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The Challenge of Bottom-Up Paradigm and Popular Participation in Sustainable Rural Development of Nigeria: The Way Forward

ADEFILA J. O (Department of Geography Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria)

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Author(s)

ADEFILA J. O

Department of Geography
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

E-mail: olufiladr@yahoo.com

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Abstract

The paper is entitled 'The challenge of bottom-up paradigm and popular participation in rural economic development of Nigeria'. There is the clamour for a shift from centre-down to bottom-up paradigm particularly among the rural developers considering the back-wash effects of the latter which tends to undermine the economic growth and development of the rural areas. The paper aims at reinforcing the adoption of bottom-up and popular participation approaches to rural socio-economic transformation in spite of the attendant difficulties. It examined popular participation as a concept relating to gaining political accessibility through democratic process, mobilizing and educating the masses to support government programmes and policies as in the case of present removal of fuel subsidy which generated hot debate and resulted in industrial action by labour unions with a view to changing government decision. But popular participation is being confronted with serious challenge of control in Nigeria. There is corruption in the high places, armed robbery attacks, religious intolerance, political violence, tribal discrimination and insecurity of life and properties thereby threatening corporate existence of the country. The paper advocates for the strengthening of a bottom-up strategy instead of top-down through decentralization of sufficient powers, functions and resources in favour of rural majority at the grassroot and by doing so, it will foster a balanced development between the centre and the subordinate local administrative units. Moreover, democratic governance must be allowed to reign supreme not only to attain the national goals of 2020 but also enable Nigeria to assume her rightful position in the world. One concludes that if the local communities are given the opportunities to get involved in the decision-making process that often affect their condition of living, engage in productive ventures, self-help communal projects, and harnessing the creative potentials, talents, skills combined with physical and human resources, it would go a long way to reduce not only the over-dependence of the people on the government to provide everything they need but also help to improve socio-economic well-being in the backward, under-privileged and disadvantaged rural areas.

Keywords: Popular Participation Sustainable Rural Development Challenge

Introduction

In recent times, there is a growing awareness that various approaches for rural development like community development, integrated rural development, river basin development, institutional framework and agricultural policies

did not achieve the goal of reducing rural poverty, improved living standards and increased agricultural productivity (Adefila, 2006). Even subsequent efforts such as better life for rural women, family economic advancement programme, poverty alleviation programme, micro-finance credit scheme and

the fadama phases have no significant improvement on the plight of the poor masses on a sustained basis. Indeed, economic growth has not been sufficiently combined with social justice and fair-play in the allocation and distribution of benefits from economic growth in terms of gainful employment, increased standards of living, increased per capita income and drastic reduction in spatial inequalities between the centre-core and peripheral rural areas (Adefila, 2008).

International, national government and non-governmental agencies realized that the fundamental failure of many rural development projects, schemes and programmes is largely attributed to inactive, ineffective instrument and generally absence of local peoples' participation (Omoleke, 2000) particularly in the formulation, implementation and execution of policies that directly affect their well-being and forgetting that the rural communities are the intended beneficiaries.

Critical to our understanding of the role of popular participation at the local community level is the related concept of decentralization. Yet the prevailing view at the present seems to be that decentralization happens only when the centre is sufficiently motivated to transfer powers and resources to the local administrative units (Balogun, 2000). It must be established however, that the increasing clamour for popular participation has generated enough momentum to drive the process of decentralization towards local level development (Oyugi, 2002). This paper advocates for the possibility of forming a strong centre-periphery alliance for the purpose of expanding the scope for decentralization in local administrative units and thus, bringing about a rapid socio-economic transformation in the lagging and deprived areas. It will in turn foster a balanced development.

One considers the active involvement of the leadership at the grass-root (bottom) rather than concentration of power at the top (centre), to give substantive objective of decentralization. The centre is expected to share power and functions among the various constituents of a political community and thus enables an increasing number of people that cut across

unions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), professional bodies, industrialists and a host of others, identify themselves with the yearnings and aspirations of developing the rural areas through popular participation approach.

Conceptual Framework

There are some fundamental concepts that constitute the bedrock for the understanding of the present discussion and they include – the concepts of popular participation, bottom-up paradigm and rural development. Each of the concepts is discussed below.

