

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

This paper examines the challenges and prospects of local government and community development in Nigeria. It reviewed the concept of local government, community development and community development practice in Nigeria. The paper concludes that while the basic constitutional mandate for the creation of local government is to meet the peculiar needs of the people at the grassroots, it is however pathetic to note that local government has demonstrated incompetence in this regard. Given the myriads of challenges faced by local governments in its constitutional roles, it recommends among others that while local government should remain as a third tier of government, it should be empowered by constitutional provisions in areas of resources and enabled environment for the development of its communities.

Keywords: Community, Challenges, Development, Practices, Prospects

Introduction

Local government is the lowest tier of government anywhere in the world. It is very important because it is very close to the people as it is government at the local level created to decongest the functions and burden of the other tiers of government; bring about democratic climate of opinion; provide valuable political education; provide two - way communication; and ensure even and rapid development (Nwaodike, 2013). He further says that local government is a government at the grassroots with powers to elect its representatives. It is saddled with responsibility to provide social welfare for the local people with relative interference from the higher authority. It is usually created by a law of the

State in a federal system of government and the law of the central government in a unitary state and given adequate power and autonomy to discharge the functions assigned to it. However, local government needs to be viable before achieving these purposes. Local government administrations (LG) globally vary in size and structure and operate under different arrangements based on the system of government indifferent nations (Alao, Osakede, and Owolabi, 2015). Local government council is the third tier of government in Nigeria with the responsibilities of bringing governance closer to the people and facilitating socio-economic and political development (Sani, Salisu and

Bello, 2019). Among the characteristics generally manifested by a local government include a subordinate system of government or subunit of a federal/central or state government charged with powers to perform legislative, administrative and quasi-judicial functions as the case may be. It also has the power to formulate policies, prepare budgets and a measure of control over its own staff, with a view that it is rightly positioned to ensure unhindered and efficient service delivery (Chukwuemeka, Ugwuanyi, Okolo, and Onuoha, Otinche, 2014).

Local government in Nigeria operates a unified administrative system while the 1976 Local Government Reform fixes the population of a local government not less than 150,000 and not more than 800, 000. In all, there are 774 local governments in Nigeria including the four area councils in Abuja. The Local Government Service Commission was established under the Local Government Law N0 14 of 1976 and contained in the Revised Laws of Lagos State of Nigeria 2015 Cap L43 to handle staff matters particularly those in senior category while the State Assembly has oversight functions on its operation. In addition, Governor's office, the Ministry of Local Government and Finance Ministry exercise authority in respect of establishment matters. The Office of the Auditor General of the state among others, performs some regulatory functions over the operations of local government. Ajayi (2000) argues that among other reasons for the existence of local government are the needs to toll in line with modern administrative /community development

practices. This position finds expression in the need for decentralization, democratic participation, speedy socio-economic development at the grassroots, bridging of communication gap and serving as a platform for training of future leaders. The World Development Report (2003) cites in Thenmolli and Kuppusamy (2013) strongly supports devolution for making service delivery work for the poor. Recently, a number of scholarly books, articles and panels at conferences have dealt with the growing importance of local government as providers of local services, valuable partners in community development arena and a successful laboratory for local democracy (Rondinelli, 2006; Forbrig, 2011).

Community development can be described as the process where community members come together to take collective actions and generate solutions to common problems. Community wellbeing (economic, social, environmental and cultural) often evolves from this type of collective action being taken at a grassroots level (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2014). Community development ranges from small initiatives within a small group to large initiative that involves the broader community. The concept of community presupposes the mobilization by government or the people of that locality, local human and materials resources to be used in the development of the community in term of project execution or implementation. It is also a population living in legally established area where people have some social, economic and cultural features in common which enable

them to pursue a common goal. Here is a consensus among development practitioners, government officials and foreign donors on the proactive role being played by the local government in participatory community development. Community development fundamentally involves a series of actions and decisions that improves the situation of a community, not just economically, but as a strong functioning community (Cavaye, 2003). He argues that through action, participation and contact, a community becomes stronger and this relies on good networks, organisational ability, skills, leadership and motivation of the local government. It shows that local government plays a significant role in bringing the best out of the community it serves in order to achieve productivity and sustainability.

