

TRADITION AS A MODERN STRATEGY: INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE, LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract:

Abstract

Globalization is now widely perceived in Africa as a new version of earlier forms of external domination and exploitation. Its economic and welfare benefits and opportunities are unevenly shared, and appear to bypass or to adversely affect many countries of the developing world. But Marshall Sahlins has rightly emphasized the need for developing countries “to indigenize the forces of global modernity, and turn them to their own ends”, since the real impact of globalization depends largely on the responses developed at the local level. The challenge for Africa is, therefore, how to engage and cope with globalization in a way that is compatible with local values and priorities; how to strike the right balance between global and local cultures in national governance and development.

For a long time African customs and traditions were misperceived as irrational and incompatible with the conventional strategies of development. But the economic crisis and policy failures of the 1980s and ‘90s, and the current threat of global recession have exposed flaws in the Western, neo-liberal, ‘external agency’ model of development imposed from the top by national governments and international development agencies. The undue emphasis which this pattern of development places on purely quantitative economic growth is now blamed for the worsening problems of environmental degradation, widespread poverty, widening inequalities within and between nations, and the undermining of those values and institutions which hold these negative forces in check. Because of growing concern about these problems, there is renewed interest in an alternative approach to development which emphasizes the cultural dimension of development, and the often overlooked potential of indigenous knowledge as “the single largest knowledge resource not yet mobilized in the development enterprise”. This paper considers how indigenous knowledge and practice can be put to good use in support of local governance and development in Nigeria; how development policies and programmes can be made to reflect local priorities, and build upon and strengthen local knowledge, capacity and organization, especially in such vital areas as agriculture and natural resource management, law review and conflict resolution, education, health care and poverty alleviation. The World Bank has recently published an impressive collection of essays aptly titled: *Indigenous Knowledge: Local Pathways to Global Development*. It is in that sense that this paper sees indigenous knowledge as a model for rethinking and redirecting the development process, and as a way to involve, enable and empower local actors to take part in their own development

Introduction:

Critics of African development liken the current pattern of development in the continent to building a house from the roof down:

... all the institutions of modern urbanization are in place – the banks, the factories, the legal system, the unions, etc; but all these appear to be suspended over societies that have no firm connection to them, and whose indigenous institutions, even when oriented in the right direction, lack the necessary scaffolding to connect them to their modern surrogates.
(Mabogunje, 1992)

Mamadou Dia of the World Bank also blames state failure and the development crisis in Africa on the “structural disconnection between formal institutions transplanted from outside and indigenous institutions born of traditional African cultures” (Dia, 1996; cf Francis et al, 1996). Because of growing concern about widespread poverty, inequality and environmental deterioration, there is renewed interest in an alternative approach to development that emphasizes the cultural dimension of development, and the often overlooked potential of indigenous knowledge as “the single largest knowledge resource not yet mobilized in the development enterprise”. For a long time, African customs and traditions were misperceived as irrational and incompatible with the conventional strategies for economic development, or at any rate as ineffective in coping with present day needs and challenges. But with the development crisis of the 1980s and ‘90s, and the policy failures associated with the formal government system, there is increasing loss of faith in the Western, ‘external agency’ model of development imposed from the top by national governments and international development agencies. The undue emphasis which this pattern of development places on purely economic and quantitative growth is now blamed for the worsening problems of environmental degradation, widespread poverty, inequality, and the undermining of those values and institutions which hold these negative forces in check.

The renewed interest in indigenous knowledge and institutions is in line with the current advocacy of the minimalist state and the ‘enabling approach’ as condition for good governance in a period of structural adjustment and public sector reform. Governments are urged to reduce their role to what their dwindling resources and capacities permit; to decentralize the structure of governance, promote genuine partnership, and enlist the broad participation of non-state actors and stakeholders, including traditional institutions and other organizations of civil society. This trend has been reinforced by the UNESCO sponsored ‘World Decade for Cultural Development’ (1988 - 1997), the UNESCO Declarations on Tolerance, Cultural Diversity and Dialogue Among Civilizations; the UN International Decade of the World’s Indigenous Peoples (1995 – 2004), and other global initiatives and debates which have stressed the cultural dimension of development, and the need to take local knowledge and practice fully into account in the development process. (UNESCO, 1995; UNESCO-LINKS)

