

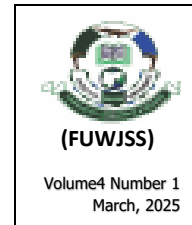
# **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN PROMOTING RESPONSIVE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**

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## **Abstract**

The paper examined town hall meeting as a strategy for public participation to ensure accountability of elected officials at the local government level in ensuring effective rural development in Nigeria. The paper adopted qualitative method of inquiry which used secondary sources of information. The 1999 Constitution as amended advocates for democratic governance at local level based on the 1976 reforms on local government which aim at bringing about rural development. Consequently, local-legislative councils are expected to promote and guarantee the local people's participation in their government as well as to hold their elected officials answerable for their actions concerning rural development. Findings reveal that a higher percentage of the local people live in poverty due to lack of rural development that emanates from lack of accountability of the elected officials. The paper concludes that the lack of accountability at the local level is as a result of the imposition of officials on the people through electoral fraud, which make officials see no reasons to be accountable to the people of their localities but to their godfathers who aided them to electoral victory. The paper recommends that there should be conduct of free and fair elections at the local government level for the emergence of accountable-oriented officials toward the actualization of rural development. Also, town-hall meetings should be employed as a strategy of the people to hold their elected officials accountable at the local level.

**Keywords:** Town-hall meeting, democracy, governance, accountability, rural development

## **Introduction**

Nigerian state is hierarchically characterized with three-tier of governments that is Federal, State and Local Government at the bottom. So, Local Government is the least governmental level in the governmental hierarchy. The least government is meant to develop the country's localities. Local government is the level of government closest to the people among the three-

tier of governments of Nigerian Federalism. This least level of government is established with the intention of proximity and accessibility of government closest to rural localities as well as to promote grassroots democratic governance in the land. Consequently, Abonyi (2007) asserts that Local government possesses legitimate powers exercised through local elected representative council enjoying substantial autonomy in the exercise of specific powers over a given locality in the performance of a range of functions and responsibilities allotted to it by law. Democracy connotes an elected government consists of representatives constitutionally assigned to perform responsibilities to ensure desired changes that would affect lives of the people positively. Therefore, a democratic society that practice federalism in which LG exists, the LG is the democratic governance structure better placed to bring about an effective rural development to the people.

Nigerian local government was turned around by the 1976 Local Government Reforms (LGRs) from local administration which alienated the rural masses from their supposed democratic LG for development at the rural localities. The said LGRs addressed the role and content of system of LG which was entirely meant to serve as appendage and extension of state governments (Otoghagua, 2004). Olowu (1984) unfolds the details of the abnormalities that existed in the practice of local administrative system in Nigeria prior to the 1976 LGRs as follow: the false staff recruitment that did not ensure efficient and virile local government; insufficient finance and denial of appropriate institutions for generating adequate funds; continuous weakening of LG power by encroachment and assumptions of powers and responsibilities of local government, and finally, the separation of the local people from government institutions at the grassroots level. The aforesaid scenario made it imperative to established an organize links, that would engender harmony and understanding between the people and their local government at the local level. The 1976 LGRs underscored the turned around point in the evolutionary history of democratic local government in Nigeria. The 1976 LGRs was targeted at eliminating identified abnormalities in the practice of local administrative system. Olowu (1984) also noted that the identified abnormalities in the local administration were eliminated by the LGRs through the follow to; ensure appropriate services and development activities responsive to local wishes and initiative by developing and delegating them to local representative bodies; speed the exercise of democratic self government close to the grassroots of our society, and to encourage initiative and leadership potential; mobilize both human and material resources via the involvement of the rural population, and finally, to provide a two way communicative channel between local communities and government.

