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PUBLIC OPINION AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NIGERIA, 2008

Introduction

Nigeria is a federation of thirty-six States and the Federal Capital Territory. The federation consists of 774 local government areas. Local governments are intended to serve as the lowest tier of governance that will be most responsive to the needs of the people. Local governments in Nigeria are also expected to enhance political participation at the grassroots. Due to these expectations, there is persistent agitation for the creation of local governments by different groups across the country. However, it is pertinent to analyse the performance of the local government by finding answers to a range of questions. In particular, how well have the local governments performed their functions and satisfied the aspirations of the citizens? How corrupt are the elected local government officials? How well are local government officials trusted by the public?

This Afrobarometerⁱ Bulletin examines these issues. The analyses are based on responses obtained from the respondents in Round 4 Afrobarometer survey conducted in Nigeria in April 2008. Nineteen other countries across Africa are taking part in the Round 4 Afrobarometer survey. Fieldwork in Nigeria commenced on the 1st of May, 2008. A total of 2,408 Nigerian citizens aged 18 years and above were interviewed using structured questionnaires in face-to-face interviews. This sample size is large enough to make inferences about all voting age citizens in Nigeria, with a margin of sampling error of ± 2 percent at the 95 percent confidence level. Additional data for comparative analysis were obtained from the previous rounds of the Afrobarometer survey conducted in 2000, 2001, 2003, 2005 and 2007ⁱⁱ.

The *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999*, guarantees a ‘system of local government by democratically elected local government councils’. Section 7(1) prescribed that ‘the Government of every State shall ... ensure their existence under a Law which provides for the establishment, structure, composition, finance and functions of such councils. The Constitution, in section 7, provides that:

1. the National Assembly shall make provisions for statutory allocation of public revenue to local government councils in the Federation; and

2. the House of Assembly of a State shall make provisions for statutory allocation of public revenue to local government councils within the State.

The functions of the local government contained in the Fourth Schedule to the Nigerian Constitution include:

- a. Establishment, maintenance and regulation of slaughter houses, slaughter slabs, markets, motor parks and public conveniences;
- b. Construction and maintenance of roads, street lightings, 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;
- c. Provision and maintenance of public conveniences, sewage and refuse disposal;
- d. Collection of rates, radio and television licences;
- e. 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;
- f. Control and regulation of outdoor advertising, restaurants, bakeries and other places of sale of food to the public, and sale of liquor, and
- g. In collaboration with the Government of a State, provides and maintain primary, adult and vocational education, and health services;

Over the past decade, under the elected civilian administration, local government councils in Nigeria have received substantial revenue allocations without always providing commensurate services or infrastructural development. This gap could be attributed to corruption, interference by state governors and the House of Assembly in the States in local government administration, and ineffective accountability mechanism, including lack of free and fair electoral processes that enable electorates to oust non-performing politicians from office.

Performance of the Local Governments

How do citizens view the performance of local governments? The survey respondents were asked 'How well or badly would you say your local government is handling the following matters? Responses are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Public opinion on public performance of the local governments

	fairly/very well ⁱⁱⁱ	fairly/very badly	Don't know/ haven't heard enough
Maintaining local roads	33	65	2
Maintaining local market places	37	60	2
Maintaining health standards in public restaurants and food stalls	33	62	4
Keeping our community clean (e.g. refuse removed)	41	58	2
Collecting licence fees of bicycles, carts and barrows	37	54	10
Collecting rates on privately owned houses	31	57	13

Question: *How well or badly would you say your local government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?*

The public clearly consider that the local governments have failed in the performance of their primary duties, namely service delivery and resource mobilisation (collection of fees and rates). On both dimensions, the public assessed performance poorly. This is not isolated from the fact that failure of the various levels of government in the country to collect rates and fees has been generally attributed to availability of oil revenues, which are allocated to the various levels of government. Federal allocation to local governments in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria is a huge 13% of oil earnings and as a result, efforts at local revenue generation are relaxed. Most recently, the Bwari Local Government Chairman in Abuja declared a meagre revenue generation of 100,000NGN (\$800) for one month, despite the fact that the local government area houses the Abuja Law School and Abuja Arts and Craft Village.

