

Inter-Departmental Relations and Effective Service Delivery in the Local Government System: A Perspective from Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examined the role of *Inter-departmental Relations* as a critical factor among others in ensuring effective service delivery at the local government level in Nigeria. It is qualitative in its data collection and analysis; combining it with the use of the systems theory which perfectly situates the import of inter-dependence that engenders the achievement of organizational goals. The analytical discussions reveal that lack of interdepartmental relations amongst units and departments, is a combining factor leading to ineffective service delivery at the local government level. The paper among other things recommends that the government should ensure that units and departments of the local government must see themselves as parties in progress; emphasizing interdependence rather than independence as well as ensuring that all categories of personnel in the local government be availed of the opportunity to attend special seminars and workshops, where they will be taught utilities of cooperation, interdependence and compromise which will equip them for effective service delivery.

Keywords: Service Delivery, Inter-departmental Relations, Local Government, Interdependence, Compromise

1. Introduction

The Nigerian local government system has been described as unified. This unification has not produced unified degree of output in service delivery. The fundamental reason for the 1976 local government reform was to make effective delivery of developmental services available to the grassroots. These unified local governments are departmentalized. Thus, they are administered with various departments reflecting the different areas of services needed by the people. These department or units are headed and manned by staff trained in various specialties. These departments include personnel, Education, Agriculture, Physical planning, legal services, Health. Although, each of these departments pursue its area of concern vigorously it is expected that they must cooperate to ensure effective coordination of all these functions to produce the overall development of the people.

The purpose of government generally is to deliver services to the people. This is why domestic public policy is implemented not merely by pronouncement of the local government chairman but a product of compromise by the various units (Nwosu, 1997:29) Effective service delivery can only be initiated and sustained through genuine consultations, negotiation, compromise, bargaining and agreement between the constituent units or departments. It grows under system of mutuality and interdependence.

The Delta State local government system is an integral part of the Nigeria unified local government system. Effective service delivery which is the underlying reason for the 1976 local government reform has not been well achieved. Poverty in areas of Education, Power, Health care and infrastructure remain dormant at the grassroots. Part of the reasons for this ineffective and by extension, poor service delivery, is put at the door step of contestations and lack of cooperation among the units and their heads. (2004, Onah: 42). This paper is a unique attempt at explaining the utility of cooperation among other factors which have been adequately identified by various scholars as inhibiting development in the local government system in Nigeria. This form of cooperation, agreement and compromise that lead to prioritization of projects and programmes make for economic rationality in the application of scarce resources. Apart from the traditional factors of corruption, financial control by the state government, budgetary failure and overstaffing, which have been variously established as combining to deny the people at the grassroots the expected services delivery, the factor of failing interdepartmental relations among the different units and departments, remains a combining factor among others already examined by earlier scholars. This paper combines the relevance of qualitative data with personal experience to express the critical role of interdepartmental cooperation, agreement, coordination, compromise and prioritization of projects and programmes. This will combine to facilitate effective service delivery at the local government level in Nigeria.

2. Statement of the Problem

The local government system in Nigeria has attracted the attention of both scholars and members of civil society groups. The popular concern of writers is that, local governments in Nigeria have enjoyed some reform which put it in state where it can effectively deliver services in form of development to the people at the grassroots. However, what still pervades the local government system is poverty of various forms. Primary Health Care System is in state of despair, primary education has received appalling attention, feeder roads and community

roads have remained unmaintained, bursary stipends for students for higher institutions has remained unpaid. This prostrate state of underdevelopment at the local government level has been severally described as caused by such factors ranging from diversion and misappropriation of local government funds by the state government through the joint account syndrome, corruption by Chairmen of Local Councils in collaboration with their unit heads, lack of prioritization of projects and programmes and overstaffing among others. (Okoli, 2005; 62).

