

Public Policy and Citizens Participation in Ngor Okpala Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria 2011-2015

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ABSTRACT:

Within the framework of multiple advocacy theory and elite model, an eclectic approach, the study examined citizens' participation in public policy making and implementation with specific reference to Ngor Okpala Local Government Area of Imo State 2011-2015, with the aim of indentifying the overall impacts, benefits as well as factors hindering citizens' participation in public policy making and implementation. A total of 220 participants were selected through multi-stage and simple random sampling technique. Frequency counts and percentage were utilized in realizing the data collected. The findings show that overall impact of citizen participation in the making and implementation of policy in Ngor Okpala local government is not all influential; the study equally revealed that there is lack of official support for citizens to fully participate in public policy. Therefore, the study recommend among others, that the public should be re-oriented on the importance of citizen's participation and target beneficiaries should be involved at the formulation and implementation stage of public making in order for them to have an input in decisions that affects their lives, thereby giving them a sense of belonging and of commitment.

Keywords: *Effectiveness, Grassroot, Interest group, Implementation, Mobilization*

INTRODUCTION

The need to bring the citizen to mainstream of socio-political, cultural and economic development of a country cannot be overemphasized. One of the ways of achieving this is through citizens' participation in public policy making and implementation process. Policies set up by organizations play an important role in maintaining a positive experience for those people the policies would affect (Wikipedia, 2013). This calls for an urgent need in strengthening and encouraging effective citizen participation in policy making and implementation process especially at the grassroots level in Nigeria.

As Cloete (2013) argued that citizens participation in the making and implementation of public policy is indispensable for sustaining democracy and promoting good local governance. Local governance encourages the principle of democratic participation and representation by promoting grassroots democracy; given the local people the opportunity to participate in the making and implementation of policy thereby upholding the value of welfare of the whole community. By democratizing the public process, valuable information about public needs and demands from the citizen to policy-makers and

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implementers are conveyed, and *vice versa*. At the same time, it promotes responsiveness to citizens' needs and facilitates the processes of policy implementation and community development (Bekker, 2012).

Citizen participation encourages a "bottom-up" approach to public policy-making process and also supports capacity building which is a continuous process of enhancing the citizen's knowledge, skills, perspective and strength so that local government services can be efficiently and effectively delivered (Fox & Meyer, 1999). Citizen participation in the making and implementation of policy is an important ingredient for effective, efficient and local good governance worldwide. A secretive and unresponsive culture is a direct threat to community development. Local government needs to develop efficient mechanisms for allowing citizen participation in the making and implementation of policy. Public policy affects individuals directly and sometimes what appears to be a minor change can have dramatic effects on people's lives as witnessed today in the country under APC led government.

Statement of the Problem

The activity of Nigerian government quite often is characterized by secrecy and restrictive measures to limit or prevent the citizen from gaining access to policy-making and policy implementation processes. With the Freedom of Information Act in place, one expects a robust and coherent citizen participation in the activities of government especially at the local government level being the closest to the people. This appears not to be the case as majority of Nigerian especially citizens of Ngor Okpala local government seem not to have the opportunity to participate in the local governance and administration of their areas. It is essential to note that the manipulative and fraudulent local government elections in which the ruling party win all the chairmanship and councilor seats is not enough and cannot express the opinion of the citizens in local government administration. Today, local governments in Imo State are not properly constituted due to Governor Rochas Okorocha's fourth tier government.

State governors are endowed with wide discretionary powers which adversely affect the citizens' democratic right, public service

delivery and level of development at the grass root. Based on the above, this study seeks to examine citizen participation in the making and implementation of public policy in Nigeria with particular reference to Ngor Okpala local government area of Imo State, Nigeria.

Research Objectives

The main objective of the study is to examine citizens' participation in public policy making and implementation in Ngor Okpala local government area of Imo State. Specifically, the objectives include to:

1. Determine the overall impact of citizen participation in the making and implementation of policy in Ngor Okpala local government area;
2. Examine the main benefits that citizen participation brings in the making and implementation of policy in Ngor Okpala local government;
3. Identify the challenges facing citizen participation in the making and implementation of policy in Ngor Okpala local government; and
4. Proffer recommendations for effective citizen participation in the making and implementation of policy in the study area.