An intricate relationship between taxation and accountability of government has been established in the political science literature. Given the neglect of resource mobilisation in the form of collection of taxes, fees and rates, how accountable are the local governments for their decisions and use of resources? Respondents were asked 'How well or badly do you think your local council is practicing the following procedures? Their responses are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Public opinion on consultation and accountability by the local councils

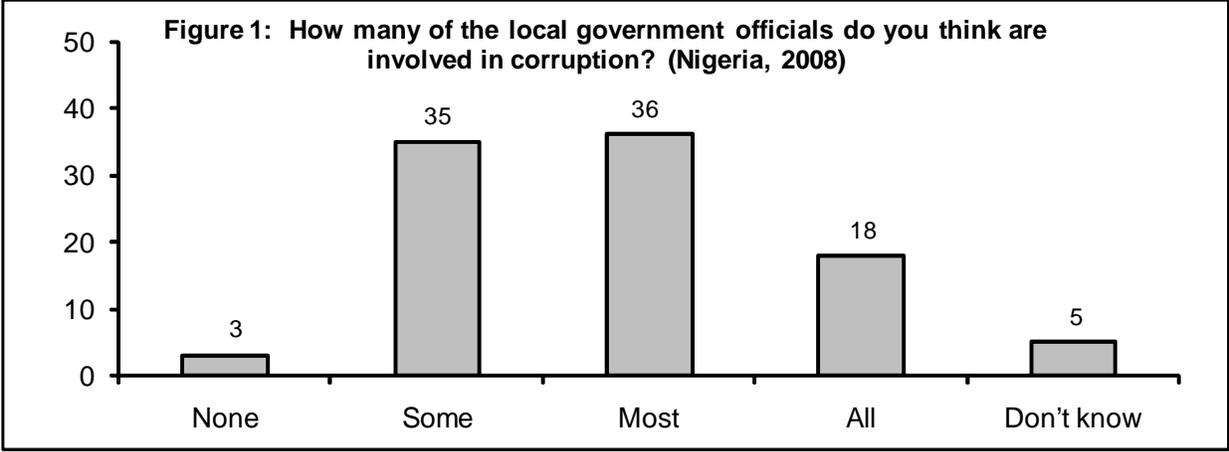
	fairly/ very well ^{iv}	fairly/ very badly	Don't know/ haven't heard enough
Making the council's programme of work known to ordinary people	22	68	10
Providing citizens with information about the council's budget (i.e. revenue and expenditures)	20	71	9
Allowing citizens like yourself to participate in the council's decisions	18	73	9
Consulting other (including traditional, civic and community leaders) before making decisions	24	63	12
Providing effective ways to handle complaints about local councillors and officials	21	68	11
Guaranteeing that local government revenues are used for public services and not private gain	22	68	11

Question: How well or badly do you think your local council is practicing the following procedures? Or haven't you heard enough to have an opinion?

The responses indicate failure on the part of the local councils to be accountable to the people and to provide them with the opportunity to participate and obtain redress for grievances arising from the behaviours or activities of local council officials. More than two-fifths (45%) of the respondents said they had problem with the way their local councils were run in the past year while about one-half (49%) had no such problem. As indicated by the respondents, there was no effective complaints system for people to register problems with the way the councils were run. The failure of local governments to provide accountable governance is particularly serious because it negates the popular slogan in the country that the local government is closest to the people. More than three-quarters of the respondents said that they had never contacted local government councillors. This finding is not surprising because where the local government chairman is well known, citizens do not pay much attention to their council representatives most of whom do not even bother to campaign during elections. Moreover, the absence of mechanisms for participation, consultation, complaints and accountability in local government administration demonstrate that their officials are distant from the people they are elected or paid to serve.

