PUBLIC POLICY AND THE CHALLENGES OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT
This article is on public policy and the challenges of rural development. In recent times rural areas in Nigeria is characterized with myriads of challenges limiting the areas from developing. Strange challenges like terrorism and banditry have cost lives and properties with rural unemployment and poverty. To address these challenges, purposive public policy needs to be formulated and implemented in line with robust third tier of government. The structural functionalism theory was adopted to explain the research article. Qualitative research anchored on secondary sources was used. The article recommended that, States and Federal Government should allow local government to operate full autonomy, involvement of the rural populace in policy decisions and the accountability of political leadership in local government administration.

Introduction

Public policy is a purposive course of action made by the state in order to solve societal problems. Societal problems are enormous and they keep emanating as long as the society exist. There are new and old problems to be addressed by public policy. Public policy can be defined as an institutionalized proposal or a decided set of elements like laws, regulations, guidelines and actions to solve or address relevant and problematic social issues guided by conception (Martinez, 2022). Public policy address complex issues in education, health care, employment, finance and economics among others. Developed countries of America and Europe come out with public policies on yearly basis to address certain issues. According to James (1997) public policy can be viewed as whatever government chooses to do or not do. While Carl (1989) see public policy as a proposed course of action of a person, group or government within a given environment providing opportunities and obstacles which the policy was proposed to utilize and overcome in an effort to reach a goal in order to realize an objective or purpose.

Government action or inaction can be termed public policy. That is whatever government intends to do or not do. If there is a problem on ground and the government decide not to solve the problem, it is policy. There could be a reason why the government has no intention of resolving it. Meanwhile the hallmark of public policy is to properly address certain challenges in the society.

This article hinge on public policy and the challenges of rural development in Nigeria. Rural

development is sacrosanct to the economic development of Nigeria. In recent times rural development has become a subject of debate considering the ill-manner the local government is being handled in Nigeria. For instance, the interference of local government affairs by the state governors through the State and Local Government Joint Account which give the state governors the access and control of the local government finance. This has limited the management of the local government to function properly in the aspect of rural development. According to Omini and Ofre (29021) posited that, there is no gainsaying that the local government system has been neglected for more than a decade, thus the escalation of socio-problems like communal crisis, clashes between herders and farmers, religious crisis, kidnapping, armed robbery, cultism and other violent crimes are on the increase in the local government. The limitation of local government administration posed serious challenges to rural development. Rural development is key to the development of Nigeria and beyond.

The challenges confronting rural development is responsible for the massive migration of young people from rural communities to urban towns and other developed countries for greener pastures. Thus, making the rural areas to suffer under development and total neglect by the people. Human beings play significant roles in the development of any society. In the event where human beings are neglecting a particular environment there is bound to be underdevelopment. Despite the introduction of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), human being still play vital roles for the development of the society. Rural areas in Nigeria is currently facing challenges such as insecurity, poverty and unemployment. To further explain the problems in rural areas in Nigeria, Omini and Opue (2024) explained that insecurity in rural areas hampers agricultural productivity and undermines the potential for rural development and diversification. Therefore, there is urgent need for the government to use the instrumentality of public policy to address these peculiar problems bedeviling rural development.

Local government administration is an instrument of public policy and vehicle for the development of rural areas in Nigeria. This article is to venture into the instrument of public policies that can be used to address challenges confronting rural development in Nigeria.