Popular Participation

The concept of popular participation is conceived in literature as people's participation which is borrowed from political science as a discipline that relates to devolution and decentralization of powers, functions and responsibilities between the central government and subordinate local administrative units (Maeda, 2004). The crux idea is that people particularly the rural populace should be given the opportunities to contribute maximally to decision-making on issues of economic growth and development that could improve their state of well-being. (Gana, 1994) had remarked the rural dweller is both the subject and the object of social and technological agent of transformation within the rural setting. In other words, it implies that the transformation should be initiated, formulated, planned, and implemented by the rural people with other factors coming into play such as resources and personnel. Balogun (2000) observed that the participation of the rural poor in economic development may involve the following:

- (a) Establishment of cooperative organizations in unity with a view to breaking the monopoly of power and resources controlled by privileged few in the society.
- (b) Identifying the multi-dimensional rural needs and problems.
- (c) Dedication and commitment through collective efforts to get the problems resolved particularly through self-help and communal self-developmental efforts.

- (d) Ability to raise efficient and dynamic leaders from among themselves that can mount political force that can be patronized by the affluent, advantaged and privileged ones on mutually beneficial terms such that the rural community can assess her own share from economic growth and development in terms of technological changes and reduction in spatial inequalities between the centre and the peripheral regions.

Bottom-up Paradigm

This is an approach put forward by Stohr and Taylor (1991) in rigorous search for solving rural problems of neglect, under-privileged and deprivation. The notion of bottom-up is conceived as a development strategy that places the rural communities at the fore-front in regional planning process. The bone of contention is that development should commence from below (bottom) that is, the grass-root as against from above (centre). Gana (1994) highlighted the essential components of bottom-up approach as follows:-

- (a) Provision of broad access to land as a major resource and other natural resources within their domain;
- (b) Revival of old, territorially organized structures for equitable communal decision;
- (c) Granting of higher degree of self-determination to natural and other peripheral areas in the utilization or transformation of existing institution to promote development;
- (d) The choice of regionally adequate technology to harness the territorial resources;
- (e) Giving priority to projects that satisfy the basic needs of the people in the rural areas and raising agricultural productivity.

The bottom-up approach seeks to remove the draw-backs of centre-down paradigm which concerns controlling the back-wash effects of localization of economic growth and development. Berry (1992) and Mydal (1996) highlighted the backwash forces to include withdrawal of factors of production (land,

labour, capital and entrepreneur) and raw materials from the peripheral areas to the centre thus, the centre continues to be more developed in terms of socio-economic prosperity at the expense of the rural hinterland (Adefila, 2008). To this end, the bottom-up or the development from below paradigm aims at creating dynamic development impulses which centre-down has failed to achieve.

Rural Development

There are two basic concepts here that are married together namely, 'rural' and then 'development'. There is some technical difficulty in defining the two concepts. The term rural often connotes a non-urban sector characterized by a small-sized settlement, dominance of agricultural practices such as farming, fishing, poultry, animal husbandry and hunting (Mabogunje and Gana, 1991). In Nigerian context, Olatunbosun (1995) simply remarked that ruralism is strongly associated with anything poor such as poor health care, education, low income per capita, infrastructural facilities, and poor condition of living. One can add other economic variables such as abject poverty, deprivation and neglect.

On the other hand, the concept of development is often used synonymously with economic growth. The concepts are equally different in the sense that while economic growth relates to substantial increase in the gross national product (GNP) or the income per capita, economic development embraces not only the quantitative increase in the national output but also qualitative improvements in the state of well-being (welfare) of the individuals as contributors to the national growth and development (Adefila, 2008). Moreover, where there is development, the economy will witness a sharp reduction in unemployment, abject poverty and spatial inequalities. In modern economic thinking, Adelment (1995) had earlier remarked that development entails social justice, equity and fair-play in the distribution of essential goods and services in the society.

The Rationale for Planning with People at Grassroot

It ensures even process of development where majority of the people are able to have access to

basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, qualitative education and health care facilities. Essentially, it is to bring development to the grass-root and that planning should commence from the rural communities (bottom) in which the yearnings and aspirations of the rural populace that constitute the majority can be satisfied. Olatunbosun (1995) had earlier remarked that Nigeria neglected the rural majority. Moreover, the rural man should be given topmost attention he needs to realise the dreams of establishing egalitarian society where no one is oppressed, discriminated against either by tribal or religious affiliations.