The primary victims of the combined effects of the misdemeanor are the people who suffered underdevelopment and poverty in the various aspects of their lives. This paper is an attempt to account for another factor which combines to produce poor service delivery and underdevelopment at the grassroots. Thus, we identified lack of interdepartmental relations among the various units or departments of the councils. The fierce contestations and influences for scarce resources and display of ego and superiority have jettisoned prioritization of programmes leading to poor and failure of service delivery. This paper therefore, examines the role of inter-departmental relations and cooperation as a critical requirement that combines with others conventional factors in engendering effective service delivery in the local government system in Nigeria.

3. Objectives of the Paper

The broad objective of this paper is to remain the extension of popular concerns of scholars and practitioners, in their continued efforts at ensuring that the problem of underdevelopment is mitigated; through identification of the causal carnal factors and recommending appropriate template for enduring effective service delivery to the people at the grassroots.

The specific objectives are;

- To discuss the meaning of interdepartmental relations in effective service delivery.
- To examine the critical role of interdepartmental relations in effective service delivery.
- To recommend workable template for entrenching sustainable interdepartmental relations among the various units in the local councils; that will guarantee effective service delivery.

4. Theoretical Framework and Application

The application or adoption of theoretical frameworks to the analysis of any phenomena, be it social, political or developmental is crucial in any research endeavour (Awambor & Ijeoma, 1988: 18). In this paper, the systems theory is adopted to explain the notion of interdepartmental Relations in the local government system.

5. The systems Theory And its Applicability

The contemporary utility of the systems theory derives its origin from the works of scholars like (Bertalanffy 1966, Schein 1980, Wiener 1967, Mattessich 1978, Easton, 1965). However, the systems theory has been expounded and applied by various disciplines to suit their explanations. The general systems theory emerged with the works of Bertalanffy in the natural sciences and later, to be expounded and adopted to explain the dynamics of other disciplines ranging from psychology, political science, management, sociology and cybernetics.

Basically, the assumption of the systems theory is that, any system is greater than the sum of its parts. In other words, the output of the whole organization is more than the output of the constituent parts if they were to function independently and individually.

The universal notion of interdependence of the systems theory as adumbrated in the works of earlier scholars, is further strengthened by Schein (1980:14) when he writes that:

A system is composed of regularly interrelating or interacting groups of activities. According to him, organizations are complex social system reducing the parts from the whole, reduces the overall effectiveness of organizations. The philosophy behind the systems; theory therefore is that a system consists of different parts (sub-systems).

These systems or parts must be healthy and active to ensure the form of relationship and interdependence that engenders the achievement of the overall goal of the system. The failure of one or more of the parts, infringes negatively on the overall purpose of the system.

The central guiding principle of the theory as may be applicable to the local government administration is the assumption of equilibrium that is the whole will need the cooperation of the parts (departments) to keep it going. In relation to the departmental relations, any named administrative structure like the local government system which has several parts or departments-Education, personnel, Health, Transport, Agriculture etc perform difference functions; and it is the combination of these functions that keep the entire system moving. The utility of the systems theory in this paper stems from the fact that its presumption that IDR is a system of transactions among the various department of the local. The system model provides a comprehensive framework for indentifying, coping with and integrating the institutional behaviour and administrative dimensions (IDR). The key idea is that, as each part of the system performs its role, it enhances the performance of the other parts and

hence, the total performance of the system. What should be noted however is that interacting units are parties in common ventures, yet they are equals nonetheless.

6. Inter-departmental Relations (IDR) and Administrative Cooperation for Service delivery

The local government system in Nigeria is an articulation of many components units described as departments. It will therefore be a difficult thing to achieve the primary purpose of service delivery if these components work at cross purposes, (Imhanlahimhin, 1999:68). Inter-departmental relations (IDR), involves the pattern of cooperation among various units or components of the administrative structures of the local government system. It always include the activities and attributes of persons (Heads of departments) occupying positions in all departments viz education, health, law and order, transport etc. These departments are likened to what obtains in the macro political systems, where intergovernmental relations (IGR) plays a critical role in recommending cooperation through which, service delivery can be assured. Thus, in IDR, the place of interdependence is crucial; even though officer occupying various leadership officers have interests that are varied and attitudes that may be difficult. It is in this inter-dependence notion that Uduigwomen, (2001:41) writes that:

once you occupy a position as a leader and the general goal of the system may be adversely affected by your attitudes and interest, the organizational goal becomes paramount....

