

Effective Resolution of Possible Conflicts in Local Government Administration: A Panacea for Nation Building

Tunde Jatto, Musa Muhamadu Mahuta, Sani Isah

Department of Local Government Studies College of Administrative Studies and Social Sciences, Kaduna Polytechnic.

*Department of Local Government Studies Waziri Umaru Federal Polytechnic, Birnin Kebbi, Kebbi State.
Department of Public Administration Waziri Umaru Federal Polytechnic, Birnin Kebbi, Kebbi State.*

Abstract: *This paper is concerned with how possible role conflicts in local government administration can be resolved in our attempt at building a virile nation. In going about this, the paper discussed some of the possible causes of the incessant conflicts in the local government councils as a result of the perceived role conflicts between the legislature and the executive as well as between the political functionaries and the career officers at the local government levels. Finally, it offered suggestions on how best role conflicts can be resolved in our efforts at nation building.*

I. Introduction

There is no doubt that since the Federal Government took hold steps to effect the Local Government reforms of 1976 and other subsequent reforms of the Local Government System, thereby making local government an autonomous third tier of government in Nigeria with specific functions and powers, Nigerians have been nursing the hope that the state of socio-economic development which had hitherto been eluding would soon be reached. This hope was hinged on the widespread belief that local government was the nearest to the people and the one most endowed with knowledge of the people's problems and ability to mobilize and utilize local resources in the best interest of the people (Mill, 1975, Sharpe, 1976).

Ironically, however, it is regrettable that the gains so far recorded from our reformed local government system have still not reached the expected optimum level due to some perceived role conflicts in the management of local government. It is therefore against this background that this paper will discuss some of the possible causes of the incessant conflicts in the local government councils from the consideration of the politico-socio-economic and other natural factors perspectives. The paper will also look at the possible role conflicts between legislature and the executive as well as between the political functionaries and the career officers before finally offering suggestion on how best to reduce or resolve such role conflicts in our effort at nation building.

II. Meaning Of Conflict And Local Government

Conflict exists when at least two people or groups have incompatible aims, interests, or values. Conflict is basically about change, e.g it is caused by, and can cause, change. Conflict arises as a result of divergent interests, goals and aspirations by individuals and/ or groups in defined social political and physical environments. Changes in the social environment, such as contestable access to new political positions, roles or perceptions of new resources arising from development in the physical environment, are fertile grounds for conflicts involving individuals and groups who are interested in using their positions or new resources to achieve their goals (C.A LEEDS, 1971).

Thus in this paper, conflict will be used to refer to fight, struggle, quarrel, bitter argument, opposition, differences or disagreements that occasionally arise either between the political functionaries and career officers or among the political functionaries in the administration of a local government.

In terms of Local Government, it has been defined as "Government at the local level exercised through a representative council, established by law for exercise specific powers within defined areas" (Guidelines to the 1976 Local Government Reforms).

Possible Causes Of Role Conflicts In Local Government Councils

There are so many factors responsible for role conflicts in local government councils. Some of these factors include:-

1. **Political factors**

This is the first and the principal cause of conflicts in a local government council (Adediji, 1986). The political system in Nigeria is that of a 'do or die' issue. Since politics is generally regarded as the shortest way to richness in life, the act of getting to political power or of retaining it is therefore a matter that cannot be left to chances. It is for this reason that in an effort to achieve or retain power, all means are employed, especially since "the ends justifies the means". It is in this light too that members of opposing parties declare and treat themselves as enemies that should neither be tolerated nor forgiven. This attitude is often carried down to the local government level, and so, all means are employed to victimize the members of the wrong or opposition party. As soon as occasions arise, the victimized side of the "game" seeks every opportunity to retaliate. Consequently, the whole local government becomes a battle field and the original objectives of local government become relegated to the background.

2. **economic Factors**

Greediness among many local government functionaries often leads to acts of misappropriation of public funds. Since most local governments are themselves generally financially poor, personal ambition in which local government leaders seek socio-economic advantages for themselves could lead to a clash of interest. The celebrated Agro-tek scandal of the Second Republic was laid to have blown up as a result of the conflicts over the sharing formula of the money corruptly received by the council members (Anuku, 1988). There are several reported cases where contracts are terminated because the contractors failed to recognize the right of some councilors to kickbacks.