The aforesaid reforms replaced the local administration with local democratic government to bring the government closest to the rural localities, which advocates accountability of the elected representatives (officials) to rural people since they are constitutionally assigned responsibilities/functions to be performed in ensuring development at the rural localities in Nigeria. However, the elected officials' accountability has not yielded desired development at the rural localities in Nigeria because of the poor attitude of the elected officials and channels of accountability to the people. The question now is, should there be an alternative way/strategy for accountability of the elected officials at the local level to the people for rural development. The paper adopted observation and secondary methods of inquiry to x-ray the possible alternative strategy for performing accountability by the elected officials for rural development in Nigeria.

Section 7 (1) of amended 1999 constitution authorized democratic local government based on the 1976 Local Government Reforms (LGRs) recommendations to bring about rural development. The operation of the democratic local government is being carried out by local legislative council instituted by the aforesaid constitution to promote and guarantee the local people's participation in their government as well as to hold local officials answerable for their actions by the people. However, study has shown that a high percentage of the people in rural areas in Nigeria live in poverty. As reported in 2022 by a collaborative effort of survey between the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the National Social Safety-Nets Coordinating Office (NASSCO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), which sampled over 56,000 households across 36 states of the federation, include FCT between November 2021 and 2022 revealed that among others that multidimensional poverty is higher in rural areas where 72% of the people are poor compared to 42% of those residing in the Urban areas (NBS, 2022). This survey further revealed specifically that over half of the populations of Nigeria are multidimensional poor and cook with dung, wood or charcoal rather than cleaner energy. The aforementioned poverty situation in Nigeria rural areas is due to lack of rural development that emanates from lack of accountability of the elected local officials to the rural people.

The active participation of the local people in their governmental affairs in terms of who to govern them as their political leader(s) is through credible elections which ought to bring about effective rural development through the accountability of the elected local officials. Painfully, unstable democratic practice caused by several military coups and as noted by Erero (2000) which occasioned years of military rule in Nigeria has made accountability of the public officials a problem, despite the institutional arrangement for

accountability. The years of the military dictatorship has inculcated in Nigerians the military mentality of undemocratic and non-accountability to public rather answerable to their godfathers who electorally aided them through incredible election to victory. Therefore, the local legislative council which supposed to have been an informative conduit between the government and the rural people is ineffective in this regard. Hence, the paper is aimed at searching for an alternative channel of accountability for elected officials at the local level for effective rural development in Nigeria.

### **Accountability in Nigeria's Public Service**

Accountability is a call on public official(s) to give account of his stewardship to answer of public officials. It is the fundamental condition to prevent abuse of powers and to ensure that power is directed towards the attainment of efficiency, effectiveness, responsiveness and transparency in public office or governmental business (Iwuoha, 2012). Accountable government promotes people-oriented governmental service delivery because absence of accountability ensue an unethical behaviour in governance. Accountability is antidote to unethical behaviour of public officials. So, accountability emphasizes non-misappropriation or embezzlement of commonwealth/public funds by public officials because it retards the development and socio-economic well-being of people of locality concerned.

Accountability connects bureaucracy and democracy considering democracy as government instituted by the people for their welfare and development. There exists in Nigeria the problems of responsiveness to the people's complains, basic needs and preferences by elected leaders particularly at the local government level due to experience of oligarchic rule. Erero (2000) asserted that transparency, operation under rule of law and in which high ethical standard are norm, are the indices of public service accountability, which largely absent in Nigeria as a result of years of military dictatorship. Thus, he opined that accountability of public officers has remained problem despite the set up of institutional mechanisms for accountability enforcement due to unification and concentration of both executive and legislative powers in the hand of the rulings junta while the judiciary is weakened by the suspension and changing of crucial constitutional provisions. Hence, to strengthen public participation at the local level for accountability, town- hall meeting becomes desirable.

Town – hall meetings is forum in which politicians meet with the people of their constituencies to hear complains and to discuss intend/propose law or regulations (Halfway, 2009). Town – hall meetings does not necessarily take place in a community town hall as the composition of the words

suggested. Therefore, Town – hall meetings are organized in places, include schools, churches and civic / municipal buildings.

