

Functional Local Government Autonomy in Nigeria: Thesis for a Community Participation Model

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Abstract

The paper focuses on how local government autonomy can be effective and efficient. Recent research findings indicate that local governments in Nigeria are not productive, not efficient and not effective because of lack of autonomy, be it financial, administrative or political autonomy. Hence, there is a need to examine the deficiencies in the operation of local governments, and come up with a process model that can enhance functional local government autonomy. Therefore, relying on Descriptive Analysis method and Democratic Participation theoretical framework, the study examines how community participation in governance can be an impetus to achieve the objectives of autonomy, and proposes a Community Participation Model, as a way to strengthen an autonomous local government performance, otherwise, full autonomy will achieve nothing with the present state of local governments in Nigeria. The model further illustrates how the Community Development Associations can participate in governance to ensure that the planning, implementation, and evaluation represent the grassroots felt-need. The study recommends the following to actualize the functionality of the model: constitutional reforms to restore local government autonomy, enabling laws mandating the creation of Community Development

Associations in all parts of Nigeria; and the States governments granting special fund to strengthen the operation of the Community Development Associations.

Keywords: *Autonomy, Community Development Association, Community Participation, Local Government*

1.0 Introduction

The global concern in recent time is on improving the human development, especially in developing and Third World nations. One of the strategies being espoused and focused on by various nations and development partners is the strengthening of grassroots and community development by enhancing the capacity of those that are most likely to be affected. Nigeria is a decentralized federation with a three-tier government: the Federal, the State and the Local government, which is the lowest and closest to the people.

Although, local government was created in Nigeria for grassroots development, its general impact is debatable. Available findings from secondary data indicate that local government autonomy- financial, administrative, and political- is a major impediment to the contributions of local government to the grassroots and rural development in Nigeria.

Furthermore, there is a general awareness and debate on what should be the structure and

function of local government, to drive development within the context of Nigeria, as contributions to the ongoing constitutional amendment process in the National Assembly (National Legislature), which includes granting of full local government autonomy. The question is, can the autonomy be beneficial within the present state of local governments in Nigeria?

The assumption of this paper is that, relying on various findings concerning the constraints on the capacity of local governments to drive political development in Nigeria, there is a need to start evolving new local government structures that can guarantee autonomy-ready-capacity to drive the new initiative, otherwise, the autonomy will be an additional burden and an instrument of mis-governance. Hence, this paper examines a new structure that will accommodate and empower the community and the beneficiaries of local government programmes in the governance processes,

2.0 Conceptual Explanations

2.1 Local Government

In basic terms, local government (LG) refers to the tier of government closest to the people at the grassroots level, which is vested with certain powers by the constitution to exercise control over the affairs of people in its domain. Hence, the concept of local government involves a philosophical commitment to democratic participation in the governing process at the grassroots. This implies the devolution of legal and administrative authority, power and personnel, by a higher level of government to a community, with a will of its own, to perform specific functions, within the wider national framework (Adedire, 2014).

Another perspective distinguishes the nature of local government in different countries based on the system of government in practice. In a Unitary system of government, local government can be defined as a non-sovereign community, which possesses the legal right, but it is essentially an administrative agent of the central government. In a Federation, local government refers to the political subdivision of the nation, constituted by law, and granted power to generate revenue and

mobilize the people for the responsibilities that are beneficial to all. (Fatile & Adejuwon, 2014).

However, regardless of the socio-political arrangement of a country, the *raison d'être* for the local government system is to bring governance and service delivery to rural and underserved communities, while also serving as an avenue for deepening democracy and decentralizing power to facilitate greater citizen participation in electoral processes and decision-making. It stimulates political development at the grassroots level (Osakede et al, 2016).

However, Local government has been constitutionally recognized as the third tier of government in Nigeria since 1976. Thus, its functions and roles are also well-defined and stated in the 1999 Federal Constitution. Local government serves a two-fold purpose: the first is the administrative purpose of supplying goods and services; the second is to represent and involve citizens in identifying specific local public needs and its accomplishment. Hence, the roles and responsibilities granted the local governments in Nigeria are spelt out in the Fourth Schedule of the 1999 Constitution. They include:

a. The consideration and the making of recommendations to a State Commission on Economic Planning or any similar body on:

- The economic development of the State, particularly in so far as the areas of authority of the Council of the State are affected, and