3. **Socio-Cultural Factors**

Socio-cultural factors are among those factors that engender conflicts in local government councils. One example of these is the culture of lobbying. A local government worker may have committed a grievous offence in the course of the year. By the time disciplinary measures are taken or about to be taken against him, the same worker would employ the strategy of pressuring or lobbying at quarters in order to get pardon (Adedeji, op, cit). all hands are mobilized in order that unbearable pressures might be put on the "officious" boss to the extent off making him forget the offences. Even if this strategy does not yield fruits, the lobbyist might not stop there. Sometimes threat to life and property of the boss might be made. It must be noted that if this lobbying culture can be said to exist in all levels of government in Nigeria, it is probably more pronounced in local government areas, thanks to the proximity to the people.

4. **Natural Factors**

The nature of man himself, which is selfishness and aggressive, is a factor of conflicts in Local Government Councils. For instance, selfish gestures over money, land and women, are well recognized all over the world as source of strained relations between individuals as well as between communities, especially during the time of scarcity of those factors and the consequent competition and rivalries. Thus, the struggle between local government functionaries over misappropriate council funds, for instance, could lead to strained relations between them just as lucrative schedules of duties can lead to conflicts in local government.

5. **Inter-departmental or territorial role conflicts**

This is another natural cause of role conflict. Robert Arder (1967) states that a territory that is jealousy guarded by inhabitants and infringements upon it by other group members will create strained relations. This explains why there were always conflicts between the secretary to Local Government, who was vested with authority to issue liquor licenses and to receive money accruing from the source and the Treasurer who also wanted to collect the monies for liquor licenses (Adedeji, op.cit).

The personnel department, for instance, most often invades or appears to 'invade' into the jealously protected territories of other departments, when it seeks information and tends to influence decisions of other departments in matters of recruitment, promotion, transfer, retrenchment and discipline. It finds itself in conflict with those who consider such as poke-nosing to their esteem. The head of personnel management insists that the rules must be obeyed. The Chairmen caught in such a predicament, resort to throwing their weight about to show their political superiority. In the circumstances, an internal friction develops between the Chairman and the head of personnel management department who, as a last resort can invoked the assistance members of the Nigerian Union of Local Government Employees, a powerful trade union, to intervene, thereby promoting a conflict. Such interference and meddlesomeness by the trade union makes matters worse. Even when the matters is sent to the Local Government Service Commission (LGSC) to adjudicate, these is bound to be a stall as the members of the Commission may be from the same party machinery to support the Chairman. The commission itself cannot pronounce on a matter where it is also guilty of making appointments on grade levels 02-06, which it ought not to do.

In the present presidential system of government, the finance and general purposes committee comprises the Chairman, the Supervisory Councilors and the secretary to the local government acts as the Cabinet of a local government council. The executive arm of the local government legislature. Members of legislature appear edged out of the scene. They become onlookers at the financial transactions going on around them. Unless the chairman can bend to their will, some of them may take recourse to revanchism in an effort to bring him down. Most of the internecine quarrels between some Chairmen and members of their legislative councils have undertones in contract awards and maneuvers. No body says this aloud, but the outward manifestations show the simmering anger within.

One of the duties assigned by the local government legislature is the examination and debating monthly statements of income and expenditure rendered to it by the Chief Executive. Some Local government Chairmen fail to obey or ignore this provision completely without qualms. The legislature feels hurt and insulted and uses this fault as one of their points in impeaching the Chairman.

In the present set-up in the local government councils, no chairman will beguile himself with the notion that the councilors could bark but not bite. Various house committees do exist and have some acts to perform the act of visiting and monitoring the programme listed by the Chairman in his budget. In normal circumstances one would expect the Chairman to implement his budget unhindered provided it has been approved by legislature. Nevertheless, this may not be so because the relevant house committee may want to satisfy itself that each item in the budget complies with the budget's provision. It may also wish to ascertain the citing of project does not come entirely under the whims and caprices of the Chairman. If the Chairman's party does not control the legislature, he is done for, because the committee may either want to pique him for one fault or the other or may embark on all sorts of tricks with a view to getting gratification. In such an atmosphere, the situation cannot be said to be normal. The all pervading conflict is there.

Having analyzed some of the factors that causes conflicts in local government councils, we can now proceed to find ways of reducing removing such role conflicts.

