local Government Council

Sources of conflict have been categorized in different ways, although these conflicts are manifested by one: the convenient jurisdiction on different tiers of government, which is the problem of law itself. These conflicts have some legal and institutional framework for the regulation of the functions of each tier of government.

For the purpose of this paper, the various sources of conflict could be:

1. **Speculative autonomy:** The autonomy of Local Government in Nigeria is very speculative. It does not actually have the

power to do certain things that could solve the problems of the citizenry. It power is in the hands of the State and Federal Governments. The State Government takes decisions for the Local Government in terms of personnel recruitment, appointment, promotion, etc. This forms a source of conflicts between the Local and State Governments (Nwanegh, 1997; Diakwa, 1998; Idike, 1995; Agubuly, 1985).

2. **Political factor:** Power is a competing game of politics. The Nigerian political system is that of gun and machet affair or “do or die.” Politics is regarded as a shortcut to survival and to having plenty. The act of getting political power should not be taken for granted. Most holders of elective political posts get their positions by rigging, thuggery and other forms of electoral malpractices employed to actualize their ambition. It is for this reason that when these politicians get the power, they are more egoistic than altruistic. Machiavellian policies are formulated to victimize and marginalize the wrong party members and for self succession. This also leads to disorder in the Local Government, making capacity and achievement wide apart. Joseph S. Tarka (1964: 53) revealed that, “I seek power reward myself and my friends and to punish my enemies.”
3. **Cannibalistic tendency:** Most Nigerian politicians come to loot the public treasury. The euphemistic slogan, “Ghana must go bag,” has become a popular concept used by opposition politicians to point to the sharing of booty by the powers-that-be. The motive of the people’s representatives (councilors) in the Local Government Council is to enrich themselves and help in the political strangulation and promotion of inadequacies of both human and material resources bequeathed to the Council.
4. **Constitutional factor:** The Nigerian Constitution has been perceived as a repugnant document of intellectual verbosity and has become mere legal jokes that culminate in conflict with other levels of government.
5. **Economic factor:** The Local Government economy is nothing but a mere plantation of hope that has become artificially

dependent upon misleading agenda of internal and external economic parasites of political convergence (Bello, 2004). Since Local Government Councils are themselves generally financially poor, personal ambition in which Local Governments forget about the goals and dimensions they are to achieve, but seek economic advantages for themselves, leads to clash of interest over resource, psychological needs or values.

6. **Socio-cultural factor:** Socio-cultural factors are more pronounced among the factors that stimulate or aggravate conflicts in a Local Government. A Local Government employee may have strangled the work ethics of the Council. By the time intended disciplinary actions are about to be taken against such conducts, the same employee may advance to liquidate the effort against the intended actions in order to get supreme pardon. In other words, all strategies are combined through friends, relations, politicians, directors, councilors, and divine parent to make the boss forget the offence committed by the employee.
7. **Natural factor:** The origin of the state of Local Government arises from man's social nature, the purpose of which is to promote good life. According to Epicureans philosophical contentions, human beings are naturally selfish. For this reason, selfishness and greed are magnanimous factors of conflicts in Local Government Councils. Conflict over scarce resources in Local Government Councils occurs when two or more employees want some things which are often not enough to go round. In such a case you may see Directors or subheads of sections attacking the resource, and the heat of the conflict affects the goals of the Local Government Council. Adedeji (2000) submits that the struggle among Local Government functionaries over misappropriated Council's funds leads to strained relations among them. So also intercommunity dispute. Schedules of also lead to conflicts in some Local Governments.
8. **Territorial native of man:** Ardar (1967) states that a territory is seriously guarded by inhabitants and infringement upon it by

other group members will create strained relations. This explains frequent conflicts between the Secretary to the Local Government, who is vested with the authority to issue liquor licenses and to receive money accruing from the source, and the Director of Finance and Supplies, who want to collect such monies on liquor licenses. Human beings are generally envious and aggressive. Man's brain consists of three distinguished parts, two of which are animal and only one is truly human. Each human being harbor in himself the impulses which could degenerate to murder torture, war and other forms of conflict with others in the Local Government.

9. **Leadership factor:** Good leadership can lead to both effectiveness and efficiency. Leadership styles in Nigerian Local Government are susceptible to causing interpersonal conflicts. The comportment of most leaders in Local Government Councils is purely on totalitarianism and tyrannical on the subordinate. The leadership style is purely on scientific goal achievement. The attitude of the political executives is purely careless on matters that can stimulate growth in terms of career climbing and welfarism. Sometimes, conflicts in Nigeria Local Government Council arise as a result of conflicting goals of the management and the employees The Nigerian Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) makes demands, but the management reneges on their implementation. The employees may resort to some aggressive behaviours, such as sit to rule, lockout, etc., which ends up with the two sides at loggerhead. Consequently, the relationship between employees and management become worsened, and this can lead to stupendous conflict.
10. **Communication factor:** Communication is a way of sending and receiving information and giving and receiving feedback. If the information is wrongly received or decoded, conflict may arise as a result. On the other hand, if a message is wrongly encoded, the receiver may be confused, leading to conflict.

