

Democratic Governance and Sustainable Development in Benue State of Nigeria Since 1999

George-Genyi, Member Euginia, PhD.

Department of Political Science

Benue State University

Makurdi, Nigeria.

+234-7039009834

Abstract

This paper has explored the extent to which democratic governance in Benue State of Nigeria has attempted to transform the living conditions and overall socioeconomic and political progress of the people of the state. This is with a view to establishing the correlation between democratic practice and the development of a given society. Consequently, the causal links between democratic governance and development in Nigeria generally and Benue State in particular was analyzed. A purely qualitative, historical and descriptive method for gathering data was adopted. Issues covered included the constraints on governance such as the extensive personalization of power, privatization of the state, denial of the fundamental human rights of the people, widespread corruption, strangulation of opposition politics and the general insecurity arising from electoral contests. We observe that lack of accountability, transparency and responsibility in the use of state power does not augur well for development, hence positive steps should be taken to redress this anomaly in the governance of the state. The paper concludes that an effective state directed by a visionary leadership, that has capacity for efficient problem solving and the management of socio-economic resources, is at the heart of sustainable development in Benue State.

Key Words: *Democracy, governance, leadership, military authoritarianism, sustainable development.*

1.0. Introduction

Generally there exist a nexus between democratic practice and the development of a given society. Nigeria today purports to run a democratic system of government that is expected to promote democratic values of public accountability, transparency and good conscience, fiscal discipline, due process and the promotion of the general wellbeing of her citizenry. This is to directly translate to enhancing the process of development and its sustainability. The exercise of power and authority in both the political and economic spheres is the essential substance of governance (Brautigam 1991.73). With specific reference to Nigeria's experience, the hypothesis that the implementation of unpopular policies will undermine democratic governance has been corroborated as the political leadership has become increasingly authoritarian, repressive and incapable of administering the polity and a rewarding relationship with the citizenry.

On May 29th 1999, the country restored civil democratic rule with the swearing in of constitutional governments at the federal, state and the local government levels. Unfortunately since that time till today, the democratic system, including the structures meant to sustain and consolidate it, have experienced strain and stress. The factor largely responsible for this state of affairs may not be unconnected to the fact that we have, as a political community, stayed far too long under different military regimes, whose common denominator was, to large a extent, their lack of, democracy, accountable and good government and general strife towards societal development.

The abuse of these time honored principles of governance was actually legendary and their negative impact on politics profound, and from the evident signs and reoccurrent signals, these will thus continue to endure for a long time unfortunately. Certain fundamental questions become obvious here and thus beg for critical examination. What are the causes and effects of the crisis of governance on the Nigerian society generally and its people? Why has it been so difficult to attain the desired development level in Nigeria and more particularly Benue State?

In the new democratic dispensation, what are the constraints on governance that must be surmounted to ensure sustainable development in Nigeria and Benue State? What is the link between democratic governance and development within which context the Benue State scenario can be examined and appreciated? These are the issues this paper seeks to address on the basis of which conclusions could be raised and suggestions advanced.

2.0. The Dialectical Link between Democratic Governance and Development

Democratic governance is globally imbued with certain minimum principles of participation and inclusiveness, responsiveness and accountability, transparency and good governance, regular free and fair elections occasioned largely by internal democracy of the participatory political parties, respect for human rights and life, and the observance of the rule of law, and so on (Agubamah, 2009), observed that where these principles or rules are generally observed, such a government is adjudged to be democratically constituted, and where the reverse is the case and there are breaches, such a regime is definitely undemocratic regardless even where it attempts to meet or satisfy the welfare needs of the people. Indeed it is doubtful that such a regime with negative reversals to known democratic practices will not deploy its resources rather in fighting opposition to its authoritarian rule than use the resources to address the welfare issues of the people, which statutorily, is the basis for the institution of government. Commonsense suggests that democracy tantamounts good governance. Our estimation therefore holds that, eleven years are good enough for any serious democratic government to perform and not to hold the past military regimes responsible for the failure of the present. As part of good governance, democratic politics does not just end at political contestations but that political contestations are guided by moral principles, which according to Betham (1994:60) include the following;

- a. Ensuring open and effective challenges to government and government policies through free and fair elections.
- b. Increasing citizens' participation.
- c. Maximizing the accountability and transparency of office holders.
- d. Guaranteeing equal rights for all citizens.
- e. Ensuring full inclusive citizenship, based on respect for gender, cultural, religious and other differences.
- f. Assuring effective redress against infringement of citizens' rights.