It is hoped that through the results from this research survey the level of citizen's knowledge and interaction concerning citizen participation in the making and implementation of policy in Ngor Okpala local government in particular and the 774 local governments in Nigeria in general could be deepened, strengthened and consolidated in the future, promoting grassroots democracy given the local people the opportunity to participate in the making and implementation of public policy thereby upholding the value of welfare of the whole community.

Conceptual and Theoretical Clarifications

Conceptualizing and analyzing terms in the social and management sciences have often formed the fulcrum of academic research. This is because it sets the parameter within which concepts are used in any given context. One of such concepts is public-policy. However, before we proceed, it is imperative to define what a policy is. Larson (1985) conceives policy as a way of dealing with public problems or a sort of

concrete socio-economic action or a response to weakness and inability of private sector to supply necessary goods and services or a response to a missing link within the norms of the society. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2013) defined policy as definite course or method of action selected from among alternatives and in light of given conditions to guide determine present and future decisions. Appleby (1984) conceives of policy in a restricted sense to mean a “guide to the action or decision of people”. This view on policy, underscores its relevance in guiding or directing the conduct of individual and human organizations. In the making of policy, the partisan mutual adjustment process needs to be employed. By this, it meant balancing of the views presented by various stakeholders in policy process.

Unlike many other concepts, public policy has enjoyed scholarly attention over time. According to Dye (2011), public policy is whatever government chooses to do or not to do. Public policy may be seen as a framework put forward to guide a person or group of persons in the conduct of a particular task. It is among other things entails how government distributes a great variety of symbolic reward material services to members of the society. According to Anderson (2007) public policy is a goal directed or purpose course of action followed by an actor or set of actors in an attempt to deal with public problem. This definition emphasizes on what is done, as distinct from what is intended, and distinguishes policy from decisions. Qualifying the introduction of public realm, Anderson (2007) concludes that public policies “are those developed by governmental bodies and officials”. The above conceptualization by Anderson has some implications.

First policy is teleological, aimed at changing, achieving or solving something. It does not refer to a random act; the result of chance. Secondly, public policies are courses or patterns of action over time of governments and their agents and agencies. Thirdly, public policies are the result of some public demand. Public policy is also authoritative and based on law. In other words, a policy should ideally be legitimate and can be legally enforced by the state (Anderson 2007).

Public policy is the principled guide to action taken by the administrative executive branches of the state with regard to a class of issues in a manner consistent with law and institutional customs. Siegel & Weinberg (1977) once argued that public policies are shaped (or made) when government or comparable authorities decide whether or not to alter aspects of community life. They further argued that polities are public to the extent that they involve governmental or quasi-governmental decision making and determine the interest of the community. Whenever we dwell on public policies, we focus on governmental actions and the consequences that flow from them. For the purpose of this study, public policy is defined as a conscious action initiated in a local government institution by top public functionaries and/or political office-bearers for dealing with a situation in such a way that a particular goal can be achieved. In public policy, government plays a major role and the policy is processed by public institutions. In Nigeria, just like many other countries, government does so many things. Many countries all over the world are confronted with social and economic challenges. These challenges are sometimes referred to, as public problems. According to Dibia (2014), public problems are those conditions which the public widely perceived as unacceptable and requires government intervention. Here brings comes the issue of citizen participation.

In an attempt to explain the concept of citizen participation it would be necessary to first define the concept of participation. According to Vroom & Jago (1988), participation is subject to ambiguous and diverse interpretations. For instance, participation is the term used to designate the process by which people contribute ideas toward the solution of problems affecting the organization and their jobs (Beach, 2014). Also, participation can be seen as an activity undertaken by one or more individuals previously excluded from the decision-making process in conjunction with one or more individuals who were previously the sole protagonists in that process (Bekker, 2012).

Specific interpretations can be made regarding the concept participation within the context of local government administration. Participation in this regard is a means to an end and not an end in itself. It is an activity

undertaken by local government institutions to realize particular objectives (Lammers, 1988). It is a deliberate and goal-oriented activity of government institutions. This is because activities in which people participate with various institutions are goal-oriented. Having explained the concept of participation, let us now conceptualize citizen participation.

