

Government and community in Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

Government, at whatever level, is at its best when it services needs that are common to the population at large but often fails in this endeavour. Local government is justified on the basis that a diversity of needs are likely to be perceived at a local level which are not apparent at the centre. Yet the centre often imposes constraints upon formal local government such that diversity is curtailed and initiative frustrated. These might be called the normal limitations of government. At the present time many countries face additional problems of debt and dependency; public sector budgets are severely constrained and structural adjustments are causing pain and confusion, particularly in the public sector.

In these circumstances people at the "grass-roots" of society are increasingly turning to their own devices for the provision of needs that are shared. When the formal institutions of the state fail to provide adequate schools, water supplies, roads or security measures, they seek means of providing these for themselves, overcoming problems of cooperation and non-cooperation on the way. This results in a plurality of community level institutions which have only relatively recently become a focus of attention amongst students of development (Korten 1987, 1990, Uphoff 1987, Curtis 1991), and have yet to be seen as important constitutionally. This paper, based upon field studies in Kaduna, Kano and Katsina States in Nigeria and subsequent training programmes for Community Development Officers in Kaduna (1), makes a start on an analysis of potential of such grassroot institutions in public service provision and considers the potential role of central, State and Local Government in supporting such bodies. As such the paper is about what might best be called centre/very local relations. Its starting point is that grassroots institutions do carry responsibility, particularly when all else fails. Their further development requires that the principle, now called subsidiarity, that responsibility be carried at the lowest

possible level, should apply to community level bodies as well as formal tiers of government.

DECENTRALISATION, PRIVATISATION AND THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY LEVEL INSTITUTIONS IN DEVELOPMENT

Through the decades since colonial rule was shaken out of the larger part of Africa and "development" became a widely shared objective, there has been a common assumption that the State would be responsible for this task and that the bureaucratic structures of government would play the major role in achieving developmental aims.

Debate there has been, two lines of argument seeking to set limits upon the role of national government in the development process. The first concerned decentralisation. A persistent refrain has been that the central state can neither have the detailed knowledge required to manage local issues effectively, nor can it make sufficient allowance for diversity. So either devolution of powers to locally elected bodies or deconcentration of administrative discretion to locally placed agents of the state is a requirement of effective governance. So, since independence, many states have experimented with either British style, free standing local government structures or French style Prefectures, or some combination of the two.

None of these experiments was a move away from bureaucratic norms; rather a reinforcement of such principles at a lower and more dispersed levels. Nigeria has examples of both deconcentrated institutions such as DIFFRI, the main rural development agency of the Federal Government, and what is in principle devolved authority in the form of both State and Local Governments each of which has certain prescribed powers and entitlements to exercise within its domain. All are bureaucratic in structure.

It is in part as a result of a critique of such bureaucratic structures that a second, more recent argument about the power of the state has

been made. This asserts that the instruments of the state are inherently inefficient and too easily corruptible to be able to assume the developmental role that they were given in the early development decades. In this school of thought the answer lies in the withering away of the State in favour of private property and freemarkets. This argument has the force of the IMF and the aid donors behind it and is the subject of current experiment in many African countries. However, a common critique of this endeavour is that there is, in many states, an inadequate separation of state and entrepreneurial elite: often politicians and bureaucrats in another guise, well placed to see to it that the state distributes resources according to their interests. So the process of privatisation and market development has hardly begun before this strategy too comes under fire.

There is a third possible line of argument about limits to the power of state and bureaucracy. This line is built upon the observation that, in many countries neither state nor full-blown capitalism has completely penetrated the social structure of the society; rural areas in particular manifesting forms of social organisation that look after important interests, but are creatures of neither state nor private enterprise. People in Nigerian villages undertake a number of activities for their common benefit. For instance drains to protect roads and houses and markets from flood water have been constructed, linking this sometimes with the creation of a reservoir for common use as a village pond. Similarly, young men have been organised into "vigilante" teams in order to protect the village households from unwanted visitors at night. Shops have been built by communal effort and given out for rent. These things do not happen spontaneously or because of traditional values but are organised, have recognised rules and procedures and, as such are new institutions.