Deriving logically from the above therefore, the ultimate goal of democratic governance will be to guarantee social justice and bring about an end to human misery in the society by eliminating poverty and improving human dignity. This is the hallmark of any societal development process (Thesing 1995, World Bank 2000). Some scholars, Sandbrook 1955:157, Chaball (n.d) are emphatic about the fact that Africa generally does not hold prospects for democratic flourishing. That the very basis for democracy which is a peaceful environment is scarcely available, as the continent is crisis-ridden. Democracy and good governance cannot thrive amidst chaos and violence for there is a necessary link between political stability, democracy, good governance and development.

Over the last eleven years beginning with General Olusegun Obasanjo (rtd) in 1999, to the late Musa Yar Adua and now Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, bad governance has gone hand in hand with a vacuum of positive (horizontal) social capital and instead of trust and cooperation for the common good and societal progress, Nigeria has been saddled with leadership crisis that is characteristically exploitative, repressive, isolative and pervasively suffocating. The only way to generate truly sustainable development in this context is to bring about a fundamental transformation in the nature and quality of governance. Democratic governance permeates the entire environment of development merging with attitudes, values and expectations to the point where it is hard to know where culture ends and institutions begin.

3.0. Constraints to Attaining Good Governance and Development in Nigeria Since 1999

Governance and development are separate conceptual entities and yet in practice often interact and affect each other. An old doctrine on the development process sees it purely as a transformation of the society (Stiglitz, 2000). A new form of thinking on development and development transformation does not talk only about a move from the old ways of thinking, and of social and economic organization to new ones, but a change in the way people think and the way societies function—a change in norms, expectations and institutions.

The lesson of the 20th century is that, successful development ultimately should derive from a homegrown strategy couched within a generally acceptable political setting, not from imported theories. Most developed societies today owe their success stories to having developed their own workable models. This is a big lesson for Nigeria and other developing countries. Democratic governance can trigger off a virtuous circle of development as political freedom empowers people to press for policies and expand social and economic policies. Open debates will then help people and communities to shape their priorities in the whole scheme of things. This has not been the case in Nigeria. Nigeria's economic performance since independence has presented a paradox in both human and material resources as majority of Nigerians live in pitiable poverty-stricken conditions. In a 2002 United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Report, the Human Development Index for selected countries placed Nigeria the 148th country behind such other African countries like South Africa 107, Egypt 115, Morocco 123, Ghana 129. The United States of America came sixth, United Kingdom 13th, France 12th Germany 17th (UNDP 2002). This situation has not really improved several years after.

By 1960 when Nigeria gained political independence from their colonial masters, her economy was largely agrarian and tilted more to the production of exportable agricultural products. By the decade of the 1970s, the fairly broad based agricultural economy became considerably less diversified as the oil-sector dominated production and trade structure. Oil became the dominant sector of the economy, accounting for more than 90 per cent of exports. This new wealth radically affected the scope and content of investment, production, and consumption patterns and the government's approach to economic management and the policies and programs implemented. The inherent dynamics of the international oil market, the attendant collapse of oil price especially since the early 1980s and the lack of effective inter-sectoral linkages pushed the economy into deep depression. Various austerity and stabilization measures from the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) to deregulation, privatization, and commercialization have not really transformed the economy to prosperity. This is exacerbated by the largely neglected subsistent agricultural and non-oil sectors. The industrial and manufacturing sectors particularly which rely on imported machinery and raw materials have remained in recession.