- Proposal made by the said Commission;
Collection of rates, radio and television licenses;

c. Establishment and maintenance of cemeteries, burial grounds and homes for the destitute or infirm;

d. Licensing of bicycles, trucks (other than mechanically-propelled trucks), canoes, wheel barrows and carts;

e. Establishment, maintenance and regulation of slaughter houses, slaughter slabs, markets, motor parks and public conveniences;

f. Construction and maintenance of roads, streets, street lighting, drains and other public highways, parks, gardens, open spaces, or such public facilities as may be prescribed from time to time by the House of Assembly of a State;

g. Naming of roads and streets, and numbering of houses;

h. Provision and maintenance of public conveniences, sewage and refuse disposal;

i. Registration of all birth, death and marriages;

j. Assessment of privately owned houses or tenements for the purpose of levying such rates as may be prescribed by the House of Assembly of a State; and

k. Control and regulation of movement and keeping of pets of all descriptions, out-door advertising and hoarding, shops, kiosks, restaurants, bakeries and other places for the sale of food to the public, laundries and licensing for the sale liquor (Muazu et al, 2017).

However, the effectiveness and the ability to discharge the above responsibilities depend on other variables, in which autonomy is central.

2.2 Local Government Autonomy

The term 'local government autonomy' connotes local self-government or grass root democracy. It also indicates the local government management authority with the will of its own and freedom to develop policy direction and pursue its development plan without undue outside interference (Amah, 2018). Local autonomy is the freedom or independence of the local

government on clearly defined issues, responsibilities, as well as separate legal identity from other levels of government.

Local governments, by the principles of their creation, are expected to exercise political, administrative and financial autonomy to enable them operate effectively as a distinct tier. Political and Administrative autonomy entails powers such as the freedom to recruit and manage their own staff, while financial autonomy implies financial freedom, void of the slightest interference from any other tier of government in the management of the affairs of the local council (Ugwuanyi et al 2016).

Akpan and Ekanem (2013) identify five key indicators of local government autonomy. First, the local government unit should have a legal personality distinct from the state and federal governments. Second, the local government ought to have specified powers and functions distinct from the state and federal governments. Third, the local government has to operate independently of the state and federal governments, thus it is not an appendage or field office of the state or federal government. Fourth, local government ought to have the ability to make its own laws, rules and regulations. Fifth,

local government should have the ability to formulate and execute its own policies and the right to recruit, promote, develop and discipline its own staff. Autonomy is not an end itself but a means to achieve the local governments' objectives, hence, the operational context, in which it is adopted, determines its relevance.

2.3 Community Development Associations

Busari-Akinbode and Temilola (2020) define Community Development Associations (CDAs) as groups formed by voluntary members of a given geographical territory, with the common interest of improving the living conditions in their society. CDAs refer to a group of people within the same landed confines who have agreed to come together and work together with a common objective; to improve their residential area, for living to be easier and safer (Adelesi, 2015). CDAs can also be referred to as Self-Help Groups, Community Development Unions, or Common Interest Groups.

CDAs serve as a means through which governance can be felt at the local level. Through their activities, the government is able to operate a bottom-up approach to community development, while the people enjoy the dividends of participatory and effective governance. According

to Akinsorotan and Olujide (2007), the activities of CDAs have yielded positive results, in terms of the execution of self-help projects, which include the provision of health facilities, market stalls, roads, schools, post offices, wells, boreholes, pipe-borne water and electricity.

As an organized community group, CDAs are positioned to collate the views of members and articulately present it at the local government level. If given the opportunity, it will influence the decision-making process to accommodate the developmental priorities of the various communities. Lagos State was the first state in Nigeria to enact an act to propagate and streamline the operation of the CDA in the state. Other states include Ogun State, with a step further in creating State Ministry for

Community Development to supervise the operation of the CDAs. The structure, according to the Act, is illustrated diagrammatically below:

Fig:1 Relationship flow of CDAs in Lagos State, Nigeria

3.0 Theoretical Framework: Democratic-Participatory Theory



The proponents of this theory include C.B. Macpherson, Cole Pateman, and Carol Gould. The central argument of the theory of Participative Democracy is that democratic participation should not be limited only to election and representation. Rather, to the citizens too, in order to collectively determine their social relations, and broaden it to a more active, direct, and extensive arrangement. Therefore, the range of issues, and the forum, through which these issues emerge, should be expanded to facilitate the achievement of both individual self-determination and social solidarity (Brian & Hansen, 2019).

