

Participatory Governance: How Nigeria Can Achieve Development Through Citizens Participation in Policymaking

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Abstract

Since the abrupt interruption of the indigenous systems of governance, it can be argued that the superior model of governance introduced by the colonialists has failed to achieve sustainable evidence of good governance for the citizens of Nigeria. This colonial tendency was passed on to the post-independence era even to the present day democratic federal system of governance. Governance is important in determining institutional norms and structures; it provides the guide to how countries tackle economic growth and developmental challenges. It also helps to shape social, cultural, and political decision-making processes at all levels of government. Data for this study was gathered by reviewing various scholarly works on the governance systems as has been applied in Nigeria in the past, to provide a high-level analysis of the impact of the current governance dynamics on the country's socio-economic growth, the challenges with achieving resilient governance through citizens inclusiveness in the policymaking process, the failure in the capacity to build inclusive political and economic institutions through citizens consultative forums to help policymakers understand context-specific problems, and proffer pragmatic ways that Nigeria can use to solve these problems using the problem-driven iterative approach-PDIA which encourages the use of local knowledge for local solutions.

Word Count: 200

Keyword: Governance, Public policy, Socio-political Institutions, Development, Regionalism.

Introduction

The pre-colonial ethnic nationalities that make up Nigeria had effective governance models used to address their social, cultural, and economic issues in their different communities. Since the abrupt interruption of the indigenous systems of governance in 1914, it can be argued that the traditional models of governance introduced by colonialists have failed to achieve sustainable evidence of good governance for the citizens of the Northern and Southern colonial protectorates that were merged to create Nigeria in 1914. After a century of trials and errors of various governance approaches, it is evident that colonisation was the genesis or the major factor that weakened the social connection between the state and society in Nigeria. This colonial tendency was passed on to the post-independence era and to date.

The indirect rule system of the colonial masters as observed by Crowther (1964) created an elitist political culture. The transfer of authority to the political elites at independence further expanded the class structure and exclusion between the elites and the masses. Yet, the quality and characteristics of the government determine the level of peace and stability that a country relies on for socio-economic development. Pia (2019) asserts that governance determines the link

between the state and society. The nature of governance, therefore (whether good or bad), is central to the molding of state systems; it gives legitimacy to the authorized government officials who execute state affairs on behalf of society. This is in tandem with the views of Chester (2019) on the importance of governance in the determination of institutional norms and structures, hence providing a guide as to how countries approach the challenges that help shape their political culture, and decision-making at national, state, and local government levels.

After independence, the complete overthrow of the already checkered democratic system by the military through serial coups led to a short-lived democratic era (Decalo, 1977). This created a gap between the state and society. It weakened the leadership structure that could have helped to build the social contract that will be sufficiently inclusive to manage Nigeria's ethnic diversity.

When Nigeria fully transitioned from military rule to democracy in 1999, there was hope that democracy would improve citizens' participation in deciding the affairs of the government. However, there has been a constant decline of democratic governance to a more centralised authoritative rule. Some of the reasons attributed to this included: Over-concentration of power at the center, even as Nigeria identifies itself as a practicing federal state. This may, however, be blamed on the country's unitary constitutional arrangement, which has allowed the federal government to wield overarching powers; Pervasive mobilisation towards ethnic lines by weak leaders; Extreme state fragility and endemic conflict risks – see issues with Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria and the secessionist movement by IPOB separatists in Eastern Nigeria; Weak state capacity to coordinate the heterogeneous nature of the country's huge territorial landmass, population, religious and cultural differences; widespread corruption among political leaders and public officials; and patrimony (Ademola, 2020; Adebayo, 2014; Nnamdi, 2015).

Methodology

This paper will review several scholarly works on participatory governance and past Nigerian governance systems to provide a high-level analysis of the impact of the current governance dynamics on Nigeria's socio-economic growth, the challenges of achieving resilient governance through citizen inclusion in the policymaking process, and the failure of the state capacity to build inclusive political and economic institutions through citizen consultative forums to help policymakers understand context-specific problems and possible ways to tackle them using local knowledge.