Local Government in Development Process

Local government is an important and inevitable unit as the grass root level government in a federal arrangement. This form or structure varies between countries. For example, in Nigeria, it operates a single tier, while in Britain, USA, France and India are multi tiers. Chukwuemeka, Ugwuanyi, Okolo, and Onuoha (2014), Otinche (2014) and Tumini (2011) note that Local government has the following characteristics: a given territory and population, an institutional structure; it is a separate legal entity with a range of powers and functions authorized by delegation from the appropriate central or intermediate legislature. Lastly, within the ambit of such delegation, autonomy is

accorded within its sphere of jurisdiction and competence.

In addition, Section 7(1) of the 1999 constitution states that:

The system of local government by democratically elected local government council is under this constitution guaranteed and accordingly the Government of every state shall subject to Section 8 of this constitution ensure their existence under a law which provides for the establishment, structure, composition, finances and functions of such councils.

It is, however, inconsistent that despite the provision of the 1999 Constitution to enhance the capacity of the local government system to be a democratic institution, effective and efficient in service delivery; such is not the experience as observed by Kyenge (2013) and Aina (2006). Local government, particularly in a federal arrangement is routed in decentralized authority and power from the central/regional government to the lower or grass root level (Youmand Feiock 2015). This in effect is to facilitate efficiency and administrative conveniences.

Community Development Practice

Community development means different things to different people. For some people, it may be working with a group of individuals on concerns central to them; whereas for others it is a process or a philosophy believing in the capacity of people to solve their own problems. Community development is often

associated with terms such as community building, community vitality, community mobilization and community empowerment (Gibbon, Labonte and Laverack 2002). There are many definitions of community development, reflecting its political and indeed contested nature. According to Combat Poverty (2000), community development is a process whereby those who are marginalized and excluded are enabled to gain self-confidence, to join with others and to participate in actions to change their situation and tackle the problems that face their community. This definition is viewed by Lee (2003) as rooted in a broad understanding of citizenship that sees people having a right to influence and participate in the decisions that affect them and to have their experiences and views listened to and acted on. Community development, therefore, becomes the means or process whereby people can achieve this right. Community development is a range of practices dedicated to increasing the strength and effectiveness of community life, improving conditions, especially for people in disadvantaged situations, and enabling people to participate in public decision making and to achieve greater long term control over their circumstances (Banjoko, 2005). From a humanitarian perspective, community development is seen as a search for community, mutual aid, social support, and human liberation in an alienating, oppressive, competitive, and individualistic society. In its more pragmatic institutional sense, it may be viewed as a means for mobilizing communities to join state or institutional

initiatives that are aimed at alleviating poverty, solving social problems, strengthening families, fostering democracy, and achieving modernization and socio-economic development (Amakye, 2017). According to Mendes (2008), community development is the employment of community structures to address social needs and empower groups of people. It is a prime mover of people because it gets people to actively participate in issues that affect them. Community development is fundamentally about the development of community involving a sense of common identity, capacity and purpose. It can take the form of unpaid active citizenship with community members organizing themselves and taking on leadership roles (Amakye, 2017). Community development emphasizes empowerment, equality, social justice, participation and representation. This means that community development is fundamentally concerned with decision-making processes affecting users, community-based agencies and services. It is premised on a bottom-up approach, which means enhancing the capacity of communities to determine goals and to pursue issues of importance to them, and to make decisions affecting their lives, for example, the direction of services and the allocation of funds (Centre for Effective Services, 2009).

Conceptualizing community development in the twenty-first century, Matarrita-Cascante and Brennan (2012) indicate that community development is a process that entails organisation, facilitation, and action, which allows people to establish ways to create the community they want to