This paper considers how indigenous knowledge and practice can be put to good use in support of local government and community development in Nigeria; how development policies and programmes can be made to reflect local priorities, and build upon and strengthen local knowledge, capacity and organization, especially in the vital areas of agriculture and health care, education and natural resource management, law review, conflict resolution, and poverty alleviation. The paper considers ways to enlist traditionally based institutions for an administrative system that would make governance less distant from the people, less bureaucratic, more accountable and more responsive to people’s needs; how the village or community to which most citizens hold moral allegiance could form the primary unit of a reformed local government system. The World Bank has recently published an impressive collection of essays aptly titled Indigenous Knowledge: Local Pathways to Global Development. (World Bank, 2004). It is in that sense that this paper sees indigenous knowledge as a model for rethinking and

redirecting the development process, and as a way to involve, enable and empower local actors to take part in their own development. The paper concludes with some general reflections on the indigenous knowledge movement as an appropriate local response to globalization and Western knowledge dominance, and as a way to promote inter-cultural dialogue on African development.

Research and Policy Issues

Who are indigenous people, and when is knowledge indigenous? These are still a matter for debate. While indigenous people may be easy to identify in the Americas, in Australia and New Zealand etc, it is not as easy to speak of indigenous peoples in Africa as all black Africans consider themselves indigenous to the continent. There are however aboriginal peoples like the San of the Kalahari Desert in Botswana and South Africa; the hunter-gatherer forest peoples (pygmies) of Central Africa; the nomadic Massai and Samburu of East Africa, the Twa peoples of the Great Lakes region, etc who claim that their aboriginal rights, especially to land, is being violated, and that they are being discriminated against and marginalized in the scheme of things.' Indigenous' is, however, used in this paper in a more general sense to refer to the local, the traditional and the endogenous in Africa, as opposed to the alien ideas and institutions of modernity which came with European colonial rule and missionary influence..

What then is indigenous knowledge.? Definitions vary, and are often imprecise, with only general agreement on the main characteristics of indigenous knowledge. (Sillitoe, 1998) The term is often used to refer to the vast and largely undocumented body of knowledge, wisdom, skills and expertise that a given community has developed over time, and continues to develop as it grapples with the challenges of its environment, with outside ideas, and with constantly changing conditions. It represents the heritage of creative thought and practical everyday life which is passed on orally or through experience from one generation to the next. It is usually tacit knowledge, stored in people's individual or collective memories, and often guarded jealously, hence the saying that "each time an elder dies, it is as if a library had burned down". (World Bank, 2004; cf SCESSAL/LIASA, 2002). This explains the current anxiety about the threat which modernization poses to indigenous knowledge, and the need to systematically collect, analyze, validate, disseminate and protect it from extinction, abuse or piracy, and ensure that the original owners of this knowledge are fully acknowledged and equitably compensated.

How does indigenous knowledge relate to modern science and book knowledge? It is really not very helpful to overemphasize how indigenous knowledge compares or contrasts with modern science, as if the two systems of knowledge were in conflict or in competition. Indigenous knowledge differs from place to place, and scientific knowledge changes all the time, hence there are similarities and some overlap between the indigenous and the scientific knowledge systems (Biggs, 2005). Very few if any serious scholars actually consider indigenous knowledge to be an alternative to modern science and technology; nor is the exclusive use of modern science enough for the complex task of achieving sustainable development in diverse cultural and ecological

contexts . The real challenge is how not to romanticize indigenous knowledge or over idealize modern science, as both have their strengths and limitations, and should complement and not confront or undermine each other. (Haverkort B et al, eds., 2002)

The UNESCO/World Commission for Cultural Development, WCCD, urges the active recognition and exploitation of cultural pluralism and “Our Creative Diversity”; and even the International Council of Science, ICSU, has recently urged “governments to support cooperation between holders of traditional knowledge and scientists to explore the relationships between different knowledge systems and to foster inter-linkages of mutual benefit”.(IESU/UNESCO, 2002, UNESCO, 1995; Haverkort, B et al eds. 2002) How does all this relate to the policy and practice of development?