This theory further argues that advancing the level of political participation (to the maximal level) of all the citizens in the public spaces, in government frameworks, and in fora for the political decisions, will lead to the development of the simple citizens (Schwartz and Galily, 2017). Thus, the goal is to promote the level of public participation in different fora of public decision-making in a liberal democracy. The theory also reiterates the importance of high-level political activity of civil society with the goal of broadening the participants in the decision-making process, in the

community, the state, and the international system.

Furthermore, the theory combines elements of both Direct and Representative democracy (Aragones & Sanchez-Pagez, 2009). Participatory Democratic theory canvasses for the maximum participation of citizens in self-governance, where citizens have the power to decide directly on public policies while, the politicians implement the policies (Hilmer, 2010). Thus, while citizens can influence policy decisions, they do not make them, as it obtains in a direct democracy. Participatory democracy obtains at the local and state levels where the citizens have multiple access points to influence decision-making.

One of the strengths of the Participatory Democracy is that it is pivotal to good governance by providing an opportunity for the citizens to participate directly and indirectly in the decisions that affect them (Keutgen, 2021). Also, Participatory democracy seeks to either provide an alternative or complement the Representative democracy (Wainwright, 2005). Participatory democracy promotes transparency, accountability and legitimacy by increasing the participation of citizens in public decision-making, ensuring transparency and public accountability in

government actions (Olivia, 2022). In addition, it elicits a significant educational value through the citizens' engagement and empowerment at the local level. Citizens develop various necessary skills, become well-informed, and cultivate a greater sense of political efficacy to contribute and participate in policy-making (Lupien, 2022).

However, Participatory Democracy poses some dangers to new democracies or transitory societies, which is one of its shortcomings. In practice, the conditions necessary for the success of participatory democratic practices are often not available. Managing the mutual role expectations of all stakeholders at different levels simultaneously can be complicating because of the lack of either financial or human resources (Trombi et al, 2009). The theories have been criticized for not taking into account the power dynamics that exist within participatory mechanisms, and overlooking gender structural inequalities (Lupien, 2022). These participatory mechanisms often mask, rather than eliminate these inequalities, especially in societies where they are firmly entrenched.

Some critics argue that participatory governance reduces the quality of democracy. They are of the perspective that elite groups with good resources

and organizational strength could manipulate the 'grassroot democracy' and 'participatory governance' as tools to pursue their own interests, which might be to the detriment of the common good. In poor societies, citizens lack a comprehensive understanding of the complex problems of sustainability. Hence, they prefer to focus on short-term, easily manageable solutions, and thwarting the policy decisions that are necessary for the long run (Geisel, 2009).

4.0 Local Government Performance in Nigeria

Despite the resources and constitutional provisions that position local governments as the best agent for effective service delivery and grassroots development, local governments still perform below expectations. In terms of project execution, local governments have not been able to deliver adequately, due to the appointment of caretaker or transition committee by the state governors to run the local government councils. As posited by Ananti et al (2015), the state governors have reduced these caretaker committees to puppets through the instrument of the State-Local-Government Joint-Account. Hence, the LG Councils are incapacitated in executing any project without the approval of the state governor.

In assessing the performance of local government councils in Nigeria, Makinde et al (2016) revealed that during the colonial period and in pre-civil war Nigeria, local governments contributed to the development and transformation of both rural and urban areas, partly due to the internally generated revenues they raised to fund the services they provided. However, after this period, the efficacy of local government administrations in Nigeria began to diminish, as they failed to deliver the much-expected dividends of democracy to the grassroots. Consequently, they fell short of expectations.

There are empirical findings that support the views that lack of autonomy is the bane of the local governments in Nigeria. For Ahmad (2013), the federal and state governments have maintained an excessive level of influence and control over local authorities. This has hindered local authorities from being effective; hence, there is neither adequate representation of the electorates nor equitable distributions of resources and services.

Uzoka (2022) investigated the inter-governmental relations between the three levels of government in Nigeria, and its effects on local government autonomy. The findings of the study show that

local governments suffer the most in this relationship as some state governors do not subscribe to the independence of local governments, because of the federal allocations meant for the local governments. Hence, local governments are unable to serve effectively as a viable incentive for grassroots governance and development.

In another study, Anayochukwu et al (2022) examined the problems confronting the Nigerian local government system. The paper also attempted to investigate the factors that make it difficult to practice complete local government autonomy and governance in Nigeria. The findings showed that the constitutional provisions and the state interference in local affairs have contributed to a lack of local government autonomy and governance. Furthermore, Okoh et al (2022) investigated the correlation between local government financial autonomy and rural development in Enugu State. The finding of the study proved that there is a local government financial autonomy deficit in Enugu State resulting from manipulation of the State-Joint-Local - Government Account among others by the state government and this has greatly undermined efforts made by local governments towards development of rural communities.