None of these activities are spectacular but all have local significance. From a constitutional viewpoint several are services which central or local government might have claimed as their own: "law and order" in particular being a collective function that is jealously guarded by the nation state as a symbol of its nationhood.

This paper, in exploring this third line of argument, is based upon the observation that the common good or public interest can be served in part by non-state, non-private, institutions at a village level. Such institutions do car-

ry responsibility and should be recognised as such. The argument touches upon some themes concerning the weakness of statist development strategies, that are shared in part by the two other schools of thought. It explores some evidence about developmental functions that have been managed by non-state, non-private institutions, almost unregarded by representatives of the State or of the "development industry". Finally it considers some questions about how central or local institutions of the state can take on supportive roles in relation to community level initiatives and institutions as against the controlling or suppressive roles that have too often been apparent in the past.

But the paper starts with a short consideration of some basic conceptual issues about the achievement of shared benefit in society which, some would argue, is the sole justification of governance or any form of collective organisation (2).

"JOINT" AND "COMMON" NEEDS

If one takes a "bottom-up" view of society, organisation of any kind is likely to be about what individuals are unable to do for themselves (Curtis 1991, Ch2). People are likely to seek to manage on their own if possible because any kind of organisation requires effort and entails costs. The benefits of organisation have to exceed these costs before it is worthwhile for anyone to invest in organisation. In this conceptualisation individuals choose to cooperate with others in various ways to solve problems and this cooperation results in the institutional structures of society.

In rather few places will this approach be much good at explaining the historical development of the major institutions of society. If there was a consensual past to the history of kings and potentates it often lies deep buried in layers of arbitrary action. Even elected bodies, central parliaments and local councils, often prefer to trace the origin of their authority to a licence from the crown rather than the exercise of the will of the people; perhaps because of the inadequate means available for exercising that will. Nevertheless to conceive of institutional development as a matter of choice helps to explain the strengths and dilemmas of cooperative action of the kinds instanced above.

The basic observation is that individual interests in things like protection from flood, even perhaps the provision of a building that will encourage an itinerant trader to establish a shop, can only be furthered or can best be furthered by joint action or community wide action. In either joint or common action, but particularly the latter, the "free rider" problem will be encountered. As anyone who has shared a student flat will know, some people will seek to obtain the benefits without sharing the costs. This has to be overcome by agreeing enforceable rules of participation and sharing arrangements — such as a washing up rota — for dividing the costs as well as enjoying the benefits.

It is useful to distinguish between the different kinds of problem that people may seek to solve by cooperative or collective action. Public choice theory provides some guidance. Common or public goods are those good things or benefits which, if achieved, will benefit everyone, regardless of whether they have contributed or not. Slightly adapting the language of public choice we could say that common "bads" are problems which remain unsolved because no-body is prepared to take action, each recognising that non-contributors will take much of the benefit. To turn a bad into a good some measure of enforcement is necessary. Otherwise some people will be inclined to free ride upon the benefit.

Joint goods are easier to manage. They are the good things which an individual can only produce or achieve by getting together with some others, but for which they then have exclusive benefit. Joint marketing of crops is an example. In Nigerian villages there are numerous clubs and associations of this kind. These will only concern us in subsequent discussion insofar as such clubs are initiators of proposals or activities which are intended for common benefit of the community, leading to interesting inter-organisational developments.

WEAKNESS OF THE STATE

In many African countries, including Nigeria, government has been responsible for extending basic services such as education and health way beyond the levels achieved during colonial times. There have however been difficulties with the efficiency of these services — the political imperative of employment

generation having often taken precedence over the maintenance of standards — so that achievements on paper have sometimes been greater than achievements on the ground. More serious as a political dynamic has been the effects of world recessions and the current debt burden of so many developing countries, leading to a crisis in public sector finance. Unable to maintain public expenditure, many governments are facing a rapid decline in levels of public services as staff are laid off, not paid adequately or simply not paid at all. Non-staff recurrent budgets have been even more dramatically cut in many places.