Nigeria's official foreign debts have been on the increase and expanded government spending especially on the governance process has led to upward pressure on consumer prices. By the beginning of 2012, the Nigerian government announced the withdrawal of subsidy in the oil sector, an action that triggered off serious demonstrations and hardships to the Nigerian people. There has been price increase of foodstuffs and standard of living of Nigerians has drastically fallen as most people live below the poverty line. The new democratic government of Olusegun Obasanjo which came to power in 1999 had recognized the pervasive role corruption has played in Nigeria's underdevelopment and therefore drafted the anti-corruption bill setting up the Independent Corrupt Practices and other related Offences Commission to confront official corruption. The recurrence of official corruption both at the level of the executive and legislative arms of government has become embarrassing to the image of the country within and at the international level. A Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2007) document showed how unaccountable governance in Nigeria has led to human rights abuse as various instances of injustice have become the permanent feature of Nigeria's political system. It is however to be noted that justice, which has eluded the country over time, is the surest foundation on which to build a good and successful government.

In Nigeria, corruption as an aspect of poor governance has assumed eccentric and ludicrous proportions, what Gunnar Myrdal calls "folklore of corruption" (Amuwo, 2005:119). To date, a total of more than \$380 billion has been reported stolen by former military and political leaders. Between 1970 and 2000, the number of Nigerians subsisting on less than one dollar a day grew from 36% to more than 70%, that is, from 19 million to a staggering 90 million people (Watts, 2007). From 1999 to date Nigeria has constantly ranked as one of the most corrupt countries in the world (www.Transparencyinternational.org). The consequence; poverty is unavoidable and this is compounded by acute unemployment rate which is put at between 50 and 75 per cent. This is explained as reason for the grave insecurity and high crime rate in the Nigerian society generally, incessant religious crises, persistent ethnic and sectional conflicts, separatist movements such as Boko Haram, Niger Delta Militia etc. and gross social, economic and political instability and deepening state legitimacy crisis (Ogundiya: 2010). Generally therefore Nigeria presents a political economy profile, of a state in search of good, efficient and effective governance that can stimulate and sustain positive development.

4.0. Democratic Governance and Development in Benue State since 1999

Benue state of Nigeria has had her fair share of these crises that have characterized democratic practice in Nigeria. The argument by some students of African politics that governance is one of the major problems in Africa generally and that the problem of development in Nigeria is a problem of governance fits squarely into the Benue scenario. This is apt especially when governance is defined in its proper context of fair and equitable allocation of resources, for the achievements of the end or purpose of the State, which is, the promotion of the common good. Government in Benue State since 1999 has shown the desire to manage the affairs of the people by the democratically elected leadership. Some noticeable progress has actually been recorded in such areas of the people's desire to participate in the governance process and infrastructural development. Over three decades of Benue State's existence would have predisposed her to growth and progress especially given her resource endowment and location. This would have made it an institution for effective development. This means that we need to interrogate what has been happening to resource endowment, what has been happening to poverty, unemployment and inequality, or how much qualitative transformation has taken place in the areas of agricultural development, education, health and infrastructure which impact on matters of poverty and unemployment.

A profile of Benue State and its people show that since her creation in 1976, agriculture is the largest employer of the work force and less than half of the large tracts of cultivable land are utilized. Farmers rely largely on traditional practices of cultivation. Processing and storage is poor and there is low level of mechanization, poor land management and high cost of agricultural input. Besides these, the state is largely civil service oriented and hardly does one notice the presence of industries. Infrastructural development (water, electricity, roads, housing etc.) is irritatingly very low and has affected all the vital sectors of the economy such as agriculture, transport, health, commerce, industries, tourism and telecommunications. Successive governments since 1999 have drawn out two development blueprints, the Benue Advance Plan, 1999-2006, and "Our Benue, Our Future", 2007-date. The synopsis of the two philosophical blueprints for development of the state is to identify challenges, potentials for development and underdevelopment through a multi-sectoral approach. Attempts have been made to address the poor economic base of the State through the establishment of the Benue Inland Revenue Services (BIRS) as an aggressive mechanism for internally generated revenue. This is to be applied to addressing infrastructural needs such as roads, electricity, water supply, agricultural inputs and education.