Indigenous Knowledge and the Good Governance Debate

The Secretary General of the UN has recently identified good governance as “perhaps the single most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development”. How does indigenous knowledge promote good governance? Much of the current thinking on good governance in Africa has tended to focus attention at the national and state levels in the programmes for institution building, anti-corruption and human rights crusades, reform of the civil service, electoral and judicial systems. The major gap in the good governance agenda appears to be at the local level where the major issues of poverty reduction, popular participation, and support for an active civil society remain largely under-researched and unaddressed. Recent studies have also questioned the undue emphasis which scholars place on centralized state systems and bureaucratic institutions in the study of public administration in Africa. The poor performance of these states in the 1980s and ‘90s has increased the interest in the study of local self-governing and self-organizing capacities, and indigenous non-state structures of governance (the clan, emirate, village, age grades, credit and mutual aid institutions, etc) which have sustained the people when states have failed. The approach is particularly relevant in Nigeria because of widespread disenchantment with excessive centralization that has been brought about by the long period of military dictatorship between 1966 and 1999.(Adedeji and Ayo, 2000; Ayo, SB 2002)

It is also at the local grassroots level that indigenous knowledge appears to have the greatest potential to contribute to sustainable development. For most of his distinguished scholarly career, late Professor Claude Ake stressed the need for a home grown model of self-reliant development which can only come about if we learn to “build on the indigenous”

We build on the indigenous by making it determine the form and content of development strategy; by ensuring that developmental change accommodate itself to these things, be the values, interests, aspirations and/or social institutions which are important to the life of the people. It is only when developmental change comes to terms with them that it can become sustainable. (Ake, Claude, 1988, p. 19)

In his influential World Bank studies, Mamodou Dia, with his group, has argued that the most promising way to overcome the shortcomings of the state system and its alien formal institutions in Africa is to recognize “the structural and functional disconnect

between the informal, indigenous institutions rooted in the regions history and culture, and formal institutions mostly transplanted from outside”. (Dia, Mamadou, 1996; cf Francis, P with Others, 1996) The remedy he argues is to ensure “a reconnect between state and civil society”, and to identify the opportunities within indigenous institutions for building a more pluralistic and participatory form of governance and development. Like the earlier UN conference, the Habitat Agenda of 1996 also highlights the need for “partnership among countries and among all actors within countries. Good urban governance entails finding ways of engaging with the urban poor so that their needs can be reflected in the policies and programmes of city governments”. (UNCHS-Habitat, 1998)

In the various decentralization programme in Nigeria, effort has been made, with mixed results, to transfer some responsibilities from the state to the market/private sector through privatization and deregulation. Political decentralization has also involved the vertical transfer of authority and resources from the central to the lower state/local government levels of governance. The weak link remains the horizontal or further decentralization within the lower levels of governance, especially from local governments to village organizations, urban neighborhoods and other interest groups.

(Allen, Hubert JB, 1990) There is a need to empower and strengthen local communities and their informal institutions to participate in decision making, resource generation and control as well as planning and implementation of development programmes. The various dimensions of decentralization, and the major shortcomings of local government reforms in Nigeria are discussed in more detail below.

The Potential Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Strengthening Local Government:

Nigeria is a centralized federation with 36 multi-ethnic states, and 774 rather arbitrary local government units. It is the largest and potentially richest country in Africa, being the sixth largest oil producing country in the world. Sadly, it is a country of paradoxes, “riddled with multiple contradictions and tensions”(Rotberg 2004) The bulk of the country’s 130 million people live below the poverty line, with a low life expectancy of 52 years, a high infant mortality rate of 20 to 1000, a low per capita income of \$270, and an extremely high level of corruption and political mismanagement. The country has had a chequered history of local governance, and experimented with different local government systems none of which is without controversy.

Local Governance Before 1976

There is a vast amount of published material on the pre-colonial period of indigenous self rule in Nigeria under various forms of traditional kingdoms, chiefdoms and village republics. What is clear from the literature is that even in those areas of pre-British Nigeria where Emirs, Shehus or Obas enjoyed kingly status and wielded considerable influence, they were still subject to established checks and balances such that “the ruler had authority but shared power” through a wide range of customary mechanisms for consultations, participation, accountability and consensus building. (Soyinka, Wole, 1993) The British colonial “law and order” administration tried to associate traditional rulers and institutions with local governance in a system of Indirect Rule and Native

Administration. But the traditional rulers and leaders who worked under that system faced the dilemma of representing their people while serving as appointees or agents of an oppressive alien regime. This discredited many of them and eroded their traditional legitimacy.

