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A Case for Regional Development Authorities in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Marked regional disparities in development could be dangerous for national cohesion and health growth of the economy. The purpose of this article is to call attention to the type and nature of a regional development authorities required in Nigeria today and the way such authorities can boldly tackle the ever growing problem of rural decadence and imbalances in national development through the promotion of equitable regional development. The article in effect seeks to stress the need for a new orientation to rural development policy and purposeful direction for the present for even development and national integration.

Introduction

... every developing country must find its own solution to its problem in the light of its political, social and economic circumstances (Sortaz Aziz, 1980).

Over centralization of decision-making processes at the national level and long absence of machinery for plan implementation and execution at the regional and state levels have been the main drawback to balanced national development. For this reason, there is the need for the government of Nigeria to decree the establishment of Regional Development Authorities. We are aware of the existence of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the North East Area Development Commission (NEADSC), established by the Federal Government of Nigeria to address the peculiar problems of the zones. It is our position that the two cannot adequately cater for the needs of other regions as manifested by the agitation by the people of the South East for the establishment of the South East Area Development Commission (SEADC). It is therefore the position of this paper that such regional authorities, when in existence in all the regions of the country, will give each region the full scope to develop at an even pace, so as to promote regional development. The establishment of such regional authorities responsible for rural development have remained an unfulfilled need for a long time.

This practice of using regional development have been successfully used in several countries developing and developed, where backward areas needed special attention to either quicken development or to prevent the occurrences of national disasters such as periodic floods or drought, special bodies have been instituted.

Some of these are the Cassa per 11 Mezzogiorno of Italy, the Gezira Board of Sudan, the Gal-Oya Development Board of Ceylon, the Kafulafuta and Kafubu Board of Zambia and the T.V.A of USA (Raanan, 1971). Other examples are the River basin Development Authorities in Nigeria and the Volta River Authority in Ghana, which are special institutions established to handle special area or resource problems. But why should regional development become a national preoccupation now?

Why Regional Development?

Nigeria is predominately a rural country with most of its population living in a rural setting. By May 10, 2022, based on Worldometer elaboration of the latest United Nations data, the current population of Nigeria is 215,581,415. Out of this figure, it is estimated that 51.96% live in urban areas, while 48.04% lives in rural areas. Moreover, agriculture which have been a primary rural occupation remains the chief national economic activity employing in 57.4% of the active labour force. The contribution of agriculture to Gross National Product is as shown below.

Table 1: Percentage Distribution to gross domestic product

	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
1. Oil	13.5	12.97	13.0	13.4	13.05	14.17	11.60	10.7	11.5	11.6	9.7
2. Non-Oil	86.5	87.3	87.0	86.9	86.95	87.16	88.41	89.3	88.5	88.4	98.3
3. Crops	29.9	29.8	29.8	29.5	31.13	31.47	32.27	22.7	32.4	32.3	31.9
4. Livestock	5.2	5.1	5.0	4.0	5.23	5.19	5.21	5.2	5.1	5.1	5.1
5. Forestry	1.3	1.3	1.3	1.2	1.27	1.24	1.22	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.1
6. Fishiness	1.4	1.6	1.6	1.7	1.38	1.49	1.66	1.9	1.9	1.9	2.1
7. Agriculture	37.8	37.8	37.7	37.2	39.01	39.39	40.36	40.61	40.61	40.45	41.23

Source: CBN Annual Reports and Statement of Accounts (several issues)

The agricultural sector has been the largest non-oil contribution to GDP (Adudi, 2004). Thus, agriculture means a lot to the Nigerian economy and requires therefore a more articulate and effective management than what has been accorded it hitherto.

But past development efforts concentrated too much on urban development to such an extent that there is a wide gap between rural and urban standard of living. This is not triviality, of course, in no country in the world is the rural sector as well-developed as the urban. But the contention here is that rational development should spread development evenly so as to form a continuum in rural-create urban standards of living but not dramatic perceptible or polar conditions. Infact, the lopsidedness in our national development is not merely urban-rural in character. The imbalances are discernible also on two other spatial levels, namely, inter-regional and inter-ethnic. These imbalances have contributed to regional decadence and its attendant rural-urban migration.