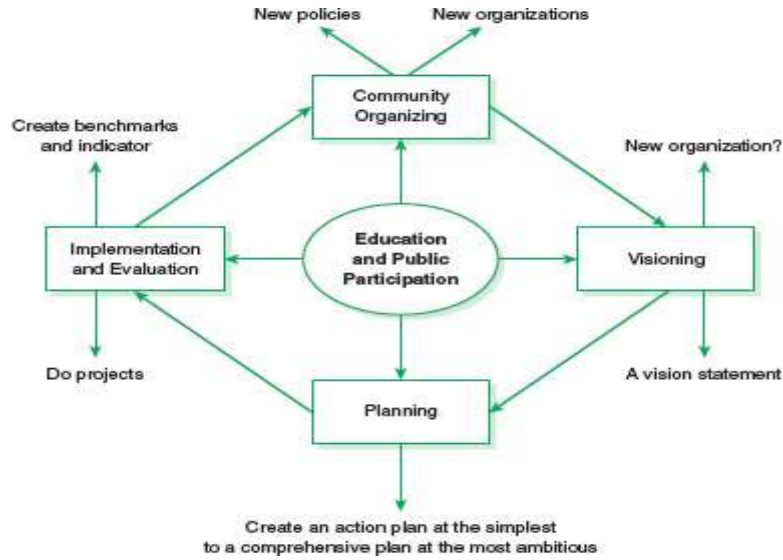
live in. It is a process that provides vision, planning, direction, and coordinated action towards desired goals associated with the promotion of efforts aimed at improving the conditions in which local resources operate. As a result, community developers harness local economic, human, and physical resources to secure daily requirements and respond to changing needs and conditions. Vancouver Coastal Health (2013) also states that community development is the process of helping a community to strengthen itself in order to improve people's lives. It addresses issues that have been identified by the community, and builds upon existing skills and strengths within the community. According to Brophy and Shabecoff (2001) and Mayer (2004), community development has three goals: to change the economy of the neighborhood, to improve the physical nature of the neighborhood, and to strengthen social bonds between people in the neighborhood. Community development is a way of strengthening civil society by prioritizing the actions of communities, and their perspectives in the development of social, economic and environmental policy. It seeks the empowerment of local communities, both geographical communities, communities of interest or identity and communities organising around specific themes or policy initiatives. It plays a crucial role in supporting active democratic life by promoting the autonomous voice of disadvantaged and vulnerable communities (Mayer, 2004; Brophy and Shabecoff, 2001).

In the words of Kleiner, Rave, Silverstein, Bell, and Well (2004), community development has a longer history and it is as old as human existence, because it seeks to improve man's standard of life. Community members who have the capacity to do something to enhance their quality of life are portrayed as having the ability to think, to decide, to plan and to take action in determining their lives. Therefore, in any community development programme, both economic and individual growth must be given equal attention. Community development in the words of Gilchrist (2004) helps local community residents to identify unmet needs. It seeks to build capacity by improving skills and knowledge for individual and community as a whole. Central to the idea of community development is that it allows community residents to come together to plan, generate solutions and take action towards developing the social, economic, environmental and cultural aspects of community (Hackett, 2004). The whole process of community development, according to Kuponiyi, (2008) emphasizes the importance of participation as a means of strengthening local communities. Finally, community development occurs when people strengthen the bounds within their neighborhoods, build social networks, and form their own organisations to provide a long - term capacity for problem solving (Rubin, and Rubin 2001). The foregoing shows that every community development programmes should be aimed at changing an undesirable situation. Obodoechi, (2006) cited in Anikeze, (2014) spells out the objectives of community development

in Nigeria as to: improve life at the local community level as much as our human and material resources can carry us; develop all aspects of community living equitably so as to avoid in balance or neglect of any area of living, achieve a self-generating breakthrough in productivity and to raise the production potentials by stimulating the human and physical process of change, minimize poverty and unemployment in the communities; make families economically viable and to cross over the poverty line provide governmental services to communities, explore and use technical assistance available from outside the community and to cooperate with and coordinate state and national development plans.

Community development process can be difficult, time consuming and costly. Community residents are often concerned with daily tasks than thinking about, and coming up with, a vision of their community's future (Green and Haines, 2012). For example, residents want access to good schools for their children, decent jobs, and a safe and a clean environment to live. Community development has the potential to effect changes against poverty and social exclusion (Lee, 2006). The author explains that its role is to advocate for radical change against the structures that keep people poor. There are alternative approaches and processes that can be put in place to build the effectiveness of community development as a powerful force for social change as suggested by Lee (2006). The model in Figure 1 below shows a process that begins with community organizing, visioning, planning and the final process is implementation and evaluation. Green and Haines (2012) also stress that there are many who argue that the outcome of public participation is unimportant as long as there is an avenue for the community to participate. In the long run, both process and outcomes are essential pieces of community development.