Bryan (2003) opined that concerning Town-hall meetings organization or arrangement, there exist unspecific rules and guidelines that specify how it should be organized. So, from Bryan's view, any event that tolerates constituents' engagement with politician(s) can be called a Town-halls, Town–hall forum or Town–hall meetings. He further submitted that Town–hall meetings include gatherings in persons, group phone calls or events on internet platforms e.g on facebook or twitter. Halfway (2009) asserted that Town – hall meetings that is organized in period of active political debate can be opportunistic situation for protest and for more active debates.

Finally, Town–hall meetings an avenue for politicians or leaders particularly the elected to get feedback on their performance or on bothering issues from a huge proportion of the people that they are representing in government. It is a platform initiated for discussions and sharing of ideas on a bothering subject matter(s) that of common interest among particular group of people. It is a way the elected officials connect or reconnect with their people in period of recess when they are back to their localities/constituencies. Town – hall meetings is a situation created in which politician(s) hear the people's views on common issues, so, there is no specific rule and guidelines for organizing the said meeting, its format vary, it depends on the conveners.

### **Local Government and Rural Development in Nigeria**

Concept of rural development is like other concepts in the social sciences with multiple definitions. Therefore, it has been defined differently by various scholars, which portray policies or programmes meant to uplift the living standards of those living in the rural localities. Sandra (1998) views rural development as a detailed process of improving living standards of those living in localities so as to close the developmental gap between the rural localities and their urban counterparts, and to strengthen rural economies to be self-sustaining and retaining its populace which has been frequently migrating to the urban centers'. Ogidefa (2007) asserts that rural development is an effort towards elimination of basic situation of poverty, diseases and ignorance through increase in rural produce and to establish employment opportunities. Similarly, Olayide in Okoli (2005) asserted that accountability is a process whereby concerted efforts are made to facilitate significant increase in rural resources productivity with the overall objectives of enhancing rural incomes and increasing employment opportunities in the rural communities. Consequently, rural development policy gives birth to rural development programme.

Local government has the superior capacity to comprehend, identify the local people needs and conduct their affairs than the federal and state governments (Ona, 1995). Similarly, Okoli (2005) local government as a grassroot government it has abundant human resources if fully mobilized to become valuable tool for rural development. In this regard, the introduction of presidential operation in local government is to separate legislature, executive and judiciary both in personnel and functions is to actualize rural development in Nigeria (Ogbe and Ejovi, 2023). So, to ensure people at the local level effective participation and to enhance government responsiveness led to the creation of local government for adequate service delivery through its elected representatives (Ogbe, 2016).

Rural Development Programme is a wide range of programmes deliberately planned and carefully articulated to improve the standard of living of rural populace. To Okoli (2005) rural development programme is a plan meant to transform the rural environment for high or better standard of living. Therefore, the paper sees rural development in view of Ijere (1992) as a solution to improving the lives of people in rural localities with the participation of the people so as to satisfy their needs.

Rural development programme as earlier mentioned is a deliberately planned and carefully articulated developmental programme to enhance standard of living of those living in rural localities, which needs the rural populace participation and accountability of the elected local officials constitutionally assigned with the responsibilities of development at the rural localities. Therefore, the non-engagement (participation) of the rural people and non-accountability of the elected officials breed unethical behaviour of the elected local officials which is capable of hindering effective rural development programme. Therefore, lack of rural people's participation and non-accountability of the elected officials cause the following:

- Acute shortage of needed support of local manpowers for the execution of the programme in targeted rural localities.
- Very poor conceptualization of rural development programme due to no inputs from the affected or targeted beneficiaries of the programme. This is because the real needs and problems of the rural people would not be accommodated in the programme in order to elevate them from their challenges.
- Lack of accountability brings about unethical behaviour. So embezzlement of funds meant for rural development hinder the implementation of effective rural development programmes.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper adopted Democratic Participatory Theory of Robert Dah (Nwosu & Dede, 2020). This theory sees local government as a

governmental institution that encourages and fosters the practice and upholds the tenet of democracy at the grassroot level of society. Umukoro & Okon (2003) noted that local government helps to enlighten the people politically; hence, it facilitates the level of rural people political participation. The theory emphasizes that LG through its functions, it brings about democracy, and democracy is a culture that demands one and others' views, and interest be mutually appreciated (Ola & Tonwe, 2003). Therefore organizing Town – hall meetings regularly by the elected local officials will afford them to involve the rural people in developmental decision making of their local areas as well as be accountable to them by the elected officials for effective rural development. In effective, Town – hall meetings as a strategy it serves dual purposes for effective development at the rural localities because it affords the people to be engage in developmental decision making of their local area(s), and it also serves as a connective place for the elected officials to give account of their stewardship to the rural people, collectively targeting a desired rural development programme for effective development at the rural localities in Nigeria.

### **Research Methodology**

The paper adopted qualitative research and analytical methods which relied on secondary data to examine instrumentality of town-hall meeting as a strategy for public participation to ensure accountability of elected representatives in bringing about rural development.

### **Local Government and Democracy in Nigeria**

Nigeria democratic environment is acidic to accountability, which could have foster rural development in Nigeria. Democracy triumphs in a society that devoid of anti-democratic practice. Democracy associates with programmes and policies initiation toward enhancing welfare of the people. Democracy triumphs in political environment thereby political leaders/elites posses the democratic leadership skills such as tolerance of oppositions, consultations, accountability and adhere to principles of constitutionalism. Democracy is a civilian-led government, which Ogbe (2015) asserted as a means through which the governed legitimate or reject the government/ leaders that govern them in the country. Hence, elected leaders must tolerate, consult and accountable to the people who gave them (the leaders) the mandate to rule. The tolerance of oppositions, consultations and accountability of elected leaders will create room for the masses active participation in the affairs of their government. Town hall meetings organization regularly serves as platform for consultations and accountability of the elected leaders to constituents of their constituencies.

Nigeria democratic ecosystem is repugnance to accountability because the political environment does not encourage the elected leaders to be accountable to the people. This is because any government that lack democratic principles, dictatorship and authoritarianism is inevitable. The Nigerian electoral institutions has made elections instrument of political class domination rather than to ensure credible elections through which the general will of masses is expressed in regard to selection of leadership. Electoral process in Nigerian has been turned to warfare, where anti-democratic means are employed by politicians to attain political power for primitive accumulation of wealth at the detriment of the masses.

Rural dwellers are mostly poor and illiterates who are manipulated by politicians in elections as noted by Areo (2020, pp.1-21) that:

In Nigeria, participation in election is essentially based on clientelism, a means of getting something out of the politicians during and after election, especially the poor for survival. Such patron-client relationship leads to control of the vote of the poor by the patron and loss of independence of the voters to choose the right candidate because the clients vote according to the instructions of their masters. . . .

Therefore, democracy which supposed to have been a basis of forming and legitimises democratic government turned to ‘stomach infrastructure democracy’ in Nigeria. Stomach infrastructure is a strategy of inducing potential electorate to support a particular candidate in an election with items mostly foodstuffs, money or anything that can quench immediate hunger (Ogbe, 2015). Hence, political educations that enthrone democratic culture are thrown to the wind by Nigeria politicians. Consequently, most Nigerians lack democratic culture, which motivates active participation in an election and to hold their leaders accountable.

The emergence of ‘stomach infrastructure democracy’ in Nigeria has further compounded the issue of accountability of the Nigerian political leaders to the people due to as noted by Suleiman (2007) the citizens (electorates) are voiceless and cannot hold their leaders accountable. Chilaka & Egbuchulem (2020) present the electoral situation in Nigeria. They assert that election at all levels usually fraudulent with doctoring of elections results, excessive monetization of politics, ethnic and religious bigotry, lack of internal party democracy and political violence at all stages of elections, and highhandedness by winners which reoccurrence have made almost accepted democratic culture in Nigeria.