To address food security challenges, the state has engaged the Federal government under the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources and in 2007, N3.0 trillion was earmarked for the next five years into several food security programs, such as provision of seedlings, fertilizers, agrochemicals (Pine, 2010:83). The Benue Advance Plan 1999-2007 of Governor George Akume aimed at breaking the underdevelopment of the state and focus was made on housing with the construction of housing estates at New G.R.A and Nyiman Layout, township roads in Makurdi, Otukpo, Gboko and Katsina-Ala and also rural feeder roads and rural electrification. Efforts were also made towards industrialization with the establishment of a Juice Company and Plastic industry and the establishment of 8 new general hospitals in 8 local government areas (Pine: 2010:119). Governor Gabriel Suswam continued with the construction of seven rural highways across Benue State totaling 248,26 kms, new contracts for the Greater Makurdi Water Works with 100,000 cubic meters per day capacity for N4.9 billion. These included repairs to existing water works facilities at Makurdi, Katsina-Ala and Otukpo at the cost of N318, 000,000 and also comprehensive renovation of over 36 government schools (Pine, 2010:112). Generally some noticeable progress has been recorded during the period under study. There have been challenges however.

5.0. Lack of Continuity of Policies and Programs by Successive Administrations

Government in Nigeria generally and Benue State particularly has been saddled with the problems of lack of commitment and continuity in government. These have affected continuity in policies and programs as successive chief executives either totally abandon infrastructural projects begun by their predecessors or terribly slow them down. An outstanding case is the Makurdi Sheraton Hotel project which has suffered several policy reversals and false starts. Annual budgets however carry these projects without fully executing them. The Babcock Rural Electrification projects inherited from Benue-Plateau State was partly completed by the government of Mr. Aper Aku, the first democratically elected governor but was abandoned until Governor Suswam completed and commissioned it on the 28th May 2004, 33 years after it was commenced.

6.0. Lack of Maintenance Culture

This has been characteristic of most administrations. Most of the structures in our government schools need complete overhaul after many years of lack of maintenance. Coupled with this is the visible display of reckless spending of public resources for private personal use. It is common knowledge that the governance project is quite expensive as those who are government, both the executive and the legislative engage in scandalous, conspicuous consumption lifestyles at the detriment of the provision of social services to the people who continue to wallow in abject poverty.

There has been palpable tension and suspicion among the political class, especially and the people of the state, arising from the manner in which leadership is assumed. This is heightened by mutual suspicion of the dominant ethnic groups in the state. Within the period in question, leadership is perceived as an imposition on the people given the electoral contests and processes that brought both governors, George Akume and Gabriel Suswam into power. The PDP (Peoples Democratic Party) under which platform they emerged as leaders is known for electoral malpractices. There have been court litigations challenging the results of the elections and this has taken toll on the resources available to government, which would have been applied to the developmental needs of the people of the state. Indeed across the length and breadth of Nigeria, there is a visible discontent between leaders and the electorate as there is a yawning gap between the quality of the populace's standard of living and their leaders. This is the dilemma of governance and development in Benue State in the last twelve years.

7.0. Conclusion and Recommendations

In comparative terms, while Europe and America contend with economic instability, the challenge for Africa generally including Nigeria is both political instability and economic underdevelopment. This is why undemocratic, retrogressive leadership, laced with inherent systemic corruption is endemic. Indeed Osundare (2012:53) has stated quite aptly that "if Nigeria does not kill corruption, corruption will kill Nigeria". Regrettably, after more than a decade of civil rule, much of the expectations of Nigerians have not been met. In Nigeria and Benue State, there is decaying infrastructure, largely education has been priced out of the reach of the masses and inflation is skyrocketing. Poverty is such a menace. Buhari (2005) posited earlier that we have been saddled with civilian administrations that have wasted the years, doing very little but struggling with questions of legitimacy arising from rigged and fraudulent elections.