- 11. Value factor:** What we cherish counts. Conflicts of interests abound in the Local Government. Some of them are the most difficult to resolve or even discuss because the employees often become defensive and take positions based on their perception or stress type assumptions.

Strategies for Handling conflict Situations in the Local Government Council

Conflicts can be managed in a more constructive way rather than leaving it to escalate and degenerate into violence that affects goal dimension of a Local Government Council. In order to reduce conflict in Nigerian Local Government system, councilors should capitalize on the concept of fairness than on equalitarianism, which is not easy to put into practical reality.

Local Government functionaries need to realize that conflict is endemic in all unions and that it is inevitable in aspects of humanity, except among the dead. Adediji (2000) posits that Nigerian Local Government should regard conflict as temporary “rapports teandus” analogous to a tide, which rises occasionally to obey the call of nature and falls down with time in order to effect inevitable equilibrium and order at the seaside.

Political Executives in Local Government Council should therefore avoid fanning conflicts that may occasionally arise between one individual and the other, or employees and management. But should rather often seek for alternative mechanisms by which conflicts could be resolved, removed or reduced. Wherever a Local Government functionary observes a sort of imperfection in a senior or junior colleague, it is just important to suspect the dominant influence of the animal brain over such action or inaction and therefore overlook the matter.

Managers of Local Government Councils should overlook human errors if men cherish symbiotic relationship and cordiality of human relations, since jealousy and envy, which are manifested consciously or unconsciously from time to time, are quite natural traits of human beings. Otherwise, there could be no interaction or

relationship between Local Government functionaries and their subordinate colleagues. In a democratic set-up, expressions of various views, values, culture, political ideologies, languages vary. As such, there must be willingness openness and respect for other employees' shades of opinion. There should be no roadblocks to communication, so as to avoid conflict in Local Government Council.

Stuart (1974) posits that it is only if all opinion could be freely expressed that those hearing or reading them could decide where the truth lies. In any case, pacific coexistence of various opinions, cultures, values, political beliefs are indispensable conditions for the survival of human organizations, such as Local Government, and indeed, humanity itself.

Too much workload can be minimized by the top functionaries of the Local Government Councils. Work load can precipitate certain frustration that can be transferred to volatile relationship. Issues of labour, funding and salaries can pose ethical questions in the actions of the political executives, sectional inter-ethnic leaders and intra-ethnic managers. Corruption needs to be restrained.

Political executives or council representatives should monitor news reporters regularly so that such reports may not provoke demonstration in the Local Government Council. Ibie (2000) opines that vigilant Chairmen hardly get into trouble because they are always vigilant on certain reports that are adjudged too sensitive and need to be sometime suppressed in the mass media in the overall interest of the council area of States or as a whole.

Local Government functionaries who have the ability to read and interpret situations and attitude portraying care and consideration for how others feel, are strong instrumentalities for removing conflicts in Local Government Councils. Employees of Local Government Councils should be given a chance to go for development training. This approach could assist the management to have mastery of human engineering. Conflict resolution can, thus be enhanced in the Local Government Council. Of course, this can be achieved by inducing the subordinate executives to change their perceptions of goals or their

perceptions of probabilities. This process may also remind the subordinates of goals the employees might have forgotten.

Emergency strategy can be used to avert conflicting situation in the Local Government Council. The strategy can be referred to as fire brigade approach where a punitive measure is adopted to protect the Council from wanton destruction. It involves proscription of striking ill-men and other related actions. Local Government Council should use negotiation method as means for handling conflicts. Negotiation can help in resolution of all types of conflicts in a more effective and mutually satisfying way.

Asayu (2000) writes that “we negotiate with a customer on an item we want to purchase, negotiate with peers about which recreational activities to pursue, negotiate with our bosses on working hours, and with organizations over contract provisions and earning expectations. The management of Local Government Council must take cognizance that the Local Government employees have individualistic needs and wants and it is the Local Government that should actualize such ambitions without damaging the objectives of the Local Government Council. Local Government should strike at a balance between the employees’ goals and those of the Council for proper utilization of resources.

The Local Government functionaries must ensure that the work environment is such that discourage hostilities to their colleagues. Thus, amenities and services necessary for solving the problems facing the employees in the cause of discharging their duties and responsibilities should be provided by the management.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conflict *per se* is inevitable in any human organization or society. Although inherent perennial conflicts have been treated as systemic variables, there is a lot to be done by Local Government functionaries to make employees meet up the underlying philosophy of the Councils as well as actualize the dire egocentric needs and wants of the employees. The absence of conflict in Local Government Councils is of great importance for the realization of these objectives. This paper

has identified effective means of resolving, reducing or removing such conflicts. To this end, it is recommended that:

- The autonomy of the Local Government System should be reviewed with a view to making it more effective.
- Attitude of tolerance should be adopted by the Local Government system operators, no matter the level and intensity of conflicts.
- Employees should be educated and trained adequately to enable them perform as they ought to.
- Conducive working conditions should be provided.

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