Further, the paper will try to find out the basic requirements to achieve participatory governance through regionalisation, if regionalisation will help strengthen Nigeria's current fragility. It will also try to understand whether participatory governance through regionalisation may or may not have an impact on local development through a case review of past efforts at decentralisation through regionalisation. It will dissect how governments at all levels can manage competing and complex interests, investigate coordination issues that may arise as a result of this model, and use the knowledge to strengthen state capacity for participatory governance in policy making.

Contextual Analysis

Participatory governance is seen as deepening democratic engagement through citizens' involvement in governance processes within the state or at their local level (Benjamin, 2005). The idea is for citizens to play more active roles in public decision-making or at least engage deeply in policy issues. Policies are the outcome of political processes that shape the welfare of societies (Putnam, Robert and Raffaella, 1995). However, the policy-making process can become complicated and can result in either good or bad policy outcomes or may even result in the decisions and actions of the government becoming ineffective when they fail to address public problems in ways that are consistent with widely shared values and preferences. Participation in policy making has historically been used to both aggregate those preferences and create a sense of ownership among citizens.

The modern theory of participation was first articulated in the 18th century by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the author of 'The Social Contract'. Rousseau envisioned democracy as being equal citizens assembling to make decisions in an interdependent, deliberative manner, to uncover the "general will"—that is, to forge a policy in which benefits and burdens are equally shared (Carole, 1976).

To Rousseau, participation was more than a method of decision-making. It was a process by which an individual developed empathy for another's point of view and learned to take account of the public interest in order to gain cooperation. Participation, therefore, served an important educational function: the individual learned how to become a public citizen, and community members developed a sense of belonging. Rousseau intimately linked the notion of participation with the development of civic life, an idea that has had a profound influence on subsequent political thoughts.

Across Africa's community settings, and especially in Nigeria, chiefs could not make decisions without first consulting their councils. Although, most of the chiefs exercised ritual powers, their influence depended on their ability to persuade and convince, not coerce. For instance, Britannica (2019) reveals that in the Oyo Empire in Western Yoruba Nigeria, the authority of the chief (the king called Alaafin or Oba) is greatly circumscribed. He is required to act in concurrence with counselors (Oyomesi) who aggregate community deliberations into the palace policies, and any attempt by the chief to act on his own becomes a legitimate ground for dethronement.

Participatory governance is not just about explaining mere citizens' participation in public discussions about policies or plans to give advice or opinion or to vote or evaluate processes on what government should or should not do. Mansuri and Rao (2012) opines that it is imperative to see the concept from a broader perspective, where citizens take a more active approach and become partners with decision-makers as well as stakeholders in policy design and implementation, as the emphasis is on a 'participatory or collaborative' framework where citizens work together with the government in creating solutions that will lead to better outcomes for the country's economic development. Instead of a top-down approach, collaboration encourages a bottom-up approach where initiatives come from the communities themselves and are driven by collective action.

Although political leaders face competing demands in terms of aggregating citizens' needs, it is important to recognise that responsive state institutions are the ones that try to decentralise political decision-making processes to have a shared delegate authority that balances the national, state, and local levels of power. To achieve meaningful progress in development in Nigeria, there

should be increased citizens' participation in governance beyond mere voting during an election or holding public offices.

Citizens should be 'carried along' in government decision-making processes. As succinctly put by Eniayo (2019) in her article – Improving citizen's participation in governance, "the Nigerian political system and governance as presently constituted do not encourage the mass participation of people in politics". The current political environment and decision-making process are structured to favour only the wealthy elites. This is one of the reasons most Nigerians do not have confidence in their political leaders, thereby leading to mutual suspicion and lack of trust between the citizens and the government.

