

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL  
OF  
INTER-UNIVERSITY CONFERENCE FOR  
DOCTORAL STUDIES

**JOURNAL OF RESEARCH  
FINDINGS  
(JoReFi)**

Vol. 4, N°1, March 2021.

REVUE INTERNATIONALE  
DE LA

Conférence Inter-Universitaire  
d'Etudes Doctorales

Revue des Résultats de  
Recherche

**(ReReRe)**



## PERSPECTIVES ON GOVERNMENT AND GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

ONYEKPE J.G. Nkem

Department of History  
and Strategic Studies,  
University of Lagos

### Abstract

*Government impact on the grassroots or ordinary people in Nigeria has been very insignificant indeed. This is largely as a result of the bureaucratic or official definition of the people's problems and needs by the political elite or government actors without due cognizance of the people's experiences. The result has been that policy formulation and implementation are strictly by government bureaucrats and actors without the people themselves. Consequently, government policy regimes have left the people and their economic and social world static. This reality is ossified by the poor fiscal resources provided by the government for the people's needs and diversion of what little that is provided through corrupt practices by government bureaucrats and actors. It is the main argument of this paper, therefore, that if the problems of the people are to be addressed the people themselves must be practically involved in the definition of their problems and needs, and in policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation, through the progressive expansion of the democratic space to ensure greater or more popular participation.*

**Keywords:** Grassroots, development, government, planning, political elite

### Résumé

L'impact du gouvernement sur la masse ou le peuple ordinaire a été en effet insignifiant. Ceci est en grande partie dû à la bureaucratie ou définition officielle des problèmes et des besoins du peuple par l'élite politique ou les acteurs du gouvernement sans prendre en compte, les expériences du peuple. Le bilan en est que la formulation et la mise en œuvre des politiques sont strictement le fait des bureaucrates et acteurs du gouvernement, sans la participation du peuple. Ainsi, les régimes politiques gouvernementaux ont laissé les peuples et leur monde socio-économique statique. Cette réalité s'est empirée par la faiblesse des ressources fiscales fournies par le gouvernement pour le besoins du peuple et le détournement du peu qui est fourni par les pratiques corrompues des bureaucrates et acteurs

gouvernementaux. Par conséquent, l'argument principal de cet article est que, si les problèmes du peuple doivent être adressés, il doit y avoir pratiquement, l'inclusion du peuple dans la définition de leurs problèmes et besoins, ainsi que dans la formulation, la mise en œuvre et évaluation à travers une expansion progressive de l'espace démocratique, afin d'assurer une plus grande ou plus de participation populaire.

**Mots clés:** la masse, le développement, le gouvernement, la planification, élite politique

### Introduction

It is proper to begin our writing with the definition of the terms: Government, Grassroots and Development. For our purpose, the term government refers to the political administration of a nation. This encompasses the people involved in the job of ruling or managing the affairs of the nation, their orientations and the value system guiding them, the organs of the administration, its agencies and institutions, and the fundamental laws operative in the system. Government may be defined as an instrument for the allocation of the resources and values in a nation. In nations where the state is actively involved in the economy, to the extent of owning and controlling the *commanding heights*, government is not merely an instrument for the allocation of resources and values; it is, more basically, an instrument for the creation of resources and values through the continuous growth and expansion of the productive forces, i.e., natural resources, human resources, and physical and social infrastructure.

The term grassroots refers to the people, or, more specifically, to the ordinary people, also categorised as the masses. The grassroots are not involved in government in terms of policy formulation and execution. However, in political systems in which government is formed through elections the grassroots are the voters. Their role even as periodic voters is not effective especially where the electoral processes are manipulated. In



most developing countries of the world such irregularities and vices as rigging, thugery, bribery, etc., and the tinkering of the electoral laws and national constitution have all combined to produce a reality devoid of any correlation between electoral or voter support and electoral outcomes. In such situations, the grassroots people are totally inconsequential in the determination of who constitutes the government (Onyekpe, 2016).