Figure 1: Community Development Process



Source: Green, G. P. and Haines, A. (2012). *Asset building and Community Development* (3rd ed.). Sage publications

Local Government and Community Development Practice

Local government councils did not have definitive constitutional recognition until local government was enshrined in the 1979 constitution, which provided the legal framework to implement the 1976 reforms. The primary goal was to ensure that every state government by law, provide for the establishment, structure, composition, finance and functions of local councils (Diejomoah and Ebo 2010). However, this means that the degree of autonomy local councils enjoys in decision-making, strength and relevance is determined by their respective state governments. The 1979 constitution did spell out the functions and responsibilities of local government. Functions fall into three categories: areas for which local governments have full responsibility, areas where local government shares responsibility with higher levels of

government, and areas of responsibility that the state or federal government may from time to time assign to local authorities (Oviasuyi, Idada, and Isiraojie, 2010). Additionally, the constitution guaranteed democratically elected government councils all over the country: “The system of local government by democratically elected government council is under this constitution guaranteed...” (Chapter 1, Part 2, Section 7(1)). The 1979 constitution allowed for local government to receive federal allocations, and in Section 149 prescribed that states should provide funds for local governments in their areas (Bamidele, 2013). The 1979 constitution assigns service delivery responsibilities to the three tiers of government with the states and local governments playing the most significant role in the delivery of basic services such as education, health, housing, water, and waste disposal services. Local government’s commitment to the

principles of quality customer service have been illustrated in recent years through a variety of practical developments, such as extending opening hours of operation, improving facilities, providing more accessible services, e-government initiatives, and published service standards, in many cases through public customer charters and customer service actions plans.

Local governments are improving their performance by playing a very significant role in providing better cooperation together with the people at local level concerning community development. It shows that policy makers are committed to a high level of community participation for the community development. By doing so, this would work towards allowing local governments to retain strong state power (Jessop 2004; Newman, Barnes, Sullivan, and Knops, 2004). In other words, community development offers a practice that is a part of a process of social change based on the sharing of integrity, skills, knowledge and experience. Green and Haines (2012) see community development as a planned effort to build assets that increase the capacity of residents to improve their quality of life. The authors add that these assets may include several forms of community capital such as physical, human, social, financial, environmental, political and cultural. In their study, they identified community development that is controlled by local government that provides a better match between the assets and the needs of the communities, such as housing, financial capital, job skills and productivity.

Local governments are public agencies that provide urban services to communities in enhancing better operations (Kuppusamy, 2008). It is the prime source of services in the community development in most developing countries, including, Nigeria. Being closer to the citizens and central to the participatory development, local government in Nigeria has been assigned an important role to play in community development. Community development is imperative as it confronts the challenges and looks for the opportunities to contribute to the renewal of political and democratic life. Community development plays a very crucial role for a better future for the citizen and renewal of democracy.

Local governments have tried in varying degrees to meet the needs and aspirations of their localities. Akhakpe, Fatile and Igbokwe-Ibeto (2012) submit that some local governments in the country have established Development Area Councils or Committees, so as to take governance closer to the people. Such local governments include those in Lagos State in 2001; Yobe State in 2003; Bauchi State in 2004 and recently Imo State in 2011. The second approach employed by some local governments is the appointment of Ward Committees to handle or supervise some development projects which are executed directly by the local governments or executed by them on behalf of the Federal or State governments and the third approach is the use of community development associations (CDAs) or Town Improvement Unions as critical agents in community development even though they have been less utilized

(Ikelegbe, 2005). There are also extension workers (demonstration approach) who are located in the third category. They are used by local governments, especially, for agricultural purposes. They move within and between ward or village areas educating farmers, advising and assisting them on the application of newly introduced techniques, seedlings, the use of insecticides and irrigation farming. Irrigation farming is predominant in many local governments in the Northern parts of Nigeria where Fadama farming has been largely successful. Thus, taking farming to the local farmers through biotechnology of improved seedlings, insecticides, extension services, irrigation and micro credit schemes. The local governments have been uncompromising in asking for democratically elected executive arm of local governments as part of their holistic development efforts (Aghayere, 2008; Imhanlahimi and Ikeanyibe, 2009).