Why Does Participatory Governance Matters? The Pros and Cons

The current interest in participatory governance began as a reaction to the highly concentrated decision-making processes of Nigeria's development strategies even when the government had moved from military to democratic government by the late 1990s. This created a widespread perception among citizens, activists, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that the "top-down" policy approach deeply disconnects the needs of the citizens, especially the poor, the marginalised, and the minority ethnic groups, from the overall country's development and policy making process, because policymakers lack local and contextual knowledge of citizens' needs. Incorporating local knowledge and preferences into the decision-making processes of governments through regionalization may help build community-level social capital and increase the demand for good governance and accountability.

This is why Dan (2019) in his article, *The Power of Letting Go*, understood from his experience in East Timor that organisations (here, countries) must juggle the fallible judgment of top-down control by those who have less contextual knowledge. As expressed by Dan, when the terrain is rapidly changing and unknown, better outcomes result when the people on the ground (the citizens) are in control of the decision-making processes because it allows for quick response, flexibility and adaptation when needed. Nonetheless, Dan also expressed concerns about the possibility of information asymmetry if citizens' goals did not align with those of political leaders.

Also, advocates of participatory governance, especially Nigerian citizens, view it as a mechanism for enhancing community-driven development, improving efficiency and effectiveness, scaling-up poverty reduction programs, making development more inclusive, empowering people, building social capital, amplifying the voices of ethnic minority and vulnerable groups, strengthening governance, and complementing market and public sector activities (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2000). Skeptics of participatory governance, on the other hand, as asserted by Cooke and Kothari (2000), are more concerned with the practical challenge of government adopting and implementing community interests when they do not align with those of political leaders' interests and incentives. They may gloss over the proposals from the communities or may even not incorporate them at all in the state plans. Also, community plans and decisions may be highly influenced and subjected to elite capture because of the overbearing influence of local elites and powerful politicians within the regions.

Other critics, such as Mansuri and Rao (2013), argue that participatory governance is severely challenged. First, that the exercise of voice and choice can be very costly; it may involve financial losses for citizens, because of the time required to ensure adequate participation. Also, participation may lead to psychological or physical stress for the most socially and economically disadvantaged, because it may require them to take positions that may conflict with the interests

of powerful groups. The premise of participatory approaches is that their potential benefits should outweigh such costs, but critics argue that this is by no means certain.

Second, as participation becomes mainstream; it is often used to promote pragmatic policy interests, such as cost-effective delivery or low-cost maintenance, rather than as a vehicle for radical social transformations. Indeed, Arun and Ribot (1999) agreed in their article on accountability and decentralisation that in West Africa, participation in governance has been described as a form of forced or *corvée* labor, with the poor being pressured to contribute far more than the rich.

Third, critics also argue that the belief that participatory experiences will transform the attitudes and implementation styles of authoritarian bureaucracies as seen with the current Nigerian government may be naive. The routinization of participatory planning exercises into the work of public sector agencies may create additional pressure on resources which leaves implementers unclear about the implications of the new accountability framework.

Furthermore, at high levels of participation, "local knowledge" is often a construct of a planned context which conceals the underlying politics of knowledge production and use. Ostrom (1999), in explaining some potential pitfalls of this phenomenon, asserts that participatory exercises are often public events that are open-ended for certain target groups and activities. Thus, such events can be inherently political, and the outcomes shaped by local power; outside agendas can also be expressed as local knowledge; Participatory processes can be used to legitimize some political leaders' ideologies that have been pre-established with little or no real inputs from the citizens of their constituencies.

Fourth, critics argue that local and state governments in Nigeria are not necessarily more accountable and transparent than the central government, because of the absence of the prerequisites for local accountability to work (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2006). These prerequisites include an educated and aware citizenry, relative social and economic equality, law and order, the ability to run free and fair elections within a constitutional setting, reliable and trustworthy information channels, and oversight by an active and effective civil society.