However, there are empirical findings from similar studies comparing the performances of local governments where the communities are involved and where they were not. In the paper, citizen's participation in policy making at the local government in South Western Nigeria, Moriyole & Adesopo (2015) assessed the extent and impact of citizen's participation in policy making at the local government level in southwestern Nigeria. The findings of the study show that policy making processes in the local governments provided too little for citizen's participation. However, participation had significant impact on policy making in southwestern Nigeria local governments. From comparative perspective, Amakihe et al (2017) carried out a comparative analysis on how citizen participation in local government elicits government responses in Nigeria and United States of America (USA). The findings of the study indicate that local government system in US engages the citizen in local governance and thus, creating a sense of obligation on the part of the elected member of government to be accountable, transparent, and responsive to the community. Contrarily, the activities of the Nigeria local governments are shrouded in secrecy without citizens' involvement in governmental activities. As a result, drivers of

local governments in Nigeria carried out their selfish functions without any sense of loyalty, responsiveness, and accountability to the local electorates but to their governors and godfathers (Amakihe et al, 2017).

In the same vein, Jiman & Foziah (2016) sought to investigate the efficiency of public participation in developing countries, Nigeria being the case study. The findings of the study show that despite the axiomatic desirability of public participation, there has been insignificant motivation by the citizens. Hence, citizens are unable to influence any development decisions. This challenge limits socio-economic development of the society.

In addition, Edih (2020) examined the impact of communal participation on good governance in Bomadi and Patani local government areas of Delta State, Nigeria. Findings reveal that there was an appreciable level of communal participation and representation in the two local government areas. Also, communities and wards are represented in the local government council administration through elected chairpersons, councilors and appointed supervisors and advisers. However, participation is not well entrenched in the local government council. This

affects the possibility of good governance through popular representation in decision-making.

According to Oikhala & Tobi (2021), the perennial failure of the Nigerian local government system should be attributed to the status of local government in the Nigerian federal structure. The Nigerian federal arrangement, particularly the relationship between local government and other higher government tiers, has continued to undermine the autonomy of the former to operate optimally. Moreover, apart from poor implementation of recommendations of various committees, inconsistencies in the provisions of the constitutions, inadequate funding, and resistance to the autonomy by state governments have collectively undermined the effectiveness of local governments as the agents of grassroots governance and development in Nigeria.

5.0 Community Participation in Governance

The local community's participation in governance refers to the capacity of the citizens to engage in public management affairs. This participation exceeds citizens' involvement in the usual democratic processes, like voting, to keep policymakers accountable to the public. It places emphasis on active involvement in decision-making to facilitate proactive responses of the

government to the demand of the citizens (Ricciardelli, 2018). Participation in governance is the process of engagement in governance. It involves the direct or indirect participation of all stakeholders in decision-making about the public policies, plans and programs (Quick & Bryson, 2016).

There are emerging global developments that are propagating the contemporary growth of the community participation in democracy. There are growing discontents due to the inability of the democratic institutions to implement the principles of democracy satisfactorily in the second decade of the 21st century. Added to this is the loss of legitimacy of democratic institutions, prompting distrust in political parties and public administration, essentially due to the failure of public governance (Crozier et al, 1975). Hence, as a tool in public governance, citizen participation assists in resolving the crisis of the contemporary democracy (Stankov, 2021).

Furthermore, the impact of economic and technological advancement of the 21st century further awakened the post-materialist values in the people, and the need for a sense of belonging, respect, self-expression and self-realization. Consequently, with significant improved political

skills and interest, people increasingly participated in decision-making at various levels including policy-making (Inglehart, 1977). Hence, it is a response to the old tools of service delivery and decision-making approaches of representative democracy inherited from the 20th century that have proved inefficient and ineffective.

Also important is the increasing shift from centralized practices and operations in governance to decentralization, which combines the responsibilities of local governments with democracy, thereby, making accountability to stakeholders imperative. Hence, it created avenues and opportunities for local communities and citizens to participate in local governance (Avis, 2016). According to Stankov (2021), the new style of participation affords the citizens a more important role in participating in specific decisions. Local governments have moved to the front line of social and political change, and they need to work closely with citizens in delivering a complex agenda of public services, economic growth and social welfare (LGSP, 2008).