Now, who are the grassroots? The grassroots are the people, the ordinary people, who constitute the overwhelming majority of the population. They are the rural people majority of whom are poor and live simple lives. The grassroots include the working class, tradesmen and artisans, market women, the youth, and the unemployed. The grassroots people bear the brunt of national development through their backbreaking labour and toil, and deprivation (Williams, 1980: Chs. 4 and 5).

It is very important to note that between the government or, better, the managers and operators of the government and the grassroots; there is a category of people referred to as the middle class. The middleclass is made up of intellectuals, professionals, senior civil servants and merchants. The middle-class is not homogenous in terms of attitude to the government and the grassroots, in terms of perception of the government and the grassroots, and in terms of their aspirations and orientations and their idea about how the state or nation should be organised and managed by the government vis-à-vis the grassroots. While some members of the middleclass are organically tied to and/or hanging on the government and, ipso facto, are ideologically committed and loyal to the government, others are independent. Some of the latter are on the side of the grassroots people (Gramsci, 1971: pp 6 – 20, 60, 330; Boggs, 1984, Ch. 6).

The term development is a generic term which refers to the processes of developing, which itself means 'growing bigger',

'making progress', or 'progressing', 'advancing' and, more fundamentally, the achievement of increased capacity-building, improved quality of life, and change in all its ramifications. As a generic term, development encompasses the processes of developing in all areas and sectors in the life and world of the people concerned (Rodney, 1972, Ch. 1; Todaro and Smith, Ch.1, 2006; Leeson and Monogue, 1988; Onyekpe, 2013).

Taking grassroots development together, our focus is on the development of the grassroots people. In other words, we are concerned about their progress, about the increase in their capacity to deal with material and social environment, about improvement in the quality of their life, and about changing their world.

### **Fundamental Determinants of Grassroots Development**

Now, concerning grassroots development in any society, the issues to be raised are: what has been the role of the government? Has the government done well and fine, all along? If the government has not done well and fine, what is to be done?

It is taken to for granted, theoretically, that a fundamental reason for the existence of the government is to identify the problems and needs of the people, and articulate programmes of action to tackle the problem and meet the needs of the people. However, the extent to which the government is able to tackle the problems and meet the needs of the people, and the extent to which it is not, are a function of a number of factors or some combination of factors. Are the problems identified and needs prioritised the real ones? Are the programmes of action properly articulated and formulated? Are they practically feasible? Are the strategies and tactics of implementation correct? What is the class or ideological character of the state? Is the state in control of self-seeking opportunists whose primary agenda is to plunder



the resources of the state? Are the state operators' idea of political leadership and administration that of service and selfless commitment to the people and their progress or that of primitive accumulation and self-aggrandisement? Is the government supported with the requisite fiscal resources to finance its programmes of action? If not, why, and what is to be done to broaden the fiscal resource base of the state? Are the people for whom the programmes are formulated involved in the identification of the problems and needs of which the programmes are said to be anchored? Are they involved in the implementation? If they are not involved in the identification of problems and needs and/or in the implementation, why, and what, again, is to be done? These and similar questions are fundamental, in that they are the determinants of government's success or failure apropos of grassroots development.

### The Nigerian Example

The reality on ground, the *people's ground*, is that we cannot properly talk of grassroots development in Nigeria in the active sense of the expression. With the exception of (1) the second half of the 1950s, which was the climax of the anti-colonial politics during which the regions – northern, eastern, and western – progressively achieved a self-governing status with the emergent political elite determined to show that they were a credible alternative to the colonial administration and (2) the First Republic, 1960 – 1966, when the regions were under the political administration of the progressive political activists with intellectual and ideological clarity about what progress entailed, the grassroots people have not been recognised, let alone treated, in Nigeria, as human beings entitled to basic economic and socio-political rights and fundamental freedoms. Thus from the take-over of the administration by the Armed Forces in January 1966, to the hand-over to civilian administration in 1979, the people were left without food security and decent housing. Besides, access to education, health-care,

energy and water, transportation, and recreation have all remained a luxury. Officers of the Armed Forces ruled by fiat and were accountable only to themselves. This enabled them to enrich themselves at the expense of the State and the people.