It is in response to this often dramatic decline in the viability and effectiveness of public services that non-governmental approaches to the provision of common benefits or public goods have a new significance. What we can expect to find is spontaneous reactions because thought out policy is yet to be formulated in most countries.

So what are the common goods in a Nigerian village and what responses have people been able to make when the services of Local or Central Government are in retreat or have failed to reach them?

LOCAL ORGANISATION FOR COMMON BENEFIT

Local organisation is not always easily identified by an outside observer. While government of all kinds advertises itself and is often apparent in patterns of conspicuous consumption, local organisation has to be economical for all parties — because otherwise they will not cooperate — and is sometimes not only inconspicuous but actually hidden from the authorities for fear that it might be taxed or suppressed. The outside observer therefore has to hunt for evidence of organisation for common benefit. Vigilante groups, for instance, will not be observed by a daytime visitor. Indeed, the security issue was only investigated in this study because the author had in mind Neighborhood Watch, a form of common benefit organisation that is now popular in suburban England.

A second problem in the identification of organisation for common benefit is that common benefits themselves are not readily predictable. At what point will it be economic for householders to take collective action against flood

dangers rather than individual actions in the form of moving their houses to higher ground? When will a security risk be met by organising patrols rather than increasing private window bars and door bolts? That there are answers to these questions is clear because people take these decisions, but the decisions are not easily modelled by observers. Values enter the picture, just as they do when governmental bodies take decisions about kinds and levels of public service.

So the best the observer can do is to guess, and then ask questions. Some lumpy capital projects such as roads or water supplies are likely to be perceived as common benefits. Some environmental issues, such as village cleanliness, sanitation, drainage, soil erosion, or desertification, will likewise fall into the commons category. Security and safety are likely candidates. Fire prevention and fire fighting, pavements and pedestrian crossings, public lighting as well as policing are often perceived public goods. Social services; although the benefits are divisible once established, are perceived as a common want if lacking, so schools, clinics and provision for the destitute can often be found as common services. Even economic services are sometimes perceived as common benefits. Market places are a frequent example and, in places, a common fund for the destitute has been a reported response to drought and famine (some villages in Sudan).

The list clearly contains a number of goods that local or central governments have sought to provide; precisely because they are so often perceived as public goods. Where we find local communities taking them over it is often because of the shortcomings of state provision through bureaucratic delivery mechanisms.

INSTITUTIONALISATION

During the field study upon which this paper is based several villages in Kaduna State were building Junior Secondary School buildings. Massive amounts of local materials had been gathered, labour had been provided, bricklayers and carpenters had been employed and the buildings were rising from the ground.

So how is it done? By common consent, is the short answer. But this answer is inadequate because it does not recognise:

1) the difficulties of reaching consensus in the complex social environment of a village in

a modern economy

2) the need to avoid free riders: through some application of sanctions or coercion in a legitimate manner

3) the fact of social and economic inequality; often taken to be the rationale for government intervention as redistributer of assets or welfare provisions

4) the additional complexity that arises because of the presence of government agents and the economic and political relationships that are established between them and local leaders. These are the centre/very local relationships.

These influences will be discussed in turn.

1) The undertaking of a project such as buildings for a Junior Day Secondary School may well have been at the initiative of a Youth Club or association, probably responding to a call by government for local initiative. Such a body, probably representing not only younger residents in a village but also more educated, is a voluntary association without powers to do anything that is not in the immediate interests of the members of the association. In other words it is an organisation designed to produce joint rather than common goods. If such an association seeks to initiate a project that will be a common service, it will need to seek a wider legitimacy. Most villages in the study area had recognised procedures for this purpose. Leaders of these associations will bring proposals to a Development Committee that has representatives of all groups and associations in the village. Here priorities are worked out. The results of these deliberations are then taken to the village head and elders, with the request that a village meeting is called to seek formal approval and decide upon how contributions will be made to the project.