Challenges Inhibiting Local Government on Community Development Practice

Local governments are by law saddled with various functions in the bid to achieve community and rural development. These functions among others include that of serving as an agent of decentralization, grass root accelerated development, bridging communication gap and training ground for future leaders (Ajayi, 2000). In Nigeria, the Fourth Schedule of 1999 constitution clearly states the function of Local Governments but regrettably, they have been found to be performing far below expectation. A number of challenges have confronted local governments in Nigeria, in their bid

to carry out their task of community and rural development.

The financial autonomy of local government has also been eroded. The 1976 local government reform, which was largely incorporated in the 1979 constitution, recommended direct funding from the Federation Account, with local government receiving a defined percentage of funds in the revenue allocation formula. This provision has been breached according to Oyediran (2001). He finds that allocations channeled through state governments were not remitted to local governments. They were instead credited to state governments, and used by state governments to reimburse themselves for expenditure made on behalf of local governments. Abutudu (2011) notes that the Babangida regime attempted to address this problem. From 1988, the federal government removed the state government from its intermediary role in the transmission of funds from the Federation Account to local government. Until 2000, allocations from the Federation Account were collected directly by local governments from the Federal Pay Offices in their respective states. However, this changed when the 1999 constitution introduced the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA) (Section 160, sub-sections (2) to (8)), which provides that:

the amount standing to the credit of local government councils in the Federation Account shall be allocated to the

states for the benefit of their local government councils on such terms and in such manner as may be prescribed by the National Assembly; and that each state should maintain a special account, to be called the State Joint Local Government Account, into which shall be paid all allocations to local government councils of the state from the Federation Account and from the government of the state.

Local Governments in Nigeria has not been able to perform optimally because of the overbearing nature of the state government rendering the autonomy of the system relatively paralyzed. This manifested largely under democratic dispensations (1979- 1983) and (1999/2015). The resources accruing to the Local government from the federated account were considered too juicy to be ignored by the state government. Hence, hiding under Section 7 (1) & (6) of the 1999 Constitution, various systems were cynically developed to rub the Local Governments of the benefit of appropriating its funds. These include that all state governments stage managed the election into the council to ensure that their party and their own handpicked

candidates won the election so that leadership at the LGs are not responsive to the electorates but to the state governors (Alao, Osakede, and Owolabi, 2015). In addition, the introduction of Joint Allocation Account by the state government and having the local government operatives to forceful authored and signed letters in support of this arrangement remove the fear of litigation (Odo, 2003 in Alao, Osakede and Owolabi, 2015). To reflect that local government operatives were participating in the process, they were requested to submit the list of projects intended for execution while the state government award the contracts. Added to this is the unrestrained demand for fund and over ambitious expectations from the populace particularly the local political powers by expecting the council official to meet their personal needs at the expense of developmental needs. Such situations constituted distractions for the Local government administration in balancing the governor's demands and community's' expectation.

Under the 1999 Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria, the State Joint Local Government Account SJLGA is a special account maintained by each state government into which shall be paid allocations to the local government councils of the state from the Federation Account and from the Government of the State (Section 162(6), 1999 Constitution of Nigeria). The Federation Account has been the focal pool from which the three tiers of government in Nigeria derive their monthly allocation which is expected to be

judiciously utilized in addressing socio-economic development of their localities. This provision does not allow for the direct funding of the local government from the federation account and various research findings have shown that state governments manipulate this constitutional provision to keep the local governments as their appendages and, in large measures, siphon the funds meant for them (Azelama, 2008; Ezeani, 2012). This interference in the local government financial autonomy reasonably accounts for their inability to initiate and execute development programmes or projects. This is understandable in view of the fact that the local governments in Nigeria rely on the statutory allocation from the federation account between 90 – 95 percent of their financial expenditures every year (Halidu and Bello, 2012).

In effect, disproportionate fund was often released by the state government to meet the needs of Local Governments which often fell short to pay staff salaries and for efficient administrative management. Hence, the scenario of 1983/84 repeated itself in 2014/2015 whereby salaries remained unpaid for upward of 5 to 10 months to Local Governments staff in most states of the federation necessitating a bail out from Buhari administration, (Ovaga, 2009). Therefore, as observed by Chukwuemeka, Ugwuanyi, Okolo, and Onuoha, (2014) the financial resources are grossly inadequate placed side by side the societal expectations and constitutionally assigned responsibilities.