The Alhaji Shehu Shagari-led civilian administration of the period, 1979 – 1983, did not better the lot of the people in any significant way. The political elite in control of state machinery and agencies at the central and state levels used their positions to plunder public resources for self-enrichment. This was achieved through inflation of contracts and cost of projects, commissions on contracts, over-invoicing, outrageously high emoluments of elected public officers, etc.

There were four military regimes in Nigeria after the overthrow of the Alhaji Shagari administration in December 1983. These were the regimes of Muhammadu Buhari (1984-85), Ibrahim Babangida (1985-93), Sani Abacha (1993-98), and Abdulsalami Abubakar (1998-99). The Buhari regime declared War Against Indiscipline and Corruption, but the self-acclaimed messiah lasted only twenty months (January 1984 – August 1985) in power. The three successive regimes promoted corruption in office, such that by the end of their tenures, the three army generals were among the world's richest ex-presidents and heads of state. The uppermost stratum of the Armed Forces and their civilian loyalists, ideologues and hangers-on controlled the oil wealth of the nation.

The Fourth Republic, which came into being with the emergence of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo as president (1999 – 2007), elevated corruption to a historically unprecedented zenith. Indeed, the reality in politics and governance since 1999 has been that of competition among the political elites for garlands as juggernauts in corruption bandwagon. Corruption and lack of accountability in office continued in the



administrations of Alhaji Umaru YarAdua (2009 – 2010) and Dr. Goodluck Jonathan (2010 – 2015). Alhaji Muhammadu Buhari became president in 2015 with total war against corruption in government avowed as his primary purpose in office. But the said irony is that the Buhari administration may turn out to be more corrupt than all past administrations.

The difficulties of the people would have been mitigated if their labour resources were not imprisoned through lack of employment and if they had the means and instruments of popular participatory political representation and expression.

What, then, are the explanatory factors for the government's failure to tackle the problems of the people and meet their needs? Let us pause and ponder issues raised early on, on the determinants of government success or failure in the tackling of problems and meeting the needs of the people.

On the first issue, that is, whether the problems identified by the government and the priorities are the real ones, our answer is simply in the negative. Indeed, government definition of problems and what it perceives as the needs of the people are not based on any scientific and concrete considerations of the concrete realities but mostly on what serves the patronage and contract system build into the political administration and governance. This brings us to the second issue, on whether the programmes of the government are properly articulated. There is nothing as evidence that the government programmes are arrived at through any universally acceptable development theories and principles. Thus far, nearly all programmes so called, have been based on trial and error and a grope in blind alley. Of course, where and when the government gropes in the dark the feasibility of programmes or correctness of strategies and tactics for their implementation are Utopian expectations.

On the class and ideological characters of the state and on whether the operators of the government are self-seeking opportunists and primitive capitalist accumulators, there can be no gainsaying that the Nigerian state is a dependent neo-colonial capitalist appendage managed by a parasitic class of lazy, redundant and thieving comprador bourgeoisie. As it is with comprador bourgeoisie everywhere in the Southern Hemisphere, their aim in politics and the quest for political power in Nigeria is primarily to plunder state or public wealth for the sake of primitive self-aggrandisement (Williams, 1980; Joseph, 1991; Onyekpe, 2021).

On whether there is a solid fiscal base for the implementation of the programmes of the state, our answer is a categorical no. The plunder of state resources by the operators and functionaries of the government is part of the reason for the poverty of the state. Indeed, the resources stolen by the managers of the state cannot at the same time be available for the implementation of the programmes of the state. But by far, the most critical explanation for the poverty of the state is the domination and exploitation of the economy by the neo-colonial powers of Western Europe, North America and Japan. The structure of the economy is about 75-25% in favour of neo-colonial imperialists who plunder the nation through the agencies and instrumentalities of direct foreign capital investment, unequal trade relations and overseas development aid, so called. The point really is that the economy is organised and managed as an appendage, externally vertically integrated with the exploiter capitalist states of the Northern Hemisphere. Consequently, resources generated within the economy are simply externalised to Europe, America and Japan. Thus, such resources are not retained within or available to the state for development.