Strategies For Reducing Role Conflicts In Nigerian Local Government

In order to reduce role conflicts in the Nigerian local government, members of local government councils should lay more emphasis on fairness rather than on equality. Equality is not easy to put into practice: the innate or acquired differences in experiences, knowledge, powers and resources in lucks, etc, make it sometimes ridiculous or at least unfair or difficult to agree on the need or equality.

Local Government functionaries need to realize that conflict is endemic in all unions and that there is no place in this world where there is no conflict except among the dead and burials of the cemetery. This happens as a result of deep-rooted differences in the interest or goals of members of a group such as a local government council. This simple recognition of this truth would go a long way in making members of the Nigerian local government to regard occasional conflicts as just like or analogous to a tide at the sea-side which arises occasionally so as to obey the call of nature, and falls down with time in order to effect inevitable equilibrium and order, Local government functionaries should therefore avoid exaggerating conflicts that may occasionally arise between one individual and the others. They should rather always look for mechanisms by which such conflicts could be removed or reduced.

Functionaries of a local government council could be avoiding intra-service conflicts if they understand that jealousy from time to time. It is observable not only among the people with whom we do not agree but also with our assumed friends and well wishers. It is therefore, important to overlook these human weaknesses if men cherish cordiality of human relations. Otherwise, a local government functionary would have no friend.

It is for the same reason that a local government functionary who emerges victorious in an election should not grudge those who did not vote for him, but should bury the hatchet, forgive and forget. Those who did not vote for him in the election may not be too bitter about his electoral success than those who actually voted for him initially. Some of those who in fact appeared to have supported him in the election may become even bitter about his success than those who did not vote for him at all; envy and jealousy may arise at any stage of human life.

In a democratic world, expression of various views, values, cultures, political ideologies, languages, etc should be allowed and even encouraged so as to have a balanced view of them (Adediji Opcit). They should therefore not be gagged. According to John Stuart Mills, it is only if all opinions could be freely expressed that those hearing or reading them could decide where the truth lies. In any case, pacific co-existence of various opinions, cultures, values, political belief, etc; are indispensable condition for the survival of human organizations such as local government and indeed of humanity itself.

The management of a local government has to recognize that local government workers come to the council's employment with the intention of satisfying some needs. Management of local governments should therefore strive to ensure that the goals of local government workers are satisfied as much as possible without injuring the objectives of the local government council. Anyway, where local government workers make

impossible demands, the local government management would have to strike a balance between the local government workers goals and those of the council, which would likely include the wish to minimize the cost of running the services.

The management must ensure that the environment in which local government workers carry out their duties is not so bad as to make them hostile to their colleagues. Thus, amenities and services necessary for solving problems facing the workers to the course of performing their function should be provided by the management.

Conflict in local government councils could be reduced, when local government leaders became more and more aware of how members feel and react. Such functionaries should be able to read quickly non-verbal communications (NVC) signals on time, it is only through written and spoken works that the feeling of others could be discovered. An ability to read and interpret situations and attitudes portraying care and consideration for how others feel are strong weapons for removing conflicts in any organization. In other words, the functionaries should have good human relations to make communications flows freely well, which is a good step towards achieving its clearly define goal (Jatto, 2008: 50).

It is important that education and training to made available to all categories of local government functionaries. This is because education is “the balance wheel” in harmonious staff-management relationship. It could give a better understanding of neighbors and colleagues. Education could also assist management to have mastery of human engineering.

Finally, there is need for both the local government executive and legislature to work harmoniously without understanding the principle of separation of powers and/or checks and balances.

III. Conclusion And Suggestions

Where as the absence of conflict in local government councils is of great importance for the location of their objectives, and subsequently nation building, conflict is inevitable in any human organization, and in fact, Nigerian local government can be said to be conflict-ridden. This paper has identified empirical factors behind the perennial conflicts in local government councils. Suggestions believed to be effective means of reducing or resolving those role conflicts in our effort at nation building have been offered. They include.

- i. Adoption of attitude of tolerance of opposing views and of the multi-cultural diversities.
- ii. Turning back against the cal for equality since in reality, all animals are not equal; demand for fairness would be much enforceable, much more acceptable than equality.
- iii. Recognition and avoidance of conflict situations.
- iv. Ensuring that working conditions are conducive to human confort and psychological satisfaction.
- v. Making arrangement for all functionaries of local government to have education and training adequate and sufficient for functions which they perform; and
- vi. Regarding socio-economic conditions of local government functionaries as important matters which have to receive constant considerations and review in the light of prevailing realities.

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