Project Planning and Implementation at the Local Government Level: Lessons of Experience

Jimoh A. Oladipo
Department of Business Administration, Faculty of Business and Social Sciences
University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria
E-mail: oladipoui@yahoo.com
Tel: +2348033781008

Abstract

Events of the second war and its aftermath have succeeded not only in making the concept of development a necessity objective but also in identifying the appropriate investment for implementing development projects. The advocacy for decentralization measures as an all-check against concentrating power in any one particular organization finds relevance in the instrumentality of local governments in planning and implementing projects to address the issues of poverty, unemployment and inequality. For developing countries such as Nigeria, however, targeted outcomes have remained largely unachieved as projects at the local level have shown profound incapability in contributing to development of local areas. The problem of corruption, social instability and ethnic divisions has continued to increasingly rear its ugly head. The author's 26 years experience as a technocrat in public project planning has therefore come in handy in looking back at all activities relating to project planning and implementation under three major areas viz: 1. chronicling the process 2. examining all institutional and administrative apparatus put in place and 3. identifying problems and constraints hampering effectiveness in project planning and implementation. Although several factors are discovered to contribute to the failure of local government projects in making appreciable impacts, the most serious ones have to do with institutional instability and policies working at cross purposes. The paper identifies six policy areas in rectifying the failings.

Keywords: Project Planning and Implementation, Local Government, Decentralisation, Social and Economic Development, Goals and Objectives

1. Introduction

The gauntlet thrown down by the concept of development has assumed varying dimensions and colorations over time. The destruction and devastation caused by the second war appeared to have exacerbated this challenge with the resultant sprouting up of all shades of opinions, policies, strategies and even institutions. Notable among the latter are the Bretton Woods Institutions and several agencies of the United Nations. These events succeed in telling us that development has become a necessity objective with a movement away from growth to more humane spheres of ensuring redistribution consistent with addressing issues of poverty, unemployment and inequality.

A major and justifiable area of development discourse concerns the appropriate instrument of implementation. Here, the advocacy of decentralization has been very loud as an all-check against concentrating power in any particular private organizations, city centres or national capitals. The collapse of many centralized contraptions by whatever name, statism, communism etc, has of recent

provided a strong evidence of the failure of monocratic order and enough justification for decentralization efforts.

Although the drive for planned economic growth and the adoption of a uniform technology on a national scale (especially) for electricity supply, provided the major impetus for centralization of resources in the former Soviet block, widespread disaffection and unattained goals became the launch pad for the block's disintegration and the subsequent death of communism in that region.

This same scenario has played out in other East European countries. Apart from the British National Health System which perhaps represents the greatest success story of a centralized system, Western Europe has an age-long history of decentralization and even statism in the Scandinavian countries is headed for extinction. It has been claimed (Olowu, 1980), and correctly so, that centralization of the African variety has been detrimental to Africa's economic and social development and by extension, its democratic aspirations. The policy responses to the evils of centralization have taken different forms in Africa. In Tanzania for example, decentralization has been motivated by the "Ujamma" ideology while Zambia's Kaunda's "Humanism" represented the linchpin for participatory and representative democracy. In Nigeria, decentralization has taken the form of the colonial masters recognizing the traditional authorities through which the people were governed according to the whiteman's social and political institutions and mores. The departure of colonialism witnessed a transformation to the divisional system of administration and its replacement by coordinating committees in unusual times.

The most comprehensive effort at decentralization in Nigeria was the 1976 Local Government reforms which was most national in outlook and sought to be rooted in an ideology of grassroots democracy. In Brigadier Shehu M. Yar'Adua's (1976) words, the reform had the aim among others, "to make appropriate services and development activities responsive to local wishes and initiatives by devolving or delegating them to local representative bodies".

The Local Government can therefore be seen as a worthy implementation design of decentralization policy to transform unserved or underserved areas into a viable and effective instrument of development and change at the grassroots level.

However, there is little doubt that the objectives of the local government reforms have remained largely unachieved. One evidence of this is the continuous instability of the councils through sackings by the military (and even in civilian dispensation) ostensibly to curb corruption, social instability and ethnic divisions. When these happen, sole administrators are appointed in place of elected representatives, a situation that means, in Egonmwan's (1984) observation, a return to tutelage and a recentralization of power. This creates a situation where local governments become mere bureaucratic appendages unable to discharge its statutory obligation in the development process.

Several factors have been adduced for the failure of local governments to achieve desired objectives including inadequate financial resources and mismanagement of available scarce resources. Said professionally, the quantum of projects required to provide needed and demanded amenities and services for the prosperity and happiness of the people has fallen short of expectation so much so people are left wondering what would have been otherwise.

As Gittinger (1980) observes, projects are the 'cutting edge" of development and they represent important and tangible symbols of change and modernization. The experience with Local Government projects in Nigeria is that rather than act as vehicles for the sustained development of rural areas, they only exist more or less as glossary in the annual rituals called budgets that serve merely as public relations cliché.