The greatest challenge in addressing corrupt practices in the Local Governments by the state government is

that the search light was not often beamed on identifying culprits but directed largely after political opponents immediately after a change of government to settle political scores. This does not remove the fact that such operatives might be actually corrupt but the effort was not to clean the whole system. Hence, the palliative selective justice could not wipe away institutional corruption in the local governments system like in the higher levels of government in general. Corruption in effect breeds inefficiency, raises transaction cost and it has become infectious in Nigeria as the institutions like Independent and Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) and The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) have not recorded sufficient result in checkmating corrupt practices. Hence, Akanbi (2003)) argues that systemic corruption leads to poor governance, undermines institutions and hinders development which is central to the existence of local government. In addition, it erodes social values and leads to ethical decay as observed by Animashaun, (2007). Ajayi (2004) identifies political control state governors have on the local government chairmen as a major challenge. This is as a result of the fact that state governors sponsor election of most, if not all, of the chairmen. They are handpicked by the state governors rather than being elected. It is a clear case of who pays the piper dictates the tune. For instance, in most of the states, there is this unholy alliance between state governments and local councils in the state, where the state government constitutes Joint Action Committee, tagged JAC. Federal

allocations to local government are first deposited into a particular ad hoc account before calling for the committee meeting. The situation is so alarming and worrisome that one begins to wonder if a local government truly is a third tier of government or a ministry or parastatals under its respective state government.

The Local Government Service Commission (LGSC) control the local government personnel services, while the LGSC is the appointee of the state government. Democratic consolidation process poses a problem for the local governments more than other governmental levels in Nigeria (Imhanlahimi 2011). This is because democracy has not taken firm roots. Its limiting positive effects are, therefore, hardly in place. Democracy is supposed to be rule-bound, respecting due process. The Federal and State governments seize the opportunity of fledgling democracy to disregard the elective representative principle and constitutionally guaranteed existence of local governments (Aghayere, 2008; Imhanlahimi and Ikeanyibe, 2009). They go further to state that, at the least opportunity, for example, in 1980, 2002 and 2007, local governments have either been scrapped by higher level governments or had their democratic elections delayed. In their place, all manners of bodies such as development Committees, Sole Administrators and Caretaker Committees had been set up. Such policy reversal situations have had implications for the development of the localities, including loyalties to the State governments by the appointed functionaries, alienation of the people

from unrepresentative governance, and diminutive development of communities.

Conclusion

Local Government is the nearest government to the people and thus, a channel through which the community feels the pulse of other higher levels of government. To this effect, the paper concluded that local government is the hub for social, economic, technology, cultural, health and environment development for effective participation in the community development. It is the prime source of services in community development in most developing countries including Nigeria. Being close to the citizens and central to participatory development, local government in Nigeria has been assigned an important role to play in community development as it also undertakes some developmental services in the community even with or without the financial/technical assistance of communities. However, the study identified several challenges that affect the roles of local government in community development. These include autonomy of local government, siphoning the funds meant for local government, disproportionate fund often released by the state government to meet the needs of Local Governments, corruption and political control state governors have on the local government chairmen amongst others.

Recommendations

In order for local government to effectively leverage the burden of community development, the following recommendations are essential:

1. Bottom up approach (participatory approach) in planning, implementing, monitoring, controlling and evaluating the development schemes and programmes is highly advocated as against top down approach. Thus, people participation at all stages of development programmes need to be encouraged for the success.
2. The amendment of Section 7 (6) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and other sections that empower undue domineering influences of the State government on Local government finances and management.
3. The transfer of the power of State Electoral Commission to the Independent National Electoral Commission for a relatively credible election to be conducted at the Local Government levels in order to make it truly democratic.
4. Local government administration needs to preserve good governance by showing high degree of transparency, accountability and participation.
5. Autonomy of local government needs to be preserved by expunging the provision for the State Local Government Joint Account from the constitution. In this regard, the statutory allocation from the federation account should be increased from the present 20 to 30 percent and federal government is expected to ascertain decentralization of the activities of local government. Adequate budget need to be allocated on annual basis by taking into account the important development programmes as felt by the community.
6. Institutional mechanisms to punish corrupt public officials should be strengthened at the level of governance.
7. Local communities should acquire new approaches in terms of community development as well as participate in community development programmes and activities to enhance performance of local government.
8. Finally, through constitutional amendment process, multi-tier LG system should be adopted by accommodating district and CDAs to make the idea of decentralization truly workable

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