In conclusion, policies and investment in infrastructures by government are crucial to the overall development and standard of living of the citizenry (Obinna, 2020). Democracy fosters a participatory rather than an exclusionary top-down approach to public agenda setting and decision-making (Agara & Okonkwo, 2020), which town-hall meetings as a strategy



for accountability aimed at to promote because lack of accountability and responsiveness in governance has resulted lack of basic infrastructures and low living standard in Nigerian rural localities in particular as political leaders only visit the rural localities/areas for rural dwellers' voters and abandon them after elections.

Ola & Tonwe (2003), also emphasize the importance of the local legislative council in ensuring accountability at the local government level. To them, local legislative councils as an elective institutions are the custodians of the purse string of their Local Government Areas (LGAs) couple with the demanding responsibility of ensuring honesty and accountability in the management of public funds are expected to focus attention on budget scrutiny, monitoring and control by making sure that;

- Each project contained in the budget is implemented in a desirably manner and to easy the meaningful development of the LGAs.
- Sufficient budget are made for the execution of each project such that they are not likely to be abandoned.
- Development projects are not unduly concentrated in any particular section of the LGA. When estimates have been asserted to by the chairman after the first approval by the legislative arm, it also carried out monitoring and vetting in such form.
- On-the-spot inspections of the projects contained in the approved budget are performed to guarantee that the projects are being implemented as approved; this may take the form of periodic visit to each project location by members of the relevant committee of the LGC such as monitoring and vetting committee.
- The situation met on ground is compared with the contents of the monthly reports rendered to the legislative council by the chairman.
- Finally, the local government chairman or any relevant officials of the executive arm are summoned (by means of motion) to the legislative council to explain any observed discrepancies. This is why Darina (2006) notes that the popularity and acceptance of accountability as a device to control leaders is build on the believe that human beings imperfect, to avoid probable corruption and wasting of resources and government facilities, best in choosing policies and programmes, and to justify the people's right possession.

### **Participation, Accountability and Rural Development in Nigeria**

Democratic governance requires people's participation and the people need accountability from democratic governance/government so as to ensure good governance/development. Laxmikanth in Ugoo & Nwanne (2007) speak about the essentiality of accountability as an aspect of public

administration in democratic system of government. In their contribution, Ugoo & Nwanne (2007) see accountability as a medium to check wrong and arbitrary administrative actions for increased efficiency and effective administrative process. They opine that accountability is an obligation of administrators to give a satisfactory account of their performance and the manner in which they exercise powers given to them.

From the Laxmikanth, Ugoo and Nwanne's views above collectively show that democratic governance requires majority participation of the concerned people to engender dividends of democracy and for the masses to enjoy democratic dividends, there must be accountability on the part of the drivers (elected officials) of the government, which could serve as an antidote to corruption. That is why Monday Ubani reported by Okoro (2010) asserted that Nigerians have not enjoyed full democratic dividends due to lack of integrity on the part of leaders. Accountability at the local government supposed to have enhanced performance and serve the people better. Ugoo & Nwanne (2007) note that in democratic governance, participation of the people is guaranteed by making the local bodies elective institutions, in case they perform below the masses' expectations, they may be faulted or voted out in coming elections. Local participation and accountability connectivity results in rural development, because local government provides local services like feeder roads, education, transport etc to the people who require the people's participation for good governance and development. This is why the guidelines for 1976 local government reform see local government as;

Government at the local level exercised through representative councils established by law to exercise specific powers within defined areas. These powers should give the council substantial control over the affairs as well as the staff and institutional and financial powers to initiate and direct the provision of services and determine and implement projects so as to complement the activities of the state and federal governments in their areas and to ensure, through devolution of functions to these councils and through the active participation of the people and their traditional institutions, that local initiative and response to local needs and conditions are maximized.