On whether the people are involved in the formulation and implementation of programmes, our answer is another categorical no. Everything about government business is concentrated and consolidated at the centre, whether at the national or state level (Agbalaka, 1980; Ibrahim, 1980; Williams, 1980, Ch. 5; Oyediran, 1994). At each of the two levels, the centre decides and 'plans' for all the regions and local areas at the bureaucratic top and without information and data and without concern for the sentiments and aspirations of the people. For example, does the Minister of Agriculture not arrogate more knowledge about rural agriculture than the rural farmer, and then decides and "plans" for the rural farmer on how to go about his activities?

A critical point to be made is that, because the people are at the receiving end they are not mobilised to participate in the formulation and implementation of programmes. Consequently, there is no question of building and developing organs and structures for mass participation. In the absence of such organs and structures the people have remained largely unempowered and therefore politically and socially of no consequence.

It may be argued by ideologues and demagogues of the state, that the Local Government is an agency for the participation of the grassroots people in the development process. Let no one be deceived by sophistries and rhetoric! The Local Government system has not departed in any significant way from the colonial arrangement under which it was employed for the imperialist exploitation of the subject people. Today, in terms of principles, organisation, functions, and programmes, the local government system is not anchored on the realities on ground. The so-called agency of the people has been over politicised. For example, after the general elections in April 2003, the local governments were hijacked by the ruling PDP government, which operated more or less as a one-party government. Under the guise of reforming the local government system while other

levels of government were yet in stasis, encumbered as they were by the corrupt actions and activities of their predatory controllers and operators, elections at that level were suspended indefinitely. The primary motive of the Obasanjo administration in the suspension of local government elections was to financially empower his supporters and loyalists at the local councils. By virtue of PDP hegemony, about 80% of the local governments were controlled by the Party, which appointed the administrators and councillors as caretaker committees. It is important to note that during the indefinite transitional period for the so-called reforms the local governments were not expected to embark on any new projects. Yet, they continued to receive their statutory fiscal allocations without responsibilities to the people. Such allocations were simply for the settlement of wage bills and then for sharing by the administrators and councillors all of who were selected and appointed rather than elected.

The brinkmanship of an uninterrupted fiscal allocation without social responsibilities achieved the desired aim. For, much of the allocation was: (1) regularly transferred to the political godfathers and the patrons in the ruling PDP, and (2) donated to the ruling party to offset part of the huge cost of the re-election of the incumbent president, Chief Obasanjo.

### **Preconditions for Grassroots Development**

Nigeria's experience clearly demonstrates that the determinants of grassroots development identified in this paper are not reckoned with in the "development" process. The people for whom development is meant are not part of the definition of their needs, the articulation of policies, and the formulation of programmes and their implementation (Ibrahim, 1980; Agbalaka, 1980; Sanda, 1980; Williams, Chapters 4 and 5; Adeyemi, 1980; Odeyemi, 1982). The government and its managers and operators arrogate themselves the wisdom and superior



knowledge to decide for the people without any close interaction with them either to learn about their experiences or to gain inputs from them. To be sure, such wisdom or superior knowledge is only on paper as it is not based on any appreciation of the people's everyday practical economic and social experiences and challenges. Expectedly, policies articulated and programmes formulated at the bureaucratic top rather than on the people's ground have never yielded results characterisable as progress for the people.

There has also been the challenge of poor implementation of programmes. But if or when wrongly defined policies and programmes emanating from them are implemented to the letter, it does not make any difference as there would be no significant impact on the people and their world. For, the policies and programmes are *abinitio* not well thought out and, therefore, invalid and wrong.