There are various arguments for public participation in governance, and one is that participation is in itself a significant end in a

democratic society. Participation plays a pivotal role in a democracy because the citizens are presumed to be important stakeholders that should be involved directly or indirectly, through their elected representatives, in the formulation and implementation of public policies that may have effect on them (Quick & Bryson, 2016). It enhances citizens' competence and familiarity in public policy-making process (Michels, 2011; Avis, 2016). Hence, public participation constitutes a fundamental part of public-government relations in a democracy. Community participation facilitates inclusive governance, active

citizenship and resilient citizens. Findings of various researches have proven that the adoption of participatory mechanisms in governance produces favorable results in terms of effective public policies. Participatory mechanisms such as referendums, citizens' fora, citizens' juries, collaborative governance and participatory budgeting enhance the knowledge of the citizens on government actions. Participation can serve as a learning opportunity, and this would empower both the stakeholders and right holders, and increase the capacity and ability of participants to use this knowledge (Okali et al, 1994). Also, the government gains more knowledge and understanding of the specific concerns of the

people, which enables the public administrators to build trust with the people and allay their anxiety or hostility (Irvin, 2004).

Another argument posits that public participation facilitate the equitable distribution of the limited resources, by creating the resources to address the future problems, enhancing trust and legitimacy, and generating knowledge and interest in governance processes (Quick & Bryson, 2016). Furthermore, participation provides an opportunity to monitor manifestations of corruption, and political clientelism. Participation involves more stakeholders, and provides an opportunity to the less represented groups for expression. This increases the overall social trust, increases civic engagement, strengthens the sense of political efficiency, and addresses the high level of political apathy concerning the democratic institutions and governance (Offe, 2011).

However, there are perceived consequences of community participation as expressed in some other arguments. One of such unexpected consequences of most participatory processes is that it intensifies the existing inequalities in the society. The opportunity cost of participating is often high for the poor people, which often results in the proliferation of participants who are

wealthier, better educated, higher social status, and more politically connected (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Thus, these practices end up exacerbating, rather than mitigating the inequalities.

Also, some researchers argue that the implementation of participatory initiatives serves to mask new forms of state control. As posited by Taylor (2007), in the global South, although the wide ranges of participatory mechanism are cloaked in decentralization, they are characterized by power imbalances between participants, explicit and implicit co-optation, cost-shifting, and continuing centralization in disguise. The traditional city elites siphon resources devoted to local interventions, while external programme planners design programmes, which are not sustainable due to the disregard for strategies that would enable the communities to restructure themselves (Gittell, 2001).

In the same vein, it is doubtful that all citizens have the skills and competence to make reasoned political judgments, and this negates the idea of making informed decisions. Also, citizens' effects on governance are limited in a situation where the authorities decide to subjugate their decisions for personal interests (Stankov, 2021). Participation is a very burdensome and costly resource for both

citizens and institutions, and this reduces its effectiveness. The implication of this is that the inclusion of all citizens becomes unattainable due to differences in the levels of participation in different social groups (Smith, 2009).

However, it can be adduced that the success or failure of the participatory approach to governance depends on the degree to which local communities are willing to mobilize their capacities, and the level of government's responses to the concerns of the people. The legitimacy of the participatory processes, diversity and inclusion of relevant participants, the nature of expertise in governance are inherent essentials that can determine the effectiveness and efficiency of the participation in governance.

6.0 Operation of a Local Community Participation Model

The operation of the proposed model will involve the structure, the instruments, and the process of governance that can reflect the Nigerian grassroots and community development context. Presently, two organs; the legislature and the executive constitutionally constitute the structure, while the instruments are the by-laws, plans, policies and programmes. On the other hand, the process includes decision-making,