The problem this paper identifies is therefore the apparent incapability of projects at the Local Government level to contribute to the development of their areas. The paper employs the method of using experience as a teacher. This involves looking at the processes of planning and implementing projects at the Local Government level, highlighting the strategies of and constraints to the effectiveness of the processes and examining the implication of findings for policy. This approach has

justification in history. History is not only a warning but also a guide and to fail to learn from its lessons is to invite the disaster of becoming its victim.

2. Conceptual Framework

The postulation in this work is that a greater level of development and enduring progress can be achieved in Nigeria if suitable projects are formulated, prepared and implemented through the instrumentality of local government machinery. Projects which are chosen should be of high priority and widespread acceptability in the national development plan.

Several perspectives can be brought to bear on the definition of projects. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) (1971) thinks of projects in the production sense, Lewis (1966) sees projects as words, drawings and figures on paper and King (1966) defines it as a capital investment. Benjamin (1985) posits project as an instrument of change in the dynamic context and defines it as a coordinated series of actions resulting from a policy decision to change resource combinations and levels so as to contribute to the realization of a country's development objectives. In simple terms therefore, a project is an investment activity on which resources are expended in expectation of a stream of benefits over an extended period of time in the realization of specific objectives. It is a specific activity with a specific starting point and a specific ending point intended to accomplish a specific objective. Normally, a project will have some geographical location or a rather clearly understood area of geographical concentration as well as a clientele group it intends to reach. As simple as this definition appears to be, we are reminded of the very complex array of activities entailed in putting in place a successful project. To put this mildly, the process involves effective planning and implementation.

Project planning begins with the setting of goals and objectives which represent the broad rationalization for the existence of an establishment. The benchmark of progress achieved is usually measured by the degree of attainment of stated goals and objectives. Usually, the goals and objectives are concretized and translated into programmes and projects which represent tangible and measurable parameters of success or failure. This is often a very difficult process but represents a very important stage in the planning process. If programmes and projects describe and capture the essence of goals and objectives, then progress would have been recorded in the determination of the extent to which the set goals and objectives can be accomplished.

Resources are the essential ingredients required for the implementation of projects. Whether tangible, intangible, human, material or financial, the main characteristic of resources is their scarcity or inadequacy in juxtaposition with needs which are often multifarious and insatiable. The element of scarcity of resources constitutes a serious limitation to the attainment of goals and objectives. The first lesson to be learned from this reality therefore is that projects have to be properly planned through careful selection and implementation of programmes and projects in such an efficient and effective manner to facilitate the realization or achievement of goals and objectives.

The effective and efficient performance of the planning task requires that project planners revert to the adoption of technical tools such as the project cycle (Baum, 1972) and other implementation and evaluation techniques. It is not the intention of this paper to engage in the treatise of these tools, suffice it to say that the capacity to prepare and analyze projects is lagging in most developing countries and even the few in planning positions continually underestimate the time and effort needed to prepare suitable projects.

Institutionalizing the concept of Local Government and the various attempts at reforming it in Nigeria have aimed at making the system more responsive and responsible to the needs of the people at the grassroots especially those living in the rural areas. It derives its relevance and importance from the fact that it presents a local point of impact on which plans for social and economic development can stand or fall. The principle behind creating local governments can be summarized thus:

a. to provide amenities and services which can be best provided on a local basis to incorporate local initiatives and efforts.
b. to assuage for the remoteness of local communities from the central government which may not know the individual wishes in the community
c. to preserve different traditions, customs and languages even when modernization causes change.
d. to provide a healthy spirit of competition between units of population in terms of participatory development efforts.
e. to enhance peace and security for increased happiness and prosperity.

If the reasons for and principles behind creating local governments are germane and it is agreed that projects are veritable vehicles for bringing bout their realization, then genuine concerns should examine the complex and intricate nature of the politics and administration that act as catalyst or impediment to the development process in the local areas; even the role of democracy.

3. Local Government Experience in Kwara State of Nigeria

Kwara State remains one of the first generation states with a long history of development planning at the local government level dating back to 1967. It can therefore be expected that events over the years have been multifarious and multifaceted. However, in looking back at all the activities concerning project planning and implementation, three major areas deserve attention. First, we need to chronicle the process itself; second, it is necessary to examine all administrative and institutional apparatus put in place; and third, the problems and constraints which in fact would show direction for action and policy.

3.1 Planning and Implementation Process

Project identification, selection and articulation at the local government level in Kwara State has not enjoyed the sophistication and elaborate procedure usually associated with modern project planning rituals. Instead, ideas on development plan articulation and project selection usually flow from the central government to the local level. This system which has existed over time is expected to maintain national focus but recent developments increasingly advocate a bottom-up planning approach which allows the local people to have inputs into projects/programmes earmarked for their benefits in order to ensure sustainability. It is however proper to critically examine the contents and operations of the present top-down procedure in order to assess its adequacy and requirements for reform.

The planning process is set in motion in the third quarter of the year with issuance of call circulars/guidelines by the National Planning Commission to the State counterparts for submission of projects/programmes.