1.2 Conceptual Clarification on Public Policy

This section of the article deals with conceptual clarification of public policy as it relates to the subject matter. Public policy is a techno-political process of articulating and matching action with goals and means to solve complex problems (Birkland, 2001). For Thomas (1992) conceptualized public policy as anything government chooses to do or not to do. This definition is quite simple and the implication is that government action and inaction is public policy. According to Williams (1978) conceptualized public policy as a set of interrelated decisions taken by a political actor or group of actors concerning the selection of goals and the means of achieving them within a specified situation where those decisions should in principle be within the power of those actors to achieve. For Janda, Berry and Goldman (1995) defined public policy as a general plan of action adopted by a government to solve a social problem, counter threat or pursue an objective.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, public policy is the examination and evaluation of available, social or other public issues. Effective policy analysis, whether to enact new policies or amending existing ones is critical in the policy making process. The process includes many facets that involves empirical research and statistical data collection as well as the participation of key stakeholder such as economists, community members and public officials tasked with enacting policy. IKelegbe (2006) see public policy as government actions or course of actions, or proposed actions or course of proposed actions that are directed at achieving certain goals. This definition indicates that public policy is governmental action to remedy perceived societal problems. Egonwan (1991) define public policy as a governmental programme of action. For Okoro (2005) public policy refers to hard patterns of resource allocation represented by projects and programmes designed to respond to perceived public problems or challenges requiring government actions for their solutions. To add to the conceptualization off public policy Ezeani (2006) sees public policy as the proposed course of action which government intends to implement in respect of a given problem or situation confronting it.

1.3 Conceptual clarification of rural development

Rural development has to do with government, individual or private efforts to develop rural communities. Rural areas in Nigeria is key to both national and global development. According to Stephen and Bosil (2012) rural development in the world generally and the third world in particular has assumed the front role status since the early 80s because government has come to realized that rural areas need to be given serious attention it deserves and closing the gap between theories and practice in this areas and the proper goals put in place to achieve accelerated national development. In Nigeria, 70 percent of the population reside in rural areas, thus, rural development cannot be overemphasized. Though rural development has numerous conceptual clarifications depending on the subject matter.

According to Aslam (1981) rural development can be seen as the concept of process aimed at developing the rural poor, their economy and institutions from a state of stagnation or low productivity equilibrium into dynamic process leading to higher levels of living and better quality of life. Also Schumacher (1983) conceived rural development as developing the skills of the masses to make them self-reliant through instruction which apply appropriate and relevant knowledge on the basis and method of self-help. Rural development is a strategy designed to improve the economic and social life of a specific group of people, the rural poor. It also involves extending the benefits of development to the poorest among those who seek a livelihood in the rural areas (Stephen and Basil, 2012). Moseley (2003) posited that, rural development is the process of improving the quality of life and economic wellbeing of the people residing in rural areas. In often times, rural regions have experienced rural poverty, this poverty is greater than what is obtainable in urban or suburban economic regions due to lack of access to economic activities and lack of investment in key infrastructure. In contemporary times with the over flogging research on rural development, rural development has been influenced with global production networks and increased urbanization. Increasingly,rural tourism , niche manufacturer and recreation have replaced resources extraction and agriculture as dominant economic rivals (Ward and Brown, 2009)

Education, entrepreneurship, physical infrastructure and social infrastructure all play strategic and important roles in developing rural areas (Rowkey et al 1976) .Anthony (2001) explained that rural development can be understood as the unfolding of capitalism in rural areas and as that package of policy and project interventions that aim to foster socio-economic change and human improvement in rural areas. Some scholars who have published on rural development addresses general issues of agrarian change, peasant economy and rural politics.

1.4 Theoretical framework Structural functionalism theory

This article adopted the structural functionalism theory. Structural functionalism theory is a framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose various parts work together to promote solidarity and stability in the society (Macionis, 2011). The theory view society through a macro-level orientation which is a road focus on the social structure that shape society as a whole and believes that society has evolved like organism (DeRoso, 2012). The approach sees the society as both social structure and social functions. Functionalism addresses society as a whole in the aspect of function of its constituent elements like, norms, customs, tradition and institution. The two major contributors to these theories were Herber Spencer and Robert Merton.

The concern of this article is the challenges confronting rural development in Nigeria through the instrumentalities of public policy. Rural areas in Nigeria is key to national and international development considering the fact that the areas harbor natural forest and natural resources. The challenges facing rural development in Nigeria are insecurity, farmers and herders' clashes, kidnapping, rural unemployment and communal crisis. These problems have caused devastation and retrogression in rural development. Therefore, impacting negatively in both rural and urban economies. In recent times, rural insecurity and unemployment have triggered massive migration to urban towns which is posing challenges of accommodation and other social vices and the rise of urban slump.