It is clear from this description of procedures that village activity is not the result of traditional authority or solidarity. Some of the people involved may be newcomers; teachers for instance are often involved in village clubs and associations. Means are found or reconciling these progressive (in their own self-image) forces with more established powers and forces; a reconciliation that may be required at higher levels also if support is sought from Local Government or State funds. So institutional adaptation has taken place to accommodate new interests while achieving a consensual approach to development initiatives.

2) In Kaduna State, but not in the two other

States in Nigeria that were visited, legal provision has been made that village decisions on public subscriptions can be enforced, if proper procedures have been followed. A subscription then becomes a village based tax. This shows a recognition of the point made above, that a public good needs sanctions to back it in order to prevent free riders. No cases were discovered of recourse to the law, but it was clear that organisers appreciated the status that was given to a properly approved undertaking.

Where community activities are essentially voluntary, because no means of enforcement are available, completion of village projects has often proved to be a problem and ability to meet recurrent costs will be severely limited (Curtis 1991 Ch7).

3) Village procedures can also make sensible provision for the facts of social inequality. A flat rate "tax" is easiest to negotiate within village councils but fails to differentiate between the ability to pay off the wealthier and the poorer villagers. Two practical measures go some way to resolving this problem. When the poor do not contribute in cash they may contribute in kind. But where this is not possible nothing is done about it. This makes tacit allowance for poverty and avoids embarrassment.

On the other hand the wealthy are led into contributing twice. Projects often start with a "launching" to which the wealthy are invited. At this ceremony calls are made for donations. An element of conspicuous giving (or, by absence, equally conspicuous failure to give) is thereby included in the resource raising process, and the overall contribution of the rich is enhanced.

As a result of this combination of measures more progressive "taxation" procedures are achieved by village institutions than is usually the case for the formal instruments of the State.

4) It remains the case that village institutional structures and decision making procedures do not always harmonise easily with those of Local Government, State Government or the agents of Central Government.

Service provision can be of three kinds, direct services by central or local government with villagers as passive recipients, partnership arrangements through which state provides, with some participation by the villagers (as in the well established "assisted self-help" formula) and provision by village people themselves

through entirely self reliant institutions (O'Donovan 1992).

Where central or local government still claims to be sole providers of services village committees are left with the problem of what to do when such services fail to materialise. Several responses are possible; become a pressure group, seek the patronage of a politician, become a provider of the service (covertly, so as not to jeopardise chances of public supply), argue or despair.

Equally well established in many countries, including Nigeria, is the Community Development formula involving "matching funds" and similar deals. This kind of assisted self-help is now more fashionably referred to as a partnership arrangement, but the formula remains the same. Villages undertake to provide a certain amount of cash or labour or both, towards a capital project, while the government provides another proportion. In Nigeria the deals tend to involve State Governments as well as Local Governments, but the standard formula is vulnerable to the failure of any one party to supply their share and, in several Nigerian States, little such activity has been achieved in recent years because of constraints upon public sector budgets.

It has been recognised for many years that assisted self-help is prone to a number of problems of coordination. Decision making in the village is generally far more rapid than decision making in public agencies, which may take months or years — particularly if foreign donors are involved. More complicated to deal with is the fact that the decisions of people in the villages can be influenced by their perception of what is on offer from public agencies, leading to grandiose projects being requested to replace modest, low cost projects that were conceived when self-reliance was required. For instance a stone and concrete classroom can be demanded as a replacement for structure of thatch and matting, without real consideration of whether the additional outlay makes a difference to the quality of teaching or learning. None of this means that partnership is impossible: rather it requires particular management approaches on both sides. Where villagers choose a self reliant strategy however, it may well be in response to frustrations resulting from the shortcomings of a poorly managed assisted self-help process, (O'Donovan 1992).