After World War II, there was a policy shift as the British tried in the 1950s to introduce a limited system of democratic decentralization in the form of District Councils, with elected and appointed representatives. The prospects for evolving a stable system of local governance looked promising; but the early nationalists and independence leaders were impatient with tradition and with local government, preferring instead the strong and centralized state system as a surer way to forge national unity and to promote rapid economic growth. Local governments consequently suffered neglect in the 1960s, and their fortunes were further undermined by the civil war and the centralizing influence of military rule in the early '70s.

The 1976 Local Government Reforms

After ten years of military rule, a bold initiative was taken in 1976 “to stabilize and rationalize government at the local level” and to decentralize some functions of the State governments to the local level in order to harness local resources for rapid development. The Guidelines for Local Government Reform issued in 1976 and backed by the provisions of the 1979 Constitution created a uniform, single tier pattern of local government for the whole country, and raised the status of local governments by making them the third tier of the federal system. By this provision local governments would enjoy a reasonable degree of autonomy as elected governments and not mere appendages of the state governments. To be viable and also reasonably close to the people local governments were to be created for fairly culturally homogeneous populations of between 150,000 and 180,000. A set of exclusive functions was assigned to them, in addition to the responsibilities which they share with the other tiers of government. Generous provisions were made for funding them and the new Guidelines appeared to offer the ideal conditions for Local governments to initiate and direct the provision of services, to implement projects of local priority, and ensure the active participation of the people and their traditional institutions in responding to local needs and conditions.

Unfortunately, the constitutional provisions in respect of the relationship between the State Governments and Local Governments has remained ambiguous, and a source of potential conflict. State Governments maintain that as the federating units of the Nigerian federal system, they have the constitutional jurisdiction over the creation and general supervision of local governments in their states. For their part the local governments have complained consistently of the arbitrary, discriminatory and highhanded attitude of many state governments in local government affairs, and have on several occasions resorted to the court of law to arbitrate on the matter.

Besides, in practice, the large size of local government (some with as many as 500,000, to 800,000) people, has had the adverse effect of creating physical and social distance between the local government and the communities they are meant to serve. Some

analysts have established that the traditional organization of individual communities, especially in Southern Nigeria -- (the Town Development Unions, the Age Grades, Social Clubs, etc.) account for most of the development programmes in their areas. The formal local government agencies account for only a few of the development activities, as they expend most of the Local Government budget on recurrent expenditure items, and projects of doubtful priority. (Ogunna AEC, 1996; Olowu et al, 1991)

Although General Buhari's regime which overthrew the Second Republic abolished the 600 or so additional local governments created randomly by the ousted civilian State Governors, the tension between state and local governments persisted even under the Babangida era (1984 - 1992) which is generally considered to be the most favourable period of local government consolidation in the country. During this period, effort was made to protect local governments from the arbitrary interference of state governments. The State Ministries of Local Government were abolished, and the responsibility for local government oversight was moved to the office of the Chief of General Staff in the Presidency. The local governments adopted the Presidential system that established their executive and legislative arms. Direct financial allocation to the LGs was raised from 15 to 20% of national revenue, up from a mere 3% in 1976. (See Olowu D, 1996; 2001; Osaghae, 1991; Gboyega 1999) With these measures there was a definite improvements in the quality of political and administrative leadership at local government level, and some advance in the social service sector - in health, education, rural roads and water supply, etc.; but the tension in state-local government relations persisted, and so was the gap between local government and the local communities. Besides, "the heavy hand of uniformity failed to allow for cultural and economic diversity, eg. between the urban and rural areas; and there was an almost total dependence of external funding, mainly federal transfers for the work of the local governments. (Olowo, 1991)