Citizen participation is described as the involvement of citizens in a wide range of activities that relate to the making and implementation of policy including the determination of levels of service, budget priorities, and the acceptability of physical construction projects in order to orient government programmes towards community needs, build support and encourage a sense of cohesiveness within society (Fox & Meyer 1995). According to Langton (1978), citizen participation involves purposeful activities in which citizens take part in government related activities. Officials of local government are supposed to rely on citizen inputs to stay informed about public concerns as well as to gain insight into citizen preferences. At the local government level, citizen participation in the making and implementation of policy can have benefits such as diverse viewpoints on particular issues, generation of a sense of ownership of projects and feeling of civic pride. Citizen participation also prevents the abuse or misuse of administrative authority and political power.

However, certain shortcomings are also associated with citizen participation, for instance, it is time-consuming, costly, and slow and it can evoke a negative reaction if citizen inputs are not taken into account. Despite the above, citizen participation is essential for promoting good governance in public institutions (Fox & Meyer 1995). In this study, a citizen is referred to as a resident of a local government area while citizen participation involves participation by an individual resident in the local government area.

As regard to policy implementation, Maduabum (2008) argues that policy implementation is critical and instrumental to the success of any policy, since it constitutes the epicenter of the policy process. It involves the identification of policy plans, program, projects and activities; this stage involves the translation of decisions into action. This concept denotes

the execution of policy decision through a directed change in the environment with a view to attaining the objectives at an acceptable and anticipated cost (Quade, 1982).

Ekelegbe (1996) contends that policy implementation involves the committal of funds, the establishment of structures and methods, the hiring of personnel, the administering or executing of activities, and the security of policy goals, services and other intended outcomes. On the other hand, implementation refers to the process of converting human and materials inputs, including information, technical, human, demands and support, and so on into outputs in the form of goods and services.

For these researchers, policy implementation is referred to as a process of putting public policy into practice at the grass-root level. There are two main ways of thinking about policy implementation. The first is the “top-down” approach which is regarded as a process of top-management driving at the attainment of predetermined goals (Parsons, 1997). The second is referred to as “bottom-up” approach. It is premised on the fact that policy implementation is not so much the preserve of senior officials who know exactly what the policy objectives are; rather, the implementation stage is and should be defined as a heuristic device, appropriate and flexible policy interventions should be discovered by the actual implementers such as legislators, courts, interest group and public officials as implementation happens (Barber, 1997). Brynard (2013) shared the synthesis of these two schools, noting that the exclusive intellectual defense of either one denigrate the positive aspects that they both afford the policy analyst. His point is that the “top-bottom” school’s focus on policy content as a useful analytical tool, while the “bottom-top” emphasis on the policy context. For the purpose of this study both aspects is taken into account for the attainment of intellectually circumspect policy analysis in Ngor Okpala local government area.

In social and management sciences research, no one theoretical window can easily address a social phenomenon. Indeed, of all available theories that could be used to unravel our subject matter of investigation, the multiple advocacy theory to decision making is considered appropriate and perhaps the most potent for this

study. It argues that “competition of ideas and viewpoints is the best method of developing and implementing public policy not unregulated or neutral advocacy but orderly, systematic and being competitive (Anderson 1984). Such healthy competitions are necessary to enable decision makers benefit from adequate supply of information about all view points or any subject matter before the government. Under this method therefore, social forces are able to make their contending views known to centers of decision making at various levels of government in the country.

However, it would appear the elite model captures the situation of citizens and public policy process in Ngor Okpala local government of Imo state. The local government utilizes the elite-mass model of policy-making which normally inhibits politicians from freely sharing every bit of information with their constituencies. There is no theory that is born refuted, multiple advocacy theory inclusive. According to Dukhira (2010), citizen’s participation is sometimes more of a nuisance than of a value. He further argues that this happens because the poor at grassroots level have little or no expertise. Politicians therefore become reluctant to consult them (Taylor, 1998).