Nigeria's political experience has shown beyond doubt that majority of public-office seekers' concept of leadership is not that of selfless service to the people, but rather that of private self-enrichment. This is a value system and orientation that run counter to the development needs of the people. The impact of this value system on the people is worsened by the dwindling public resources which itself is the logical consequence of (1) the continuing domination, control, and exploitation of the dependent neo-colonial state and economy by foreign enterprise, capital, and technology, and (2) the inability of the Nigerian state to transform the economy through the articulation, formulation, and implementation of bold and courageous programmes aimed at self-enhance and all-round development of the productive forces.

To be sure, dwindling public resources has meant lower and lower fiscal revenue appropriation for the needs of the people.

Yet, the private self-enrichment ambitions of the political elite in power has meant that what title fiscal resources that are appropriated for the people's needs are diverted through the concatenation of vices in public expenditure, such as overvoicing, inflation of contracts, misapplication, the trick of phantom projects, etc.

Our explanation of identified problems logically leads us to recommend that if the grassroots people's needs are to be addressed the following conditions must be met.

First, the people must be involved in the definition of their problems, in the formulation of programmes of action, and in the implementation of the programmes. The people should know their problems and needs better than the government and its managers and operators who have all along been "thinking" and "working" for them. The point here is, therefore, that the paternalistic orientation of the government and its managers and operators should give way to the direct participation of the people. It is important to point out that the direct participation of the people requires that they be sensitised, mobilised, enlightened, and organised on a permanent basis. This in turn requires that the people's civil organs and structures are strengthened and new ones are created for them. The people's organs and structure are the platforms on which they play their roles, express themselves, and engage the government as active participants.

The above is a call for the active participation of the people in government (Lucas, 1963; Oyediran, 1994). Active participation or what might be called participatory democracy is possible or realisable only on the basis of the restructuring and reconfiguring of the local government system to make it nearer and more accessible and accountable to the people. Nigeria has an estimated population of 182,000,000. With 774 local govern-



ment areas, the average population of the local government areas is 235,142.

Nigeria has a three-tier government structure, viz, federal, state, and local government tiers. The third tier, that is, the local government is supposedly the nearest tier to the grassroots people. But for the local government to respond to the people and serve their interest, it should be smaller than the present average population of 235,142. For, the smaller the population the more functionally effective and efficient it is expected to be. For example, in the United Kingdom, the average population of the local government in Wales and England is 120,000. In both France and Italy, it is a mere 13,000, while in the United States which is a federal system on which the Nigeria federation is modelled, the average population is 12,000.

Besides, there is a need for a new value system focused on the progress of the people rather than on the elite in power. A new people-oriented value system, if and when operative, would ensure that the "success" of the tiny minority of the privileged elite would cease to be equated with the success of whole society, nay, the people. The point here is that the society must shift from its unequal socio-economic structure to egalitarianism that would ensure the greater happiness for the greater number of the people.

Finally, there is also a need for more fiscal resources to be allocated to address the problem of the grassroots people. More resources allocated should be able, if and when judiciously deployed, to develop the potential of the people and empower them through: (1) the provision of functional utilities and amenities both for the rural and urban poor, and (2) the development of programmes, for example, the establishment of skills acquisition centres, formation of cooperative societies, creation of revolving loan schemes, etc.

It is expected that the change of the value system and concept of leadership would ensure that the resources that are appropriated for the benefit of the people are deployed in accordance with the appropriation and implementation guidelines as defined in the blueprint.

### **Conclusion**

We have done a problematisation of grassroots development in the context of government bureaucratic approach and associated fundamental difficulties. In their definition of the people's problems and needs, the government and its bureaucrats and actors never reckoned with the people's practical experiences, hence policy formulation and implementation were always without any inputs from the people for who the policy measures were formulated. The result of this divorce between the government and the people in problem definition, and policy formulation and implementation has been an abysmal failure of policy to impact positively on the material – economic and social-existence of the people.