Two of the major reviews of the Local government system in this period deserve special attention for this study - the Report of the Dasuki Committee on the Review of Local Government Administration in Nigeria, (1985), and the work of the Political Bureau set up to advise on the programmes for the return to civil rule (1987). The Dasuki Committee report endorsed the 301 local governments structure established by the 1976 reform - for at least the next ten years, but observed that the system was marred by operational problems and the military context in which it operated. The committee sought to strengthen the revenue base of the Local government councils, but more importantly recommended that seven or so Development Area Committee, each of about 25 to 50 thousand people, should be established within each of the 301 local government areas in order to further decentralize the delivery of services, and promote broad grassroots participation. (Fed. Rep. of Nigeria, 1985) These recommendations were, however, not implemented, but the Political Bureau which was set up a few years later upheld the ideas of the Dasuki report, and went even further to suggest a multi-tier, pyramidal structure for Local governments, with villages and neighborhood organizations forming the primary units and building blocks of the restructured local government system. Village/Neighborhood Committees would coordinate the work of the various village

organizations, monitor the work of local government officials, and nominate their leaders or chairmen to serve at the next level of local governance - the Area Divisional Councils. These Area Councils, with administrative officials appointed or seconded by government as secretary, would play a higher coordination role below the apex umbrella third level of the local government system. (Fed. Rep. of Nigeria, 1987) The idea is that government is best when power is shared and brought close to the grassroots. Again for various reason, mainly to do with the crowded programmes of the planned transition to civil rule, these recommendations, though accepted in principle, were held in abeyance. Some elements of the report were to be implemented in a modified form by the new and well funded Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure - DFRRI.

Among other things this Directorate was to

“encourage communities to form their own village, community or town improvements or development unions or associations, under their own democratically elected leaders to serve as the apex organization for mobilizing their communities for the successful participatory implementation of all rural development programmes initiated by the Directorate, each tier of government, or by the communities themselves”. (Fed. Rep. Nig. 1987b)

Government would provide matching grants to encourage communities to invest their labour and resources in the development of their local communities. It was hoped that in this way the over 100,000 or so communities identified in Nigeria would be structurally linked to the formal organs of government as agencies for community and neighborhood development. Again for various reasons associated with the frequent changes of government and policy direction, DFRRI was short-lived, and its programmes were transferred to the State Directorates for Rural Development, SDRD.

The role of traditional rules and institutions in local governance and development has been examined in detail by the present writer elsewhere, and need not detain us here (Nwaka, 1999; Ray Donald & Raddy, ed., 2003); but let me conclude this section with the observation of the Commonwealth Local Government Form which studied traditional organizations and leadership patterns in Sierre Leone, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Botswana, and South Africa, with a view to providing practical guidance in reviewing relations with traditional leaders and institution. While admitting that some traditional practices were authoritarian and ill-suited to present day conditions, the Forum suggested that:

traditional leadership, in its form before external interference, operated on the principle of community participation, consultation, consensus, and an acceptable level of transparency through the village council or open tribal consultative meetings. These principles are not too different from the ones which modern democracies prescribe as essential for democracy! It might serve the purpose, therefore, that countries of Africa which are striving to gain Good Governance, should look with renewed detail to the role of traditional leaders, and pay specific attention to the similarities between the principles of traditional governance and the aspirations of new democracies the world over. (Venson, P. 1995, p. 2)

Indigenous Knowledge and Urban Governance

Is indigenous knowledge also relevant to modern urban governance? Many Nigerian cities pre-date colonial rule, and still have large indigenous populations whose traditional attitudes and institutions are said to constitute a constraint to national development, especially in respect to land ownership and control. Colonial policies did not favour urban development, but many cities have developed nonetheless, and have grown so rapidly ahead of the development of appropriate institutions to handle the challenges of rapid growth. The country is therefore facing a worsening urban crisis. The six to ten fold increase in urban populations between Habitat 1 in 1976 and Habitat 11 in 1996 has overtaken the capacity of national and municipal authorities to cope with the problems of housing, employment, environmental sanitation and the provision of basic services. Many critics have likened this chaotic pattern of urban development to building a house from the roof down!