The other reason why the country should adopt regional development which is a follow-up to the

last point, is the need for national integration. In the past seven years or more, Nigeria faces integration problems which led to the existence of self-determination groups in the country and the call for the restructuring of the federation. Thus, Nigeria is rapidly experiencing fundamental economic and social relation challenges which are generating conflicts at faster rate than the capacity of the country to find methods of resolving the conflicts.

Well this situation has been supported by historical facts. It is generally agreed by scholars of development studies that a major problem that confront new states (including Nigeria) is that of national integration. As Weiner (1964;54) argues:

... the developing nations central problem that is often more pressing than even economic development is the achievement of integration.

The reason for this is not farfetched. Most of the modern states of the world are made up of numerous cultural and linguistic diversities and it is the success in bringing these diverse elements into

unity that is determinate of success in other spheres of relationship within the state. Thus, the need for concerted efforts towards regional planning.

Nigeria has behind it a colonial history. Its territory was delineated by the imperial legal order that came with colonialism. Thereby nationalist who struggled for political independence did so from a disunited front and the consequence today is the seemingly ineluctable problem of integrating the people.

Secondly, the lopsidedness in national development can also be blamed on the fact that regional planning as a tool for plan formulation and machinery for plan execution has not been adopted, on a serious note, as a national development policy.

Since the rural areas have been allowed to decay, agriculture has thus remained undeveloped because we cannot develop it without modernizing the rural environment and vice versa. A modern strategy of regional development aims principally to transform rural life and thereby prevent significant variations in resource allocation. For example, access to health resources by people living in different geographic locations should be equitable. Equity in resources distribution, which we believe, regional planning can provide, does not imply that every Nigeria would have access to all services within each local community. Some levels of services, such as essential health packages, which includes primary health care, basic hospital services and supported community care, should be available in most local areas.

A modern strategy of regional development aims principally to transform rural life by, for example, modernizing agriculture in tandem with rural

industrialization and supporting system development. Some of the objectives in such efforts are to distribute development evenly over space so as to break the vicious circle of rural-urban migration. This makes regional planning a necessary tool for national development. It is our view that regional development in Nigeria can be more effectively handled if strong and viable regional authorities are established to handle this major aspect of national development.

Why Regional Development Authorities (RDA)

Regional development planning is a cross-function (Weitz, 1971). It is at the regional level that cross-fertilization of development ideas, vertical and horizontal, thrives best. Nigeria has for many years sought to plan and develop its resources and meet its needs sectorally. This has not proved very successful partly because regional considerations have not often featured prominently in the national planning decisions and in their implementation. Overtime, Nigeria fail to understand that differences in the cultural and economic histories of areas make variations in the level of general development inevitable. More than that, the inequalities are self-perpetuating and inevitably the wealthiest areas of the country are the most attractive to many forms of investment; and sectorial planning can never be the solution.

This is where regional planning becomes important, if economic planning (whose value is not in doubt) is understood to mean taking the right sectorial decisions, or investing in the right things, then regional planning means putting them in the right places (Barbour, 1972). Regional planning in Nigeria is thus one tool among many (whose use,

incidentally, is widely accepted among states with many philosophies), whereby we may hope to see the national wealth enlarged and more equitably distributed, since it is widely agreed today that the activities of “free enterprise” need to be watched, noted and if necessary checked if they begin to impinge on the welfare of society at large. In the process of nation-building in Nigeria no task is more important than eliminating sources of resentment, or envy between the country’s constituent parts; to this task, an immeasurable contribution can be made by effective regional planning.

From the above, it is now becoming increasingly recognized that regional development planning is a necessary factor in national development. But the inadequacy of government administrative structure at the regional level inhibits effective planning and implementation of regional development programmes. The present organization structure of the country according to states and local government areas have been discovered to be ineffective. They serve more political than economic development function (Asogwa, 2007).