It is glaring from the above that democratic governance in Nigeria and Benue State, has not achieved development envisaged in 1999. There is the need for political leadership that can midwife good governance and development. The terrain of politics needs to be reconstituted, transformed and humanized to serve broader, more inclusive interests and concerns than those of the political class. This will mean that the political leadership will need to address the structural problems stunting economic growth. This will invariably address poverty, unemployment and to a large extent raise the standard of living of the people. The irresponsible use of state power is at variance with the fundamental objectives and directive principles of state policy. There is the need to stop lip-service to political and electoral reforms. The votes must count and the people deserve to have a genuine say on who governs them. Government in Benue State needs to redirect attention and apply resources in resuscitating the array of comatose industries in the state. This will revive the economy and have multiplier effect on other sectors of the society.

Government indeed needs to be committed to poverty alleviation strategies, and the building of infrastructure should be top priority. This paper cannot agree less with George-Genyi (2010) on the need for a selfless political leadership that is necessary to midwife the process of sustainable development in Benue State and Nigeria. A leadership that will drive the governance process that is people oriented and is capable of accommodating diverse opinions as well as creating a truly participatory and emancipatory democracy.

References

- Agubamah, E. (2009) "Accountability and Good Governance: A Prerequisite for Democratic Politics in Nigeria" in Edoh, T & Wuam T. (eds) *Democracy, Leadership and Accountability in Post-colonial Africa. Challenges and Possibilities. Essays in Honor of Professor Akase Paul Sorkaa. Makurdi. Aboki Publishers.*
- Amuwo, K. (2005), "The Peripheral State: Critical Perspectives on the structure and Role of the Public Bureaucracy. IN: *J. Dev. Altern. Area Stud* 24(3-4) 119-130.
- Betham, D (1994), "Conditions for Democratic Consolidation", *Review of African Political Economy*, 21, 60.
- Brautigam, S.P (1991:73) *Governance and the Economy Review: Review of concept and perspectives on Nigeria's Political Economy*, University of Ibadan Press.
- Buhari, M. (2005), "Challenges Facing Democracy in Nigeria" Remarks delivered at the International Conference on Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria. *Challenges and Prospects. London. Imperial College. June 25th.*
- George-Genyi, M. (2010), *Challenge of Political Leadership in Africa: The Nigerian Perspective (1999-2009)* Kogi Journal of Politics. Vol. I No. 2 August.
- Human Rights Watch, (2007) "Election or Selection? Human Rights Abuse and Threats to Free and Fair Elections in Nigeria" <http://hwr.org/background/Africa/Nigeria0407/index.nt>
- Ogundiya, I. (2010), "Democracy and Good governance: Nigeria's Dilemma". *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* Vol 4(6), pp201-208, June 2010. Available online at <http://www.academicJournals.org/ajpsir>
- Osundare, N. *The Nation Newspaper. Wednesday, July 25th 2012.*
- Pine, A. (ed) (2010), *Milstones in Leadership. Essays in Honor of Governor Gabriel Suswam. Aboki Publishers.*
- Stiglitz, J. (2000) "Development Thinking at the Next Millennium". In Pleskovic and Stern (eds) *Annual World Bank Conference on Development Economics. Washington D. C. The World Bank.*
- Thesing, T (ed) (1995) *For Democracy and Social Justice, Bonn: Konrad Adenauer Foundation International Corporation.*
- United Nations Development Program (2002), *Human Development Report: New York Oxford University Press.*
- Walts, M. (2007), *Crisis in Nigeria. www.counterpunch.org. Retrieved on February 1, 2007*
- World Bank (2000), *Can Democracy Claim the 21st Century? Washington D.C. World Bank*