Omoleke (2000) had suggested that it is possible to adopt the principles inherent in Christaller central place theory to choose the optimum sizes for communities to be designated as foci points. The physical and economic planners would need to cooperate (NITP, 1997) with each other in the process of selecting central communities as a base for planning. While the economic planner allocates the resources, the physical planner is in best position to site development projects so as to avoid localization of socio-economic facilities. The selected centres can generate into growth poles as indicated by (Rodell, 1995; William, 1995) in each locality and this is in conformity to the suggestion of the theory of planning from below that emphasizes the spread of socio-economic facilities to rural hinterland instead of concentration in few urban cities in Nigeria.

The third tier of government is expected to promote socio-economic transformation in their respective areas of jurisdiction (Amucheazi, 1999) but it is rather unfortunate that the opposite is happening in Nigeria where states and local governments cannot sustain themselves even for a month without depending on monthly subvention from the federation account. Indeed, once the statutory allocation fails or not forthcoming, operations of the local and state governments become paralyzed. There is every need to tap the potential resources in terms of physical, material, capital and human resources at the local level and make them function towards overall growth and development in their domains. Omoleke (2000) highlighted some benefits of planning from the grass-root and they include:-

- (a) make their desires met;
- (b) It enables the government to legitimize its credibility and
- (c) Allows the grass-root to have inputs in planning process which affect their life. For example, it is easier for local government councils to collect relevant data on the number of unemployed persons in its own area of jurisdiction than for the federal government at the centre. Indeed, it is rather difficult for the federal government (centre) to know precisely the needs of the local people.

However, as elegant and profitable the planning with people at the grassroot is, in equal manner is the challenge that can mar the approach to rural socio-economic transformation.

The Challenge of Popular Participation

Political units whether federal, state or local that adopt popular participation will inevitably be confronted with obvious challenges ranging from the control, unity, participation and equitable resource distribution (Balogun, 2000). In this regard, the most pertinent issues in assessing popular participation in rural development process are the participation and control. Essentially, (Peil, 1995) considers participation in body politics that is, decision-making process that affects the state of well-being of group of people. One is really happy that some political power has been transferred to the grass-root in Nigeria. The rural populace has the statutory mandate to decide who the community wants to represent her interest at the local, state and national assembly through popular election at the polling stations. But it is regrettable enough that Nigerians do not allow democratic process to function as one would expect as long as there are cases of rigging, snatching of ballot boxes, killings and disfranchisement of eligible voters which often resulted in wrongful and disgruntled persons to emerge as leaders.

Voting is just an integral part of popular participation. Landau and Eagle, (1991) incorporates the idea of having close contacts with government officials to resolve personal, groups, organizations and community's problems or to offer suggestions for a change of policy, paying community tax, and law abiding.

Jones (1995) identified execution of self-help communal projects such as building of culverts, bridges, schools, town halls, ultra-modern markets, road rehabilitation, health centres and road construction. Indeed, involvement in those projects constitutes forms of participation which are essential for political, socio-economic development. The Second National Development Plan (Nigeria, 1970 -74) recognized the role of communal self-help projects could play in bridging the development gap between the urban and rural areas. The policy document was restated in the Third National Development Plan (1975-80) encouraging communities to embark upon projects that government can give financial grants and technical assistance to such communities. But the problem has always been increased number of abandoned projects emanating from poor maintenance culture and incapacitation of the communities to run the projects on sustainable basis.

Political Accessibility

Participation as a political access is an input into the political system from below or grass-root. People use to come together and participate in decision-making which affect their conditions of living through representations, constituting themselves into organized pressure groups in order to have strong bargaining power with government and expressing their opinions on national issues (Reagan, 2003). For instance, the current policy of federal government to remove fuel subsidy that culminated in astronomical increase in fuel pump price from the initial #65.00 per litre of petrol to #140.00 per litre of which the Nigerian labour congress (NLC), Trade union congress (TUC) and civil society cannot but embark upon an indefinite strike in order to show their displeasure with the obnoxious government policy. Accessibility could take the form of involvement in community programmes. Moreover, political accessibility can involve organizing and participating in peaceful demonstrations and rebel against oppressive and tyrannical government.

Essentially, it is to have access to decision-making units from the grass-roots. This form of

participation is crucial to the success of genuine democratic governance where people are free to choose their leaders without intimidation and threats to life (Balogun, 2000). However, in Nigeria democracy is still at experimental stage and it is doubtful if it could be sustained under the cloudy atmosphere of political violence, religious intolerance, armed robbery attacks, insecurity of life and property.