It is this philosophy of systems goal that, inter-departmental relations (IDR) presents to contemporary leaders. Thus, leaders must jettison their individual interest for the organization believing that their interest will be achieved once the general interest is achieved.

7. Lack of Resource Prioritization and poor service delivery

Budgetary determination and application has been identified as critical instrument for delivery of services to the people whether at the federal state or local government level. It has been variously misused in government particularly at the local government level. The idea of IDR in budget determination is the fact that all departments must cooperate in ensuring that the crucial needs of the people are captured in a prioritized manner. What obtains is that, the departmental heads are required to submit their budgets to the chairman of the council without first discussing these needs with the people and the chairman. Thus, the result is the inclusion of project without direct impact on the people.

Onah, (2004:35) writes that: *projects implemented by most local government are less a product of well thought out button-up discussions with these beneficiaries, hence, the people withhold their support.* Inter-departmental relations in resource allocation require the cooperation of both the government and the people in the determination and prioritization reflecting the immediate needs of the people. Lack of this form of cooperation, where budgets are not economically made, services delivery, is always poor. This perennial, poor budgetary practices, is seen as a form of corruption. Because, it makes budgetary implementation monitoring very difficult, it allows for leakages and diversion of funds to projects without direct bearing with the people; making it possible for the handlers to misappropriate public funds (Okoli, 2005, Adamolekun, 1985, Tyagi, 2004). The concomitant effects of misapplying scarce resources is poor delivery of services to the people; thus, it is critical that the idea of cooperation, compromise and interdependence is key to determining what is captured and prioritized in the annual budget of the local councils. This will engender agreement in the pursuit of the general goal which is equal to effective service delivery.

8. Inter-departmental Relations in Personnel Training for Effective Service Delivery.

Human resources management has come to be an inseparable part of general management, whether in public or private organizations. This is because qualified and competent workforce is a crucial determinant in the application of all other resources in the production process (Okoh, 2001, Nwanchukwu, 1988). At the local government level where the major function is service delivery, it is difficult to measure employees input and performance. This is why employees commitment kept dwindling and assessment of local government in Nigeria has always been described as poor.

Therefore, training in effective personnel management at the local government level becomes the key in eliciting the commitment of staff and efficiency at the local government level. Training and development is an integral part of effective human resources management or service delivery. The collaborative notion of inter-departmental relations enables management to know and compiles who to send for training; arising from good job analysis and performance appraisal exercise. Experience and studies have shown that these exercises are not effectively administered at the local government level, hence the jostle for training. Employees are expected to be sent for training as fallout from the performance appraisal result. But, what we find is that, because, stipends are paid to participants, some heads of departments and units nominate their friends and relations for seminars and workshops. The result is that those who get these trainings are those who actually do not deserve them. (Sharma & Sadana, 1989, Tonnwe, 2008, Lupton, 1984, Onah, 2004). This is a misplacement of privacy.

The linkage of interdepartmental relations and ensuring effective training and development lies with the cooperative roles of heads of departments and other senior officers to conduct good performance appraisal exercise which will indicate those workers that genuinely deserve these trainings. If those that need the training are not given the opportunity to get them, the result is that performance will be poor. There should be prioritization of training needs that must arise from the compromise among departmental heads, instead of competition and struggle to train employees with less interest to immediate need of the local government. Collaboration compromise rationality and priority must govern the selection of candidates for training. This is the goal of inter-departmental relations for effective service delivery in the local government system.

9. Inter-departmental Relations in Recruitment and Selection of Personnel

Recruitment and selection exercises are critical stages in the process of looking for a suitable candidate to fill an existing vacancy. It is very important that recruitment should be done very carefully with all necessary information as contained in the job analysis report so that a square peg is put in a square hole, Novit (1979, Mukoro, 2000, Okoh, 2001).