Then the question becomes, to foster participatory governance, should the priority be to achieve the inclusion of diverse elites from the various ethnic groups and professional constituencies in Nigeria (a sample of the grassroot opinion leaders) who will be knowledgeable enough to engage in policy dialogue? What level of society should be included? Should the dialogue be an ongoing process or a single annual event to reduce costs for the citizens? How can the voices of local communities, as well as the groups operating at state and federal levels, be heard by the government? What about the inclusion of specific demographic groups such as women, youths, the physically challenged, and people with special needs in the decision-making process?

Participatory Governance Framework: Potential Implementation Challenges from the Past Attempts in Nigeria with Regionalisation

Regionalism as a concept in Nigeria is used to differentiate political sub-units for administrative consideration – that is, national and lower government units. The regions in Nigeria are to a great extent, partitioned along geopolitical boundaries to express the idea of nationhood, which is characterised by a common language, religion, history, and ethnic group, common objective, the desire for belongingness, and nationalist identity.

The Richards Constitution of 1946 introduced the three regions of Nigeria-the northern, eastern, and western regions (Omipidan, 2018). The three regions existed through independence

in 1960, until 1967, when former Head of State General Yakubu Gowon expanded Nigeria into 12 states and scrapped regions. Subsequent administrations kept increasing the number of states to the current 36+1 (Amoda, 2012). The regional system of government was scrapped due to agitations for resource control by some regions, the loud outcry of marginalisation, issues of ethnic-tribal and regional discrimination, conflicts, and lopsided economic growth which created economic inequality. Also, to an extent, as the then administration's effort to ensure that every citizen irrespective of age, sex, religion, ethnic, linguistic, regional, or tribal affiliation is given a sense of belonging to the country. Amoda further asserts that regionalisation brought development to the country, as the three regions were engaged in healthy economic competitions which led to rapid growth (that was when Nigeria gained its "pride of Africa" title).

To date, Western Nigeria is still the most educated region in Nigeria, a legacy inherited from regionalisation, which supported the exponential socio-economic growth and modernisation it still currently enjoys. Yet, regionalisation promoted ethnic loyalty, as citizens prided themselves on their ethnic and regional heritage. These created fear of political/economic dominance by the strong regions and an economic collapse in the regions with less economic development.

Apologists of regionalisation as a system emphasize that a decentralised Nigeria along the already existing regions will improve the capabilities of citizens within each region to define and determine collectively how to make their regions economically viable and increase their local ability to generate revenues. Currently, Nigeria's centralisation of political power distorts its political economy by encouraging redistribution instead of productivity. This makes most of the constituent parts of the country less economically productive, as nearly 70 per cent of Nigeria's state revenue as noted by Okwori (2016) comes only from oil sales.

On the other hand, some Nigerians strongly believe that the federal system of government with its three levels of government is one of the most participatory forms of governance. They believe that the failure of participation is driven by external factors other than the system of governance in practice. They argue that apathy, fatigue, the cost of governance, and the failure of the constitution to recognise the ethnic diversity and religious incompatibility of Nigerians are the real culprits behind governance failures under the past regional/parliamentary system and the present federal/state system of government.

Therefore, restructuring the Nigerian governance structure by decentralising the policy-making process to become inclusive enough may be a way to encourage political participation and economic growth. Recently, this has become a widely discussed issue due to the exigent need to have a true federalist system of government that will bring the government closer to the people. This is also seen as one of the many ways to restore Nigeria from its current fragile state. As decentralisation will have the potential to incorporate the country's heterogeneity and improve the democratic process. However, the transition can only be successful if all parties collectively agree to pursue the integrative policy process, and if done in a democratically legitimate, participatory, and coordinated manner.

How Nigeria can Achieve Participatory Governance Using the Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) Approach

For Nigeria to achieve an effective governance system that will foster economic growth and stability, it requires concerted efforts by both policymakers and the people to collaboratively design a system that will take into consideration the peculiar and heterogeneous nature of the

country. This can be achieved through the adoption of the Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) model as postulated by Matt, Lant, and Michael (2017).