Political Mobilization

The net effect of popular participation and accessibility is the mobilization of people by government towards a specific programme and activity. For instance, the military regime of Olusegun Obasanjo in 1977 introduced 'operation feed the nation' which was a programme meant to produce enough food and 'green revolution' was launched by Sheu Shagari's administration as the first civilian President of Nigeria in 1979. Surprisingly, the period marked unusual increase in food importation bill especially rice. In both cases, government had to mobilize people to support the programme but they are initiated from the top or above as against from bottom or below. The decision flows from top to the bottom and it explains in part why such laudable programmes failed to achieve the desired goals.

Parallel to the programmes, is the mobilization strategy that was launched in 1987 geared towards mobilizing the creative potentials, talents, and values of local communities in order to compliment government efforts in development process. The development of rural area in Nigeria constantly agitates the mind of governments but the way and manner to achieve this laudable goal largely remains a problem. With the existing huge land, labour, mineral and material resources, the government believed that the missing link in the struggle for rural development is effective mobilization. It is believed that appropriate strategy must be devised to mobilize the nation's massive labour resource, the talent, skill, value and creative knowledge embedded in each community and directed towards the national and more importantly, the rural development (Gana, 1987:16). To this end, the federal government established the Directorate of social mobilization (MAMSER) in 1987 believing that

mobilization constitutes awareness and a vital strategy in rural and national development. Webster (1994) noted that the central idea of this strategy is that true development begins with the mobilization of the creative potentials which involves exploration and discovery of the energies and indigenous technological knowledge embodied in individual and communities and the use of these, as potent tools to achieve self-sustained process of development. Gana (1987) remarked that social mobilization is the process of pooling together, harnessing, actualizing and utilizing potential human resources for the purpose of development. It is essentially where people are made aware of the resources at their disposal and also motivated to collectively utilize such resource for the improvement of living conditions. The social mobilization focused on mass mobilization, political education and mass education. As elegant as the programme was, frequent changes in political leadership marred the success of the programme.

The Challenge of Control

Indeed, any form of government that does not legally ensure autonomy of community at grassroot as they make decisions which affect their state of well-being, is not a popular approach to governance. In Nigeria, the local government reforms Act of 1976 is a welcome idea which guarantees some degree of autonomy for local administrative units. The brain behind the creation of more states and local governments is geared towards bringing economic development to the door steps of the people at the community level.

In this context, the challenge of control that is, the authority refers to the ability of political elites at the centre, state and local levels to maximize control over the units of administration such that the presence of each tier of government is effective and efficient in its discharge of statutory functions to the people (Omoleke, 2000). This is a vital area that deserves proper attention of the federal government if Nigeria wants to progress and takes her rightful position in world by the year 2020.

The situation is becoming worrisome in Nigeria where there is no proper accountability,

transparency and due process not strictly followed. Indeed, there is corruption in the high places, smuggling, armed robbery attacks, insecurity of life and properties become the order of the day and remain unchecked. In recent times, the ugly situation is manifesting itself in forms of political violence, religious intolerance, tribal discrimination, civil unrests and put them together, they are now threatening the corporate existence of Nigeria. The way forward is that Nigerians should sink all differences, tolerate other people's culture and develop a common national goal of building a strong egalitarian and democratic governance that pave way for popular participation.

Concluding Remarks

The essence of decentralizing power and functions of the government is to give opportunity for a balanced development through popular participation at the grassroot thereby breaking the monopoly being enjoyed by privileged few in the country. But it is observed with dismay that the purpose of creation of more states and local governments in Nigeria has largely remained efforts in futility. The reason is that as the number of tiers of government increases, the more the agitation and the more people at the grassroot continue to suffer from abject poverty, unemployment, and low standard of living, poor infrastructural facilities such as roads, water supply, electricity, education and health. The basic needs of the rural people have not been adequately addressed by the government. Lipton (1994) had earlier remarked that as long as there were spatial inequalities in terms of resource distribution in favour of urban centres, the tendency was the continued mobility of people from the peripheral regions to the centre for economic motives. Todaro (2001) expressed similar opinion in his differential wage theory to explain the mechanism for regional income inequalities and labour mobility. This is really true to Nigeria's situation and other developing countries because resources are localized in few urban cities to the neglect of the rural populace...By and large, the time has come to harness the creative potentials, talents, skills, crafts, values and resources both physical and human, capital and energies of rural populace for the purpose of transforming local

communities from present dependent individuals into independent and self-sustaining communities. The local communities can become viable and productive to combat all sorts of socio-economic problems if only if the central elites could give the rural people the latitude to function and get developed.

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