To address the challenges posed to rural development in Nigeria through the platform of structural functionalism there is total need for

public policy overhaul and transformation to address the rising peculiar problems confronting rural development. In the past policies such as local government establishment, poverty alleviation programs, women development programmes and conditional cash transfer were formulated and implemented as part of rural development and those motivate rural dwellers to remain in rural areas. In recent times such policies have failed woefully including in rural development. Sophisticated crime with complex weapons are being used by bandits, kidnappers and terrorists to attack law abiding citizens in rural communities. Viable and peculiar policy options can address these myriads of challenges.

1.5 Methodology

This study is qualitative research anchored on secondary sources of data which was obtained from the study of literature in the form of journal, books, magazines and other works that provide scientific and related information relevant to the study. The research made use of content analysis.

1.6 Importance of Rural Areas to Nigeria and the Global Community

Rural development involves improving the quality of lives and economic well-being of the people residing in rural areas, often relatively isolated and sparsely populated. (Pledge Foundation, 2025). Rural areas have transformed massively due to changes in global production networks and urbanization. Resources extraction and agricultural activities have increasingly been replaced as dominant economic drives by tourism, niche manufacturers and recreation (Pledge Foundation, 2025). Rural communities in Nigeria now view development from a broader perspective than merely resource base business.

Rural areas are the home to raw materials for both national and international development. The reason why the former colonialists in Africa have continued to stay despite decolonization is because of the raw materials and natural resources in rural communities in Africa. The European government have always hide under the guise of providing security to exploit the resources of Africa. Rural areas are also characterized with the emphasis on locally sourced economic strategies. This is in contrast to urban areas with many similarities. Rural areas are highly distinct from each other.

Rural economy in Nigeria is crucial for the growth of the Nigerian economy. Agriculture use to be the mainstay of Nigeria's economy before the advent of crude oil in commercial quantity. Even with the high attention given to crude oil by the government agriculture still play major role to the Nigeria's economy. Therefore, the development of the agricultural sector in rural communities cannot be overemphasized. Though in recent times, insecurity has impacted negatively on agriculture with farmers scared of going to their farms. According to Omini, Opue and Etowa (2025) development administration and administrative development can be used to tackle insecurity in rural areas in Nigeria. This would go a long way in advancing the course of agriculture and triggered food security.

Rural areas in Nigeria are sources of employment generation being host to virgin forest and natural resources. Some persons prefer to reside in rural communities because of the standard of living is virtually low when compared to the humongous amount of money that need to be paid for rent, transportation and other facilities in urban towns. It is clear that about seventy percent of Nigerians reside in rural areas. Thus the challenges pose to rural dwellers must be addressed through the instrumentality of public policy.

In developed countries of Europe and America, the government developed its rural settings by making the areas much attractive to people to live and work. Rural communities are the bastion of the development of any national economy. Challenges currently confronting rural communities in Nigeria are capable of triggering food insecurity and rural unemployment. Therefore, the relevant public policy must be formulated and implemented to curb these challenges for the betterment of Nigeria and the economy.

1.7 Challenges of Rural Development in Nigeria

There is no doubt that despite the importance of rural areas in Nigeria and the government initiatives put in place to accelerate the development of rural areas, there are myriads of challenges negatively affecting the areas. These challenges have ignited food insecurity, rural unemployment and underdevelopment of the areas. The following are the challenges posed to rural development in Nigeria:

i. **Lack of local government autonomy**: The lack of local government autonomy is the greatest bane to the development of the local government administration in Nigeria. The State and Local Government Joint Account orchestrated both the lack of financial and administrative autonomy at the local government level. The 1999 Nigerian constitution, in section 162 (5) provides inter-alia, "the amount standing to the credit of local government council in the Federation Account shall also be allocated to the state for the benefit of their local government councils on such terms and in such manner as may be prescribed by the National Assembly". Also, section 162 (6) provides as follows, "Each State shall be paid all allocations to the local government council of the state from the Federation Account and from the government of the State". In view of the postulation of the constitution backing the State and Local Government Joint Account, Ojugbeli and Ojoh (2014) posited that, state government abused to Joint Account which crippled the local government system and plunged the local government into serious economic doldrums. The governors have become emperor and killed democracy at the local government level by not conducting free and credible election, rather they prefer to constitute care-taker committees or where elections are conducted stooges who are loyal to the governors are planted into offices against the will of the people (Omini & Ofre 2021).

ii. Following the lamentation from the people and scholars on the lack of autonomy at the local government level and the continued myriad of problems in rural communities, the Federal Government through the Attorney General of the Federation and Minister of Justice had to take on the thirty six state governors to the Supreme Court since the State and Local Government Joint Account is a constitutional matter. After a protracted legal battle, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the Federal Government to affirmed full fledge Local Government autonomy devoid of any state government interference . The autonomy is both administrative and finical control. Unfortunately, many months after this landmark judgement, the implementation of the local government autonomy has remained a myth and not reality. It has not been implemented since the state governors still have access to local government funds with the state electoral commission conducting sham local government elections where stooges loyal to be governors are imposed on the people accompanied with sporadic looting of local government resources.

These issues posed serious challenges to the development of rural areas in Nigeria.

iii. **Insecurity in rural areas**: Insecurity in rural areas in Nigeria has become a social problem posing high level of challenges to rural development. It is no longer news that terrorists are controlling some communities in Northern Nigeria. In a television and social media display recent killings of many villagers in Bokkos community in Plateau State, Nigeria. The governor of the State, Caleb Mutfwang announced that 64 rural communities in the State are under the control of terrorists and bandits. He further mentioned that terrorists have taken over the ancestral communities of the people. According to Omini & Friday (2021) communal conflict has been common in African societies and the results of these conflicts is bloody calamity in the aspect of destruction of lives, property, livelihood and hindrance to economic development. The impact of rural insecurity to the Nigeria's economy is alarming.

iv. **Poor government policies to rural areas**: Federal and state government have influence in making policies for the protection of rural areas. More often than not policies from the various governments to rural areas are not consistent, mostly experiencing unintended consequences to the area. For instance, the policy to alleviate poverty in rural communities carried out by both State and Federal governments hardly fulfilled its purpose. Sometimes the real people who are poor in rural communities do not benefit from these programs. Such programs most of the times are influenced by politics and sentiments.

Another related issue to poor government policies is that need assessment is not conducted before a particular policy is formulated and implemented for rural

areas. These programes are capable of not being successful and further escalate the challenges bedeviling rural communities in Nigeria.

v. **Interference and imposition of traditional institutions in rural communities by government and local government leadership**: Imposition of traditional rulers by governors and politicians with political contacts to rural communities has posed serious challenges and escalated insecurity. Traditional rulers are custodian of culture and tradition. They inherit what their ancestors kept for them including how a traditional ruler can be enthroned. Political interest has desecrated most thrones by enthroning politically influenced traditional rulers against the laid down tradition handed over by their ancestors. More often than not, politically influenced traditional rulers are resisted by the people through violent means which has cost destruction of lives and property. People now use political contacts to ascend traditional thrones for selfish reasons. Imposition of traditional rulers is a bane to the development of rural areas in Nigeria.

vi. **Diversion of funds from international donors**: The poor state of rural communities in Nigeria has attracted funds from international donors like the World Bank, Rocker Teller Foundation, International Monetary Funds and other Non-Government Organizations. Most of the funds from donors meant for infrastructural development and poverty alleviation programes are diverted to private pockets, thus, rendering rural communities under-developed. With poverty on the increase, there are instances where the leadership of the Economic and Financial Crime Commission invited some top government officials to answer for funds diverted meant for rural development. Diversion of rural areas funds is also challenge to rural development.