First, by using context-specific and local information gathering to diagnose and identify the binding constraints constituting the disconnection between government and society, there is the need to carefully interrogate the specific distorting factors behind these constraints, as some have argued that the failure of Nigerians to participate has little to do with the governance system, but with the people who have difficulty identifying themselves as Nigerians.

Secondly, to escape the current state capacity trap, the government should navigate the complexities of the country's heterogeneous nature. At this time, it may be impossible to return the country to three regions, but a proper analysis of the issues should be done, in cognisance of the fact that to improve citizens' participation, there is a need for the support of local policymakers to build strong checks and balances that will strengthen accountability and build trust among citizens.

Hence, the problem-solving capacity of the states should be defined; whether to maintain the current state model, but reduce the overbearing power and authority from the central or to empower the sub-national regions to entirely manage the affairs of their state and support the central government to provide coordination. Whatever may be applicable, it needs to be designed in an inclusive, iterative, incremental, and experimental process with built-in mechanisms for feedback, so as to refine and modify the process until a suitable way to solve the problem in a way that works for everyone is clearly identified.

Achieving participatory governance will only be sustainable if it arises organically through the use of local knowledge. With the present state of the country, many citizens are already demanding for the government to open up spaces for citizens to participate in the policymaking processes that affect their lives. Understanding how to navigate the complex relationships that exist within the regions' culture, history, institutions and using that information to frame participation in a way that works for everyone will be a step in the right direction.

Experimentation will help policymakers understand local problems and how to solve them. This stresses emphasis on the critical role local stakeholders will play in contributing knowledge to problem-solving (Nwambari cited in Khwaja, 2004). It is also in line with James' (1999) assertion in his "Seeing like a State" – using deep experimental local knowledge to understand how to manage local problems.

Policy Implications

For participatory governance to work at the state and local government levels, it should be a non-confrontational collaborative platform where citizens, professionals and policymakers work together to identify the priority needs of the communities, the resources available at their disposal, and figure out the best way to approach the problem.

For participatory governance to work at the national level, it should be multifaceted and involve multi-stakeholders from different sectors, regions, and networks within the communities. Getting the buy-in of everyone from the beginning will deepen the sense of ownership of the process, starting from problem identification to implementation.

Potential Dangers

Participatory Approaches are Still Prohibitively Expensive

Implementing participatory governance is a capital-intensive process, which is not always considered because it is often designed to be a low-cost or voluntary program to make it sustainable. Most of the activities require funding and logistics that members may either lack the financial capacity to provide or the willingness to invest their fund in, thereby limiting the ability to fully implement activities. So, there is a need to figure out how to take care of these logistics to avoid hijacking the process by political or local elites who may want to infuse their ideologies into it.

Community Fatigue is a Potential Challenge

Because real-world participation will not be a one-time event, the process should be designed to reduce citizens' feelings of being unmotivated to participate in the process due to fatigue. As participatory processes involve comprehensive activities, methods, approaches and objectives, it is important to develop clear processes and timelines when consultations will happen.

The Mix of Religion, Tradition and Politics

In Nigeria, the entanglement of religion, tradition, norms, and local practices in politics and government affairs may make it unclear in defining the roles of leaders and policymakers, which makes it difficult for citizens to know who to trust or even to trust the participatory process.

Conclusion

There are no silver bullets on how Nigeria can achieve citizen participation in policymaking other than to stabilise the economy through the decentralisation of power by opening spaces to incorporate citizens' voices into policymaking processes at the local level. However, this will depend on the commitment of the current political leaders to relinquish the excess power that is concentrated at the national level, to push towards participatory democracy, and to incorporate citizens' voices into building strong government institutions that will allow the market, the economic environment and policies to thrive.

The government needs to investigate the internal constraints and challenges in different regions of Nigeria to understand the context-specific issues and the needs of the people, and work with local knowledge to design a transitional strategy toward devolution of policymaking processes to achieve true federalism.

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