... all the institutions of modern urbanization are in place - the banks, the factories, the legal system, the unions etc.; but all these appear to be suspended over societies that have no firm connection to them, and whose indigenous institutions, even when oriented in the right direction lack the necessary scaffolding to connect them to their modern surrogates. (Mabogunje, 1995)

The laws, codes and standards that operate in the cities were inherited from the colonial period, and are now applied with little rethinking by the local elite and bureaucrats. This anomalous state of affairs has led to the poor functioning of the cities, and the call for endogenizing or 'radicalizing' the institutional response to rapid urban growth, especially because there are still strong ties between urban and rural areas, and a large urban informal sector.

To explain the poor performance of public sector management in the cities and elsewhere in Africa, Professor Ekeh has drawn a distinction between the morality of the 'civic public' associated with colonial rule and alien institutions on the one hand, and on the other the 'primordial public', associated with traditional sentiments, values and restraints in various indigenous societies and institutions. The political and administrative structures of the civic realm (the civil service, the police, the judiciary and other state institutions.) were created by the alien colonizers who neither sought nor won the affection of the people. These institutions inherited from the colonial period have continued to be regarded as alien and oppressive, to be avoided, resisted or opposed if possible. Government work is still regarded as white man's work, and public resources as fair game. As Chinua Achebe's novel No Longer At Ease puts it

In Nigeria the government was 'they'. It has nothing to do with you and me. It was an alien institution and people's business was to get as much from it as they could without getting into trouble (p.33)

There is general apathy and cynicism towards government, and some ambivalence about accountability in governance. By contrast, the general attitude to the primordial realm (ethnic, clan or village) is much more selfless and transparent because of the cultural norms, obligations and sanctions that come into play. (Ekeh, P. 1975; cf Honey, Rex and S. Okafor eds., 1998) This partly explains the pervasiveness of ethnic and clan unions in the cities, with strong links to home towns. The argument then is that these traditional values attitudes and institutions should be consciously harnessed and brought to bear on governance and public affairs in the cities and other spheres of public life.

In the same way, Dia's influential World Bank studies referred to earlier in the paper have urged for synergy or "institutional reconciliation" between state and community, through measures which increase the technical and organizational capacity of community institutions, and also create a more responsive and accountable public sector. Both formal and informal institutions are here to stay, and need to be more flexible in their relationship to each other. The formal sector and its institutions need to adapt to local conditions for greater legitimacy and enforceability; informal sector institutions in some cases also need to be renovated and adjusted in order to remain relevant. Local institutions which are sometimes handicapped by limited skills and resources need support links to the budgetary and technical resources available in government and its numerous agencies.(Dia, M. 1996)

This concept of institutional reconciliation can be given practical support in urban governance by consciously trying to integrate the vast urban informal sector to the economic and administrative mainstream; and by encouraging and utilizing informal urban neighborhood associations, not only for the well known functions of local security and solidarity, but also as active agents for governance and development. For instance, the South African Municipal Structures Act requires all Municipal Councils to develop mechanisms to consult and involve the community and community organizations through Ward Committees and other structures for consultation and collaboration. (see IDASA Local Government Briefs, 2002). We have referred earlier in the paper to how the traditional system of rotational credit has influenced the establishment of Community Banks, and Peoples Banks in Nigeria. The first of these banks was opened in December 1990, and by 1992 the number had grown to 401. Together they had built up assets of over 981 million naira, mobilized over 640 million in savings or deposits, and disbursed some 150 million as loans and advances to small informal sector producers. (Mabogunje, 1995; Halfani, 1996) Unfortunately, recent studies of the informal sector in Nigeria suggest that only a small percentage of informal sector operators take advantage of these new opportunities. Only about 10 percent were aware of how to avail themselves of the services offered by the Community Bank and the apprenticeship programmes of the National Directorate of Employment, NDE. There appears to be general apathy and cynicism toward government and the public sector, perhaps because "the informal sector lacks the institutional base to link up effectively with debate on public policy" and ensure effective engagement with public policy issues. (Dike, 1997) The challenge is, therefore, in how best to build active institutional channels to mobilize and link up individuals and groups in the informal sector to the mainstream of urban government and development.