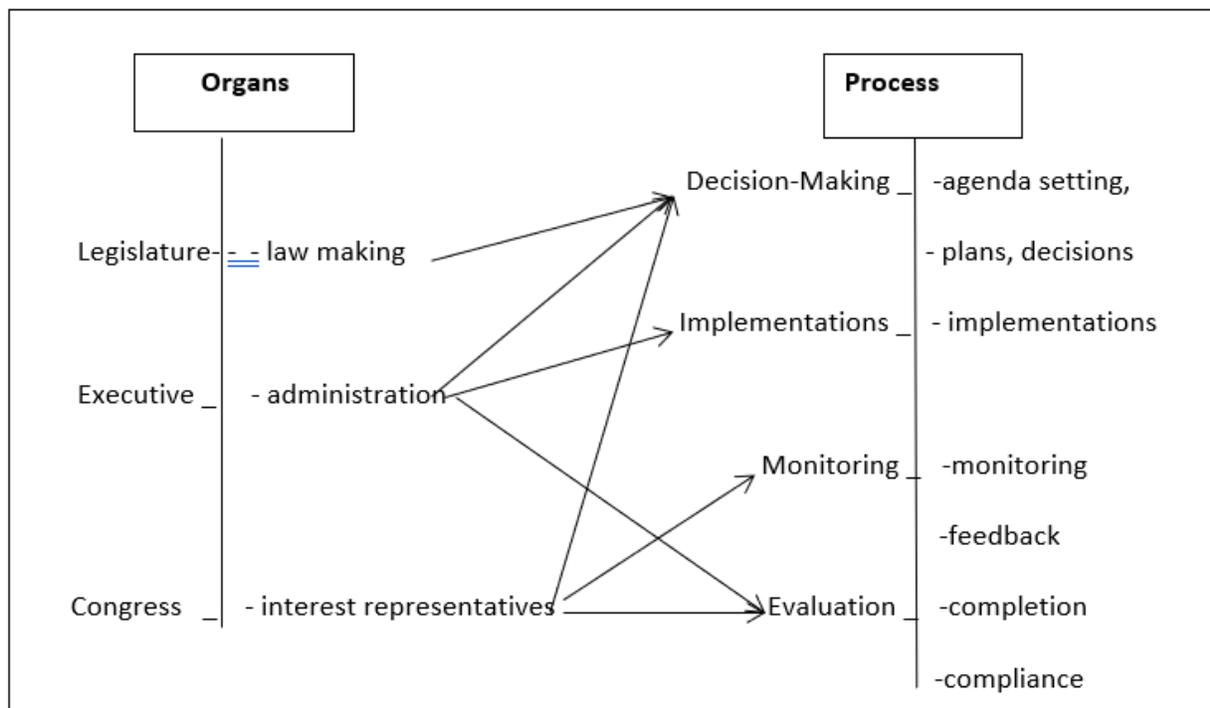
implementation, monitoring and evaluation. However, the proposed Local Community Participation Model favors the redesigning of the operation of the local government.

The new structure will include the legislature, the executive, and the congress. The legislature comprises all the elected councilors, who are representing various wards (smaller

constituencies), with one of them as the leader. The executive comprises the chairperson, the vice-chairperson, the secretary, and the supervisory councilors appointed to monitor local government departments. The new additional organ is the congress, which will comprise the Heads of Area Community Development Committee (CDC). This will be a group of non-governmental volunteer participants

Fig. 2: Operational Flow Chart for the Local Community Participation

directly representing the people’s interest in local government governance processes.



The main responsibility of the Congress will include:

- ❖ Participating in agenda-setting, planning, implementation, and monitoring
- ❖ Ensuring that the programmes and projects reflect the immediate felt-needs of the people.
- ❖ Presenting feedback to their constituencies, and collating the opinion in their communities for agenda-setting at the local government.
- ❖ Ensuring compliance to good governance processes.
- ❖ Facilitating ownership of development programmes in their communities.

7.0 The Essentials for the Operation of the Model

To achieve the objectives of local government autonomy through the Local Community Participation Model, the following are the essentials for an effective operation:

1. Constitutional reforms: the ongoing constitutional reform must not only guarantee full autonomy, but must also create a Congress with

powers and responsibilities as an additional organ for the operation of local government.

2. There must be enactment of laws mandating each state government to create a ministry that will ensure the establishment of Community Development Associations (CDAs), and supervises their operations.

3. There must be additional legislative provisions that will mandate state governments to set aside special funds as operational grants to support the development projects of various CDAs in their states.

4. There must be extensive enlightenment programmes by National Orientation Agency to enhance the capacity of the people on the new responsibilities of the CDAs.

8.0 Conclusion

It is imperative that the level of rural development in Nigeria does not justify the efficacy of decentralization of the Nigerian federation. The governance processes at every tier of government hinders the political involvement of the citizens, and consequently, it is difficult to monitor the implementation of good governance processes. Autonomy is a fundamental issue in the discourse on the effectiveness of the Nigerian local government.

However, it is apparent that a fully autonomous local government, without reconstructing its structure and processes, may not make any difference. Therefore, local community participation would reposition and redirect processes of governance to achieve the intended benefits of autonomy. Hence, the National Assembly would have a great role to play by reforming the Constitution.

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