Therefore, we have recommended that an entirely new political context be created to enable the people to participate in "development" issues that are about them, through their involvement in the definition of their problems and needs on the basis of their everyday practical experience and challenges, through their involvement in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of policy measures and action programmes that are meant for them. It is expected that the involvement of the people in the definition of their problems and needs, and in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of policy measures and actions programmes would progressively reduce and ultimately eliminate the divorce between the government and the people, as it would naturally facilitate mutual input-output engagement.



The new political context recommended is an expanded democratic space that would ensure greater participation of the people, what might be called popular participation or popular democracy. It goes without saying that greater participation of the people requires the strengthening of existing organs and structures of the people and the creation of new ones to meet the ever-changing and ever-expanding needs of the people. Any honest government should encourage this – that is, the strengthening of existing organs and structures of the people and the creation of new ones - which truly aims at unfettered grassroots development but hitherto did not appreciate its critical imperative; the imperative of greater participation and its corollaries of strong organs and structures for the people.

## References

- Adewumi, J.B. 'Planning at the Local Level' in A.O. Sanda (ed.) *Planning with the People*. Ibadan: Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1980. Chapter 4.
- Agbalaka, P.N. 'Planning from Below' in A.O. Sanda (ed.) *Planning with the People*. Chapter 6.
- Boggs, C. *The Two Revolutions: Gramsci and the Dilemmas of Western Marxism*. Boston: South End Press, 1984.
- Gramsci, A. *Selections from Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971.
- Ibrahim, M. 'Planning Economic Development from Below', in A.O. Sanda (ed.) *Planning with the People*. Chapter 5.
- Joseph, R. *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books in arrangement with Cambridge University Press, 1991.

- Leeson, P.F. and M.M. Minogue (eds.) *Perspectives on Development Cross-disciplinary themes in development*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988.
- Lucas, B.K. 'The dilemma of local government in Africa' in Robinson, K and F. Madden (eds.) *Essays in Imperial Government Presented to Margery Perham* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963, Chapter 7.
- Odeyemi, I. 'How it all started' in Usman, Y.B. *Political Repression in Nigeria Volume One. A Selection of Basic Documents 1979 – 1981*. Kano: Bala Mohammed Memorial Committee, 1982.
- Onyekpe, J.G.N. 'Economic Growth and Development: Focus on the Less Developed Countries (LDCs) in Olukoju, A., A. Lawal, and K. Faluyi (eds.) *Fundamentals of Economic History*. Revised edition Lagos: Department of History and Strategic Studies, University of Lagos, 2013, Chapter. 3.
- Onyekpe, J.G.N. '2015 General Elections: The Electorate and the Legitimacy of Electoral Outcome', *The Constitution. A Journal of Constitutional Development and Democratic Consolidation*. Vol. 15, No. 1, March 2016, pp. 44 – 60, published by Centre for Constitutionalism and Democratic Consolidation.
- Onyekpe, J.G.N. 'Anatomy of Nigeria's Economic Crisis', Lead paper presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference organised by the School of General Studies, Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku, Delta State, August 3 – 6, 2021, on the theme of "Nigeria's Economic Crisis: What Is The Way Forward?"
- Oyediran, O. (ed.) *Autonomy of Communes in Africa and German Speaking Countries in Europe*. Ibadan: Vintage Press, 1994.
- Rodney, W. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Bogle – L'Overture Publications, 1972.



Sanda, A.O. 'Development Planning and Mass Participation, Some Lessons from Nigeria's Post-Colonial experiences' in Sanda, A.O. (ed.) *Planning with the People*

Todaro, M.P. and S.C. Smith. *Economic Development*. Eight Edition. Edinburgh Gate Harlow: Pearson Education in arrangement with Dorling Kindersley, London, 2006.

Williams, G. *State and Society in Nigeria*. idanre: Afrografika Publishers, 1980.



*Printed by*  
UEW Printing Press  
P.O. Box 25  
Winneba