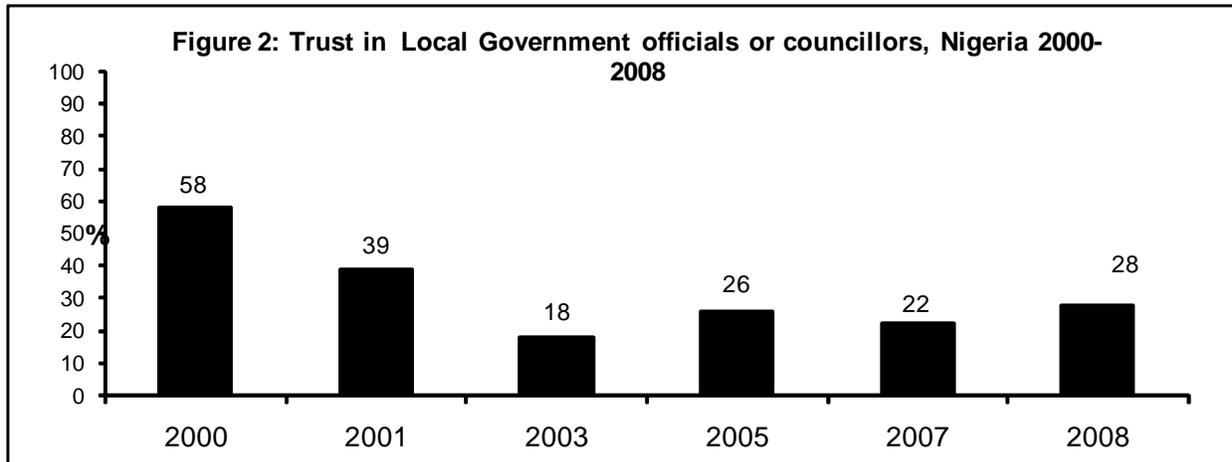
Only one-fifth (22%) of the respondents consider that the local government guarantees that 'revenues are used for public services and not private gain.' Stated differently, majority of Nigerian adults apparently perceives corruption among local government officials. When asked 'How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption?' responses ranged from "none" (3%), through "some" (35%), "most" (36%), "all" (18%) and "don't know" (5%)

(See Figure 1). This distribution compared closely to responses obtained during the round of survey (3.5) conducted prior to election in 2007 when 35% and 22% respectively said most and all officials of the local government were involved in corruption.



Trust in local government officials

Popular trust is an indicator of the legitimacy of a government or public institution. It indicates the confidence that people have that government can be relied upon to do what it is supposed to do in terms of the constitution and statutory law. The 2008 survey respondents were asked how much they trust elected local government councillors: some 29% said they do not trust them at all; 38% said they distrust them somewhat; 22% trust them somewhat; and 6% trust them a lot. The last two responses indicate that, overall, only 28% of the respondents in the 2008 survey trust local government officials. This represents a sharp decline from 58% of the respondents in the 2000 survey that said they trusted local government councillors. However, it was an improvement by 6% over the result in the 2007 survey when only 22% said they trusted the councillors. The 2007 survey also revealed that majority (55%) of the respondents disapproved of the performance of the local government while 37% approved their performance.



Conclusion and recommendations

As guaranteed by the Constitution, the local government system is an important structure for economic development. It is aimed at promoting rural development, reducing poverty and inequality, and stemming excessively high rates of rural-urban migration. Furthermore, it is meant to consolidate democratic culture and citizens' participation in the political processes of country. Unfortunately, the foregoing analyses of local government performance, transparency and accountability show that there are major problems with local government administration in Nigeria. This has resulted in lack of trust in local government officials by the people.

Local government administration in Nigeria is not as open to scrutiny as found with state and federal tiers of government. There is therefore the need for civil society to constantly demand transparency and accountability from local council officials. Moreover, civil society organisations such as human and socio economic rights groups should help develop strong accountability processes/mechanisms as well as play active watchdog role. In addition, there should be explicit and enforceable constitutional and statutory provisions that will make local governments responsive and accountable to local people.

Besides, the establishment, structure, composition, finance and functions of local government councils should be prescribed by an act of the National Assembly. Matters such as the creation of the local government may be left to states subject to minimum criteria as may be prescribed by an Act of the National Assembly. These measures will minimize the manipulation of local governments by the executive and legislative organs of the state government. Lack of accountability and undue interference by state governors and legislators inhibit the responsiveness of local councils to their communities and people.

ⁱThe Afrobarometer is an independent, non-partisan research project that measures the social, political and economic atmosphere in Africa. Afrobarometer surveys are conducted in more than twenty African countries and are repeated on a regular cycle. Because the instrument asks a standard set of questions, countries can be systematically compared. Trends in public attitudes are tracked over time. The aims and publications of the network can be accessed at www.afrobarometer.org.

ⁱⁱ Detailed information on the data can be accessed at www.afrobarometer.org.

ⁱⁱⁱ Response categories were very badly, fairly badly, fairly well, very well, don't know or haven't heard enough.

^{iv} Response categories were very badly, fairly badly, fairly well, very well, don't know or haven't heard enough.