The State Planning Commission in collaboration with the State agency responsible for Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs issues comprehensive guidelines requesting the local governments to submit projects/programmes proposals for inclusion in the plan. These guidelines reflect the policies and objectives of the state government for the period to ensure consistency and integration with Federal thinking. The guidelines also supplies data/information on macroeconomic framework, resources projection and programme ceilings (plan size) for each local government and require submissions to reflect the scale of priorities, emphasis, peculiarities and needs of their areas.

The responsibility for the articulation of the local government plan devolves on either the Zonal Planning Office (before its abrogation by the 1988 Civil Service Reform), the Planning and Statistics Unit or the Treasury Department of the local government depending on the choice of individual local governments. This department /unit then issues call circular to all departments for submission of programmes / projects proposals as integral parts of the local government plan. Actual plan articulation is facilitated by the combined efforts of various technical and professional staff of government agencies present in the local government. They work in tandem, through extensive consultations, with traditional rulers, community leaders, village heads, councillors etc to identify priority projects which

bear relevance to the needs and aspirations of the people while remaining consistent with national and state goals and priorities. Identified projects are then collated and referred to Local Government Planning Committee or the Finance and General Purposes Committee for consideration and onward transmission to the full council meeting of the local government. At this level, the inputs of representatives of Federal and State agencies are incorporated before submission to the local government planning Board for approval and inclusion into the State Draft Plan after receiving the blessing of the State Executive Council. It then forms part of the State component of the National Development plan in a 'consolidated' form.

The responsibility for the implementation of the approved consolidated local government programme in the State's development plan devolves on its officials. It is apposite to note that the successful implementation of the plan is a function of the institutional arrangements put in place, the sincerity and commitment of executing officials, available logistic supports and the funding arrangement. For now, the implementation strategies are under focus.

(a) Annual Budgets

A budget is usually drawn up yearly taking into consideration important variables such as the existing macro-economic framework and the financial allocation contained in the development plan for the particular fiscal year. The budget reflects the priorities of government as well as constitutes an effective means of mobilization and allocation of resource. It also provides the basis for assessment, monitoring and evaluation of plan performance. Effective implementation is facilitated by stated guidelines having the following provisions:

- executing or entering into commitments can only be done on projects duly approved with effective financial provision in the budget.
- departments should adhere strictly to existing tender procedures and processes in the award of contracts.
- all expenditures should fall within the limit of the Authority to Incur Expenditure (AIE) for authorizing offices.

(b) Capital Development Fund

The main sources of revenue available to local governments to finance projects include.

- Federal statutory allocation
- 10% of internally generated revenue (IGR) of State Government
- Value Added Tax (VAT)
- Local Governments internally generated revenue from development tax, licences, rates, permits, cattle tax etc.

Local Governments are expected to fund their development programmes through their annual recurrent budgets surplus, transferred into the capital development fund. However, experience shows that the capital development fund has been on the decline for this tier of government for a variety of reasons (dealt with in the next section). This has necessitated the adoption of the following management techniques, among others:

- Phasing of Project Execution: Projects with heavy capital outlays are executed in phases based on the cash flow situation. This serves the advantage of dividing the scope and spreading implementation over a number of years and ensures that resources are not spread too thinly on several projects, none of which may be completed.
- Bulk procurement of construction materials: This is a check against inflation on materials such as cement and iron rods which are susceptible to wild fluctuations. It is to forestall excessive cost –overruns and consequently contract variations.

(c) Monitoring and Supervision

As an implementation strategy, monitoring serves as an important instrument for improving project delivery and impact since information gathered from such exercises enables management to take appropriate remedial actions.

Monitoring also reduces implementation costs through elimination of bottlenecks and ensures efficiency in resource utilization. Several institutional and administrative arrangements have been put in place to ensure its effectiveness in the local governments. Some of these arrangements put on a tripartite garb involving all three tiers of government in order to enlist and maintain national focus and consistency.

3.2 Institutional and Administrative Machinery

The third National Development Plan (1975-80) period marked a significant milestone in the history of concerted efforts made to put project planning and implementation at the local government level on a sound footing. This manifested in a string of institutional and administrative outfits designed for and downloaded to the local government for adoption. They include:

(a) Establishment of four (4) Zonal Planning Centres with each zone being manned by a zonal planning officer who coordinates all planning activities within the zone and assists the local government planning committee in project identification, selection and formulation. The centres also represent focal points of implementation arrangements through periodic monitoring and reporting exercises.

(b) Establishment of Local Government Planning Committee for each local government comprising the chairman and secretary to the local government, heads of departments, representative of the state ministry (at other times called Bureau) of local government and the zonal planning office. Where the committee is not established, the Finance and General Purposes Committee performs its function which, in the main, is the review of project proposals preparatory to presentation to the full council meeting of the local government.

(c) Establishment of the Local Government Planning Board at the ministry of local government comprising the Director-General (now Permanent Secretary) as chairman, chairman of all LGAs as members, representative of the state planning commission and local government inspectors. This body performs the function of reviewing and giving final approval of the local government draft plan acting in concert with the State Planning Commission.

(d) Establishment of Area Plan Implementation Committees specifically designed to monitor and supervise the implementation of projects in the respective local government areas. The committees are expected to submit progress reports at the end of the year on their activities to the then Ministry of Economic Development.