Concluding Remarks

The paper has argued that the conventional model of development, which has sought to transform African societies into the Western image of what these societies ought to be, has not only failed, but has tended to alienate the people from their roots, and to undermine local capacity-building and self-confidence. We have also tried to show that local governments are better placed than distant central and state bureaucracies to promote development and poverty reduction, especially if the citizens are given a sense of involvement in making decisions about policies and programmes that affect them. Also, the nearer government is brought to the people, the more likely it is that the positive traditional norms, values and institutions will be brought to bear on development action. It is in this sense that decentralization broadens participation, and helps to build democracy from the grassroots. (Inter-American Foundation, 2001; Adedeji and Ayo, 2000)

Unfortunately, the record of democratization, decentralization and local governance in Nigeria has been rather disappointing, in spite of the political rhetoric about power sharing and popular empowerment. There is a pervasive feeling of alienation among the people, general cynicism towards the state and its institutions, and limited commitment to the development programmes sponsored by government and aid agencies. The roots of democracy remain very shallow, even as the political elite seek to manipulate the process of elections, ‘popular participation’ and other aspects of local governance. With the economic crisis of the 1980s and ‘90s, and the poor functioning of the state system, more and more functions have been off-loaded onto the lower levels of government without the resources and the institutional support needed to ensure effective performance. Indigenous knowledge may not be the panacea for the multifarious problems of governance and development in Nigeria, but it is certainly a useful but sadly overlooked resource which, with appropriate support, can strengthen governance at the grassroots, and promote a more self-reliant, endogenous and sustainable form of development.

The challenges and opportunities of integrating this knowledge in the process of governance and development are enormous; we can only highlight here some of the policy implications for national planners and the international development community, which must provide the enabling and supporting environment for indigenous knowledge to flourish and to realize its potential. First, the local people themselves who are the custodians and practitioners of indigenous knowledge must overcome doubts and diffidence about the merits of their ideas, skills and practices. While they should not idealize or romanticize the merits of their cultural practices and traditions, they must be encouraged to appreciate the strong and weak points of their knowledge, and seek, through experimentation, to improve and modify them appropriately in the light of change and new ideas, especially in the vital areas of agriculture and food security, human and animal health care, education and natural resource conservation/management. Knowledge grows only when it is shared, applied and challenged. Marshal Sahlins has rightly emphasized the need for peoples in the developing world “to indigenize the forces of global modernity, and turn them to their own ends”, since the real impact of globalization depends on the response developed at the local level. (Sahlins in Hopper, 2000; Harvecort et al, 2002) They should also actively engage government and its

agencies in genuine dialogue and partnership to ensure that the interests of all stakeholders are served. For its part, government at the national and sub-regional levels should create the appropriate legal and regulatory framework to facilitate decentralization and broad-based civic participation. Part of the rethinking needed in this regard would imply a policy shift from the top down centralist model to a bottom-up grassroots approach that would rely not solely on the state or on market forces, but also on genuine partnership with the organizations of civil society - with renewed emphasis on indigenous moral and material resources in all spheres and sectors of national life. (Nwaka 1999; Ray and Reddy, 2003)

The indigenous knowledge movement has important implications for development assistance as well. Hitherto, donor agencies have tended to engage numerous outside consultants and experts who sometimes assume a knowledge or capacity vacuum among the people they seek to assist, instead of seeking to identify and tap into existing local capacities, institutions, skills and practices. It is just as counterproductive to seek to dictate or impose alien values and development agendas and to ignore the need for tolerance and mutual respect. Increased emphasis on the indigenous appears to be a more promising way to enhance local ownership, sustainability and impact of aid and development partnership. When technical assistance underrates and overlooks local knowledge and expertise, it reinforces the problems of dependency and underdevelopment instead of reinforcing and building upon existing local capacity. As well, aid agencies that seek to alleviate poverty must focus more on assisting peoples directly rather than exclusively through states and governmental structures and bureaucracies. They should explore more actively the mechanisms for decentralized people to people, city to city forms of cooperation. They also need to adjust the ways they operate so that they can more effectively support and strengthen local institutions which relate more closely to the needs and priorities of the intended beneficiaries.

With the increasing tempo of globalization, Africa cannot now opt for an insular and entirely home grown approach to its development, but must follow a pattern of development which recognizes the merits and limitations of both local knowledge and global science, and explores how the two can best complement each other. Like the Japanese and the rapidly developing countries of Asia, Africa must aspire to achieve endogenous development which has a distinct African cultural fingerprint.

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