The organizational structure of federal and state agencies for sectoral development create comfort situations in regional development which as a result remains sporadic. The quality and character of the public institutions in the states and local government make co-ordination of sectorial activities almost an impossibility. Often, the scale of priorities differ from one sector to another, consequently budget and manpower distribution follow the pattern of priorities discordantly set by individual sectors as dictated from the central

government. As a result, where the responsibility for such integrated regional project, such as agricultural settlement development cut across a number of agencies, the difficulties that are encountered are region, and project failure is not uncertain. Where the project must succeed, duplicate agencies therefore become necessary. This negates regional development as a cross function (Friedmann, 1970).

The point we have tried to establish is that regional planning cannot proceed given the present organizational structure and functioning of government institution at the federal and state levels. Since by the structure and functions of the Federal and State Government, they do not seem capable of handling integrated regional development effectively, it is imperative to create new organizational structure whose activates are horizontal as well as vertically defined to take on the necessary task of quick regional modernization. This adds to the call for restructuring (Baje, 2021; Ogunmupe, 2022) and building the structure for regional development.

The organizational structure we suggest for adoption is the six Regions by Bob-Duru (1990), in which he advocated “a national framework to be reviewed to allow ethnic or cultural groups to maximize their performance with internal freedom, develop their resources and improve the quality of life the people” (Bob-Duru, 1999;2).

The six regional re-grouping, will form the Regional Development Authorities, while states should retain their capitals (within the regions) and cultural integrity.

Table 1: The new geo-political regions of Nigeria

S/No	Name	In Brief	States	Ethnic groups	Capital
1	North East Nigeria	NEN	Taraba Borno Bauchi Yobe Adamawa	Kanuri, Jarawa Fulani, Marghi Hausa Jukun Chamba, Batta	Maiduguri
2	North West Nigeria	NWN	Sokoto Kebbi Katsina Kano Jigawa	Hausa Fulani Kambari Kamuku, Bussawa Dukawa	Kano
3.	Middle Belt Region	MBR	Benue Kaduna Niger Plateau Kwara	Tiv Gwari Nupe, Idoma Bariba, Anga Birom, Kataf	Kaduna
4	Eastern Nigeria	ESN	Anambra Imo Cross River Akwa Ibom Enugu Ebonyi Abia Rivers	Igbo Igbo Ibibio Efik Igbo Igbo Igbo Kalabari	Enugu
5.	New Mid-West or Oil River Region	ORR	Edo Bayelsa Kogi Delta Orashi	Urhobo, Ika-Igbo Oru-Ogba Ijaw, Itsekiri Ikwerre-Igbo	Asaba or Benin
6.	South West	SWN	Oyo Osun Ondo Ekiti Ogun Lagos	Yoruba Yoruba Awori Agogo Ajaw	Ibadan

Source: Bob-Duru, 1999

The table below presents the names of the six regions (authorities) he suggested with the Federal Capital Territory and the name of the main ethnic groups and states making them up. The only alteration to his Six Regional Structure is that we moved Kogi from New Mid-west or Oil Rivers Region to Middle Belt Region. And we quickly add that there should be a coordinating structure at the federal level that will replace the present National Planning Commissions (NPC) which, we indicated

earlier is only interested in sectorial planning at the expense of regional planning. The result was that:

Application of a centrally planned economy to the Nigerian situation has invariably led to economic losses, reduction of intersectoral competitiveness, resulting in persistent drops in the value of the currency, and inappropriate sharing of internal revenue in favour of the central government, while regions and states, where the population

resides, receive minimal shares
(Bob-Duru, 1999:6).