Recruitment and selection begin with the declaration of a vacancy by line managers/heads of departments who writes to inform the personnel managers of the existence of a vacancy. The personnel manager thereafter examines the vacancies to determine whether it can be filled through redeployment of staff within the system. He also considers whether such vacancies are relevant to the organization. If it becomes necessary to filled the vacancy by deploying staff or employing a new hand, he then sets the machineries in motion for the recruitment and selection of staff (Armstrong 2009:15).

The above process of recruitment and selection chronicled above by Armstrong, is a perfect reflection of the plethora of roles the various departmental heads play in collaborating in ensuring that capable staff are employed into the organization. Thus, interdependence, cooperation and compromise, which express the import of the philosophy of inter-departmental relations, cannot be jettisoned. This collaborative effort of all and sundry is lacking in the local government system in Nigeria. This lack of inter-departmental collaboration in the recruitment and selection process was reflected in the views of Ola and Tonwe (2009:142) when they write that:

Recent study reports have shown that these processes had always been jettisoned for political considerations, particularly when the personnel department' at the local government level appears to be mere appendage in this regard,... Even though, it is the statutory role of the Local Government Service Commission to perform recruitment exercises, particularly of senior staff.

The collaborative notion of inter-departmental relations requires that Heads of departments for whom these staff will be recruited must be procedurally involved. Their non-involvement in the process had resulted in overstaffing and incompetence among local government staff. This indiscriminate recruitment and selection procedures adversely affect effective human resources management in the local Government Administration in Nigeria.

10. Conclusion and Recommendations

The Nigerian local government system has been reformed and made unified. This is to enable it provide efficient developmental services to the people at the local government level; yet service delivery remain unsatisfactory. Many classical and contemporary scholars have adduced the poor service delivery at the local government level to bureaucratic and political corruption, status symbols resistance to change nepotism rigid adherence to rules, jurisdictional problem, lack of autonomy among others, yet the evil of dwindling service delivery has not abated. Thus, this paper is an exploratory one that argues that the service delivery at the local government level is dwindling partly because of lack of inter-departmental co-operation and compromise.

In this paper the idea of inter-departmental relations has been qualitatively discussed using the systems theory as a framework of analysis. It expressed the role of inter-dependency as pillars of the success of the whole. We see the local councils as a system comprising of units or subsystems (various departments headed by senior officers, that must work together to ensure cooperation and compromise among, all units. Thus, it examined the systems philosophy of interdepartmental relations in the areas of lack of resources prioritization and service delivery, personnel training and service delivery, and recruitment and selection in the Nigeria.

11. Recommendations

It is the view of this paper that political and bureaucratic leaders will do well in fulfilling their mandate of service delivery at the local government level if the government works with the following template.

- That various units and departments of the local government must see themselves as partners in progress, they must engender mutual understanding and respect for each other. They must realize the fact that they cannot operate in a watertight compartment; thus, they must imbibe the spirit of cooperation and tolerance.

- For the sustenance of interdepartmental relations in the local councils, units or departments and their heads must constantly be emphasizing their interdependence rather than independence. Indeed, they are indispensable to each other. While local governments are supposed to enhance monumental development at the grassroots, the departments are expected to coordinate the activities of the local governments and ensure their conformity with the local government goals and objectives.
- The erstwhile superior and watchful posture of some departments in the local government must change to that of co-partners in a progressive manner to alleviate the suffering of the people at the grassroots. The division of the functions and powers between units should be mutually exclusive.
- The essence of interdepartmental relations in the local government systems is to enable unity and cooperation to prevail not only among heads of departments but also among all other staff working under them in their different departments and schedules.
- That all categories of staff in the Nigerian local government system be availed with the opportunity of attending seminars and workshops, where the utilities of interdepartmental relations, that is, interdependence, cooperation and compromise, which are critical ingredients for achievement of set goals must be taught to them. Experiences have shown that some staff of local councils do not attend workshops and seminars that does not attract allowances. Thus, it must be made compulsory and stringent penalties meted to those who fail to take the training opportunities.

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