The above definition portrays the positional link between participation and accountability in democratic governance as they encourage and promote rural development at the grass-roots. Abubakar in Eboka (2013) sees accountability as "legal liability (involving) the creation of a pattern of controls over receipts and expenditures that permits a determination either by the executive or by the legislature (or both) that public funds have been utilized for public purposes". He further noted that accountability broadly encompasses the five responsibilities following;

- Fiscal accountability – Responsibility for public funds
- Legal accountability – Responsibility for obeying laws.
- Programme accountability – Responsibility for carrying out programmes.
- Process accountability – Responsibility for carrying out procedures
- Outcome accountability – Responsibility for results.

The major concerns of this study is programme accountability and outcome accountability because the performance of democratic governance at the local level would be judged by the local/rural dwellers base on the developmental programmes initiated and results/outcomes/impacts of the programmes on the rural/local dwellers.

A town hall meetings as earlier noted is a platform initiated for discussions and sharing ideas on a bothering subject matter(s) that of common interest among particular group of people, while accountability is a call on public official(s)/leader(s) to give account of his stewardship which promotes transparency, effectiveness and efficiency in government. Hence, Town hall meetings can be employed as a strategy for accountability for rural development because it offers and fosters effective communication as relates to group discussion on bothering subject matters. Effective rural development needs the targeted beneficiaries active participation in terms of intensive discussions as relates to decision making between the planners and the beneficiaries of the proposed rural development programme to avoid the earlier identified obstacle to rural development programmes in this paper.

Accountability of the elected officials/leaders is inevitable in order to achieve desired rural development in a democratic society. This paper argued for capability of town-hall meetings as a strategy for accountability for effective rural development because it is a medium through which both stakeholders and the people could have effective discussion. For a desired rural development policies and programme to be the initiated and effectively executed, the inputs of the beneficiaries are inevitable and imperative for their success. Town-hall meetings is an effective platform to have the inputs of the targeted beneficiaries because it offers both the elected officials and people avenue to discuss their challenges; thereby giving account of stewardship by the elected officials while the people voice their views on bothering issues to the leaders for effective development. Hence, town-hall meetings are a strategy for accountability which brings about effective rural development through the following ways: town-hall meetings offers the leaders opportunity to see and feel among others the facial expressions of the people, particularly the one that held the hall, which other means of communication (accountability) may not offer. As a strategy, it provides an avenue for hunting for information

that is otherwise unavailable to elected officials/leaders because it offers the people opportunities for self expressions which destroys man-made barriers, which are unnecessary protocol and practice of self-interest in regards to official line of communication between leaders and their followers.

It provides ideas for reforms/or refinement of existing government policies and programmes, its institutions and agencies. Consequently, town-hall meetings as a strategy for Accountability for rural development, it enriches the quality of service delivery structures of government. It provides possibilities for the people to redirect government's priorities and gives greater voice to the people that are participating in their government. Finally, it capable of promoting accountability through questioning and answering of the elected officials by the people.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The people's participation in democratic government should be enhanced and facilitated to enforce accountability at the local government level, which capable bring about spiral effects on rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, and effective and good use of resources for rural development. Town-hall meetings as a strategy for accountability should be an obligation and responsibility of the executive and legislators in ensuring desired and effective rural development. Hence, the administrators of local government particularly the elected officials should be organizing town-hall meetings to ensure the fulfillment of the 1976 and the other subsequent reforms aimed at ensuring rural development in Nigeria. In his complain, Ademolekum (1993) asserts that much has been said concerning the necessity to develop the local areas but solutions should basically aimed at providing responsible local government officials and good governance that would tackle the abject poverty (caused by lack of rural development) facing the vast majority of the rural dwellers in the midst of plenty in Nigeria.

There should be conduct of free and fair elections at the local government level for the emergence of accountable-oriented officials towards the actualization of rural development.

Town-hall meetings as a strategy of the people to hold their elected officials accountable at the local level should be encouraged, promoted and constitutionally guaranteed because it is pivotal to desired and effective rural development.

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