Hitherto, development had meant provision of basic amenities. This is not quite satisfactory, an effective rural modernization must concentrate on the transformation of the economic base, and the basic service amenities will become ancillary developments that could be planned and executed even by the communities themselves if provided with the funds. Economic base development entails the raising of rural incomes through modernization, expansion and diversification of the rural income activities, especially agriculture, agro-industries, handicrafts and farm and other services that can generate employment. The solution to our regional development problems therefore lies in the creation of a more meaningful development authority charged with the comprehensive regional development. Such authority with a full Ministry of Regional Development at Abuja, should replace the present National Planning Commission (NPC) with sub-units or departments like Regional Planning Committee, Regional Development cooperation and the Regional Management Committee. It may also have district (patterned after the senatorial, zonal or districts) and local sub-organization to rationalize regional/rural development.

The ministry of Regional Development must then have power to develop agriculture, commerce, industry and supporting services on an integrated basis. This would be a sound beginning for rationalizing our settlement pattern, which in many parts of the country is so dispersed, making provision of basic social amenities so prohibitive in cost and tedious in physical implementation. This will indeed lead to the development of more growth

poles or growth foci in different parts of the country. We do not develop growth pole and growth points these days out of casual empiricism and emotional insight but on the basis of rational spatial strategies tied to a sound economic base development plan using ideas such as “development from below” (Pufendorf, 1965), the “composite rural structure” (Prion, 1970) and others at the base of a planned growth foci.

Source of finance

The budget of a virile regional development authority must be adequate especially finance in the nascent stages. Government appropriations are the usual source of finance. The Government should make adequate provision, through legislation, for the proposed Ministry of Regional Development. Regional bonds, lotteries, etc could be permitted. The successful operation of a development authority depends by and large on its ability to exploit its own budgetary resources efficiently. This calls for regional specialization in resource development on the basis of comparative advantages which could be climate, edaphic, locational or demographic. The purpose is to generate inter-regional trade. A system of control and inspection of finances should be instituted to ensure transparency, accountability and sound business operation.

National Planning Commission (NPC), which is located in Abuja is the *Modus Vivendi* that the Federal Government adopted to rationalize regional development so as to correct the lopsidedness in national development. The most obvious observation is that it is engrossed by economic thinking than planning for even development of the

country. As a result, there is not only the absence of supporting services but also that the commission is dealing mainly with sporadic economic projects of doubtful regional significance and relegating infrastructural and social amenities to either local government or utility agencies.

If a Regional Development Authority is to build a farm but should not build a road, or a clean, water supply or school, how integrated can its farming scheme be? A regional development authority could have plans to establish large-scale farms worth millions of naira. The development ripples of such projects could affect peasants and communities around if they are made comprehensive local projects with industrial, commercial and supporting services projects. But by far the most important handicap that regional planning authorities might have could be the absence of a central machinery for purposeful direction and co-ordination of programmes and policies.

Conclusion

We have sought to stress the need for effective and comprehensive regional development. The need for this cannot be gain-said. To create a viable ministry of Regional Development Authority that will oversee and supervise the constraints in capital and man power will be heavy. But the outcome will be exceedingly rewarding. Undoubtedly, a decision of this nature will not only be revolutionary but courageous, given our present circumstances, financial strait and others. But that it will be a decision in the right decision cannot be denied since the structurally weak and backward economic base of the regions must need to be transformed in a bold and imaginative way to promote national

development. The initiative must come from the government by boldly institutionalizing regional development into a viable full-fledged federal ministry. This will surely leave the destiny of the new geo-political regions in their own hands, to develop at even pace while the government is free to devote more attention to issues of national character.

The machinery for this is undoubtedly an effective institutional framework such as that of regional development authorities that can handle the cross purpose of integrated development projects instead of sporadic and disjointed economic sectorally aligned development projects, presently carried out by the federal and state governments. The authorities, to be functionally efficient, should be accorded significant legal and financial independence. Their functions must be clearly defined and coordinated by the Federal Ministry of Regional Development. In this way, regional development authorities could be made equal to the task of quick transformation of the rural socio-economic situation which is paramount now that we are witnessing insecurity and calls for restructuring of the polity.

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