1.8 Solutions to the challenges of rural development in Nigeria

i. **Full blown local government autonomy**: Local government autonomy in Nigeria has become a subject of debate considering the fact that the state governors are not ready to allow local government autonomy to operate in local government. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria permit state and Local Government Joint Account which gives the state governors the political power to control the monthly allocations of the local government. The state governors have also made participatory politics and democratic elections impossible at the local government level. This action of State governors has impacted negatively on the public policy towards the development of rural areas. Therefore, full blown autonomy would bring the required development at the rural communities. With local government autonomy, there would be much funds at the local level that can be utilized for economic development at the grassroots. Local government autonomy would give the leadership of the local government the opportunity to employ people who are jobless and seeking to secure jobs at the local level. If people are employed at the local government, it would give them the opportunity to remain in rural communities and protect the ecosystem.

ii. **Legalization of community policing**: Currently in Nigeria insecurity is a huge challenge to the development of rural areas. In recent times in Nigeria, rural areas are attacked by bandits, terrorists, ritual killings and other forms of insecurity that have constituted a quagmire in the wheel of progress of rural development. The conventional security organizations have been lacking to providing security in rural areas. The governors and other security experts have called on the federal government to give constitutional backing to community policing considering the fact that insecurity is escalating and impacting negatively on rural economy. The community police officers can access the hunter land to curtail the activities of bandits and terrorists. The establishment of community police would restore security in rural areas.

iii. **Full implementation of government policies in rural areas**: The responsibility of the development of rural areas is not only reserved for local governments. The state and federal governments are actors in the development of rural areas, the state

government have roads that passes through rural communities and link to other local government areas. The roads must be developed for the interest of the local government and the state. Similarly, there are infrastructure owned by the federal government located in rural areas, such infrastructure should be regularly maintained by federal government. There are also programs such as poverty alleviation, empowerment of the youths and social security programs among others designed by both the state and federal government and targeted to the people in rural areas. These are all public policies to develop rural areas.

The positive activities of the Non-Governmental Organization towards the development of rural areas should be implemented to the fullest.

iv. **Strengthening the traditional institutions to maintain peace and unity**: In recent times the imposition and unlawful removal of traditional rulers in rural communities have escalated crisis and triggered insecurity. These crises have negative impact on rural development policies. Enthronement of traditional rulers should follow laid down rules handed over by their ancestors. Only traditional rulers who are popular should be allowed to be enthroned to enable peace and security in rural areas. Thus, the strengthening of traditional institutions would enhance the development of public policy in rural areas.

v. **Funds from foreign donors should be used judiciously to fund rural development** - Foreign donors and other organization usually donate funds for rural development considering the peculiarities of rural areas in Nigeria. Funds meant for rural areas from foreign donors should be utilized with utmost care.

1.9 Conclusion

This article hinge on public policy and the challenges of rural development in Nigeria. Rural areas have the peculiarities for socio-economic growth and development. Therefore, rural areas in Nigeria need special attention to maintain and sustain development in rural communities.

The bulk of Nigerians reside in rural communities; this is the clear reason why the challenges bedeviling rural development must be surmounted with every developmental indices.

1.10 Recommendation

The federal and state government should allow local government to have the structures of the third tier of government by granting full autonomy following the supreme court judgment. The structures of the reflection of third tier of government would enhanced the required development in rural communities.

The public policies meant for the development of rural areas should always accompanied feedback mechanisms from the rural populace to ascertain the success and failure of the policies. The government should not make statement on the success of any public policy without the contributions of the people who the policies directly impact. This would ensure the government to focus on public policies on rural areas to be only on areas of need that can impact on the people.

Local government leadership should be accountable to every funds released for local government including Internally Generated Revenue. The economic and financial crime commission should be effective on investigating financial fraud perpetrated by any local government chairman.

This would go a long way in making the leadership of local government accountable to the people.

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