RESEARCH METHOD

The study was carried out in Ngor Okpala Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria. The study adopts a descriptive and exploratory approach. The study population used in this study was citizens’ representatives such as traditional rulers, public servants and councilors who lived within the boundary of Ngor Okpala local government selected through purposive sampling technique. Ngor Okpala LGA is made up of 11 electoral ward namely: Ward 1, Amala, Alulu, Oburu, Obokwe/Ntu ward; Ward 2, Elelem/Obike ward; Ward 3, Ozuzu ward; Ward 4, Ezianya/Amala ward; Ward 5, Imerienwe ward; Ward 6, Ngwuru/Umuowa ward; Ward 7, Ngor.Ihitte/Umukabia ward; Ward 8, Ohekelem/Nnorie ward; Ward 9, Umuhu ward; Ward 10, Obiangwu ward; and Ward 11, Logara/Umuohaigu ward. The multi-stage sampling method was employed in selecting 6 wards out of the 11 wards in Ngor Okpala LGA, 35 participants were randomly selected from each ward making a total of 210 participants,

while 10 principal staff of the local government was purposively selected respectively totaling 220 sample size. The study employed a questionnaire survey and interview with 5 of the principal officers and some traditional rulers and market men and women. Frequency distribution table and the simple percentage were used in analyzing the data.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation

The primary focus of this section is to present the findings, analyze and interpret the research data obtained from questionnaire and interviews. As mentioned early, this research, among others, aims at establishing the perceptions of respondents on the objectives set out in this study and provide possible solutions to the problem statement of this study. The analysis and interpretation of the data thus gathered has been carried out in light of the research objectives set out in this study.

Research Question 1: What is the overall impact of citizen participation in the making and implementation of policy in Ngor Okpala local government area? The respondents were asked to rank the variables (table 1).

An analysis of table 1 shows that a total of 26 respondents or 54percent ranked not all influential in the first position, 10 respondents or 21percent ranked fairly influential in the second position, 7 respondents or 15percent ranked occasionally influential in the third position while 5 respondents or 10percent ranked often influential in the fourth position. Among the individual groups, the highest response rate was overall 26 respondents or 54percent, which can be explained as follow: 19 out of the 32 citizen representative or 59percent, 4 out of the 8 civil servants or 50percent and 3 out of the 8 councilors or 38percent, this give a total of 26 respondents as mentioned above. Hence, such a high response rate indicates that the respondents were of the view that the overall impact of citizen participation in the policy making and implementation in Ngor Okpala local government is not all influential.

Research Question 2: What is the main benefits of citizen participation in the making and implementation of policy in Ngor Okpala local government? To answer the question, a number of possible benefits were listed table 2 below.

Table 1: Impact of citizen participation

Numbers and Percentage					
Question	Citizens Rep	Public Servant	Council	Rank Order	Total %
Not at all influential	19(59)	4(50)	3(38)	1	26(54)
Fairly influential	6(19)	3(38)	1(12)	2	10(21)
Occasionally influential	3(9)	1(12)	3(38)	3	7(15)
Often influential	4(13)	0(0)	(12)	4	5(10)
Total	32 (100)	8(100)	8(100)		48 (100)

Source: Field Survey, 2016

Table 2: Main benefits of citizen participation

Numbers and Percentage					
Questions	Citizens Rep	Public Servant	Councilors	Rank Order	Total %
Improvement in public service	17(53%)	3(38%)	3(38%)	1	23(48%)
Greater public awareness	7(22%)	1(12%)	2(25%)	2	10(21%)
Community empowerment	4(13%)	2(25%)	1(12%)	3	7(15%)
Better making and implementation of policy	3(9%)	1(12%)	1(12%)	4	5(10%)
Better policy making on specific points	1(3%)	1(12%)	1(12%)	5	3(6%)
Total	32(100%)	8(100%)	8(100%)		48(100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2016

As illustrated in table 2, a total number of 23 respondents or 48percent ranked improvements in public service in the first position, 10 respondents or 21percent ranked greater public awareness in the second position, 7 respondents 15percent ranked community empowerment in the third position, while 5 respondents or 10percent ranked better making and implementation of policy in the fourth position, another 3 respondents or 6percent ranked better

policy making on specific points in the fifth position. Among the individual groups, the highest response rate was overall 23 respondents or 48percent i.e. 17 of the 32 citizen representative or 53percent, 3 of the 8 civil servants or 38percent and 3 of the 8 councilors or 38percent giving a total number of 23 respondents as mentioned above. With this high preponderance rate, we therefore conclude that the respondents agreed the tentative statement

that an improvement in public service delivery is the most important benefit (ranked most highly) that citizen participation brings in the policy making and implementation in Ngor Okpala of Imo State.

Research Question 3: What are the main challenges of citizen participation in the making and implementation of policy Ngor Okpala local government? Respondents were provided with a variety of possible challenges in table 3 below and they were asked to rank them according to importance.

A close analysis of table 3 show that, 18 respondents representing 38 percent ranked lack of officer support in the first position, 14 respondents or 29percent ranked lack of councilor support in the second position, 17 or (15percent of the respondents ranked lack of time in the third position, 6 or 12percent of the respondents ranked lack of resources in the

fourth position, and lastly, only 3 or 6percent of the respondents ranked lack of public interest in the fifth position. On the individual basis groups, the highest response rate was overall 18 or 38 percent of the respondents, for instance, 16 of the 32 citizen representatives representing 50percent and 2 of the 8 councilors representing 25percent. With the above high score, we can therefore conclude that apart from civil servants, other respondents were of the opinion that lack of officer support is the most important problem in the policy making and implementation in Ngor Okpala local government. However, none of the civil servants was of the view that lack of officer support is the most important problem in citizen participation. Therefore, it can be deduced from this finding that the civil servants were of the view that probably other problems exist which may have an impact on citizen participation in the public policy making and implementation in Ngor Okpala LGA.

Table 3: Challenges of citizen participation

Numbers and Percentage					
Question	Citizen Rep	Public Servant	Councilors	Rank Order	Total %
Lack of officer support	16(50%)	0(0%)	2(25%)	1	18(38%)
Lack of councilor support	13(41%)	1(12%)	0(0%)	2	14(29%)
Lack of time	2(6%)	2(25%)	3(38%)	3	7(15%)
Lack of resources	1(3%)	3(38%)	2(25%)	4	6(12%)
Lack of public interest	0(0%)	2(25%)	1(12%)	5	3(6%)
Total	32 (100%)	8 (100%)	8 (100%)		48(100%)

Source: Field survey, 2016

DISCUSSION

Majority of the respondents representing 54percent were of the opinion that overall impact of citizen participation in the making and implementation of policy in Tai local government is not all influential. This view corroborated with the interview conducted as some of the respondent argued that they feel as members of the public that their inputs were not considered and it is waste of time discussing any particular council issues. This view is supported by Lando (1999) which says that citizen inputs should be encouraged in governance process. According to Lando (1999), participatory local governance encourages active and daily face-to-face local problem-solving. Local government is claimed to be the primary channel of citizen's participation in public affairs. To Hanser (2014), participatory ideals regarding local government imply that active citizen participation in local policy-making and implementation is both a goal in itself and an instrument for strengthening democracy in the community and in a society at large.

Similarly, it is quite clear from the findings of this study that majority of respondents or 48percent agreed that improvement in public service delivery is the most important benefit that citizen participation brings in the making and implementation of policy in the local government. This study shows the importance of including citizens in the planning and execution of development projects that affect their life cannot overemphasized. This finding is supported by Kuponiyi (2008), who state that, actual participation of citizens in the execution of development projects could be a strong indicator for the progress of the project. Corroborating the foregoing statement, Ekong (2010) argues projects and programs of government are better executed if people participate in the identification, planning and implementation. This was also corroborated during the interview session that citizen participation is a mechanism which upholds democratic value, it also ensures accountability in public services, and therefore I believe that citizen participation is very important.

Lastly, findings from this study point to the fact that, the most problem facing citizen participation in making and implementation of policy is the lack of officer support, this was the

view of majority of the respondents or 38percent who believed that lack of officer support is the most important problem in the making and implementation of policy in Ngor Okpala local government. This finding was supported by the interview extract that lack of officer support to the citizen is the main factor hindering public participation in the making and implementation of policy. According to Marsh (1987), the most advanced democracies have come to realize that they have inherited, from the ancient times, a tradition of secrecy in government institutions which is incompatible with the public's right to know how public affairs are conducted. Support from public officers to citizens in local government policy-making is considered important, because it enables the local residents to influence their everyday-life decisions and thus narrows the gap between the rulers and the ruled (William, 1998).

CONCLUSION

The central theme of this study revolves around public policy making and implementation and citizen participation in Ngor Okpala local government area of Imo State Nigeria. Also, searchlight was also beamed on the conceptual framework for a better understanding of the concepts under investigation. Thus, the theories of multiple advocacy and elite model on the concept of public policy making and implementation and citizen participation has been examined as postulated by scholars.

The importance of citizen participation in public policy making and implementation cannot be overemphasized. Citizens' participation in public policy is regarded as one of the milestones of democracy and local governance. Local government provides an ideal forum for allowing participatory democracy to flourish as it is closest to the inhabitants.

This study identified poor public participation as a major drawback to the achievement policy goals in Nigeria. The target beneficiaries are not involved at the formulation and implementation stages in order for them to have an input in decisions that affects their lives. As a result, denying them sense of belonging and commitment to policies geared towards rural and community development. It is worthy to note that in Nigeria, policies are often imposed on

people with little or not consultation for citizens or beneficiaries input; citizens in turn distance themselves from such government's policy even if it is genuine and meant to improve their lives. They can even go as far as sabotaging such programme and policy. The non inclusion of the target beneficiary in the formulation and implementation of public policy have serious implication on policy failures in Nigeria. Unless citizens are carried along in the process of public policy making and implementation to reflect the modern trend in today globalize era, development may remain far-fetched. Such trends demand the appropriation of international best practices base on the right of law and transparency in governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The need for strategizing ways of enhancing and encouraging citizen participation in the making and implementation of policy cannot be overemphasized. To this end, this study therefore calls for government at all levels to have a rethink towards running an inclusive government. Citizen and most especially the beneficiaries of any public policy or program should be encouraged and educated through intensive public enlightenment on the importance of citizen participation in governance.

The study recommends that the old development paradigm in Nigeria should give way for a new paradigm that hinges on empowerment of the people to make choices and carryout bottom-top approach to development. As Ake (2000) puts it, such development paradigm aims at

Making the people the end and means of development by this approach, development ceases to be what the government and international development agencies do for the ordinary people, but what the ordinary people do for themselves. It becomes their possession, their hired experience, not a received experience. In so far as they posses development and become its end, the content of development can be potentials, their progressive empowerment and self-realization.

It is this people-oriented approach to local government development that can bring about

sustainable development. This will encourage local communities' commitment and acknowledged benefit to pay the price of continuation of project activities.

It is important to stress the imperative of increase in the level of peoples' participation in decision-making, project design and development, implementation and evaluation (Olawoye, 2008). The level of popular participation should be able to promote local ownership of project, thereby mitigate the effect of foreign oriented programs and give a sense of ownership, maintenance and care for facilities. Also, intervention projects in locality should involve all sectors of the grass root population to avoid their alienation from the development process.

There is also need for the enlightenment of the rural/urban communities that the policies are to serve their interest on the need to be abreast with the policies of the local government with respect to their economic development. The public should be re-oriented on the importance of citizen's participation both at the input and out-put stages of policy making. There must be effective communication between the target beneficiaries and the implementers of policy programmes. Target beneficiaries should be involved at the formulation stage in order for them to have an input in what affects their lives. This will also give them a sense of belonging and, therefore, a sense of commitment.

The need for positive leadership cannot be overstated. Positive leadership is needed to bring leaders and the lead together to harness resources to effect change in the local government areas in Nigeria. What this means is that leadership should be selfless and visionary, ready to subordinate their personal interests for group interest. Both material and human resources cannot be put into productivity use on their own, unless they are combined effectively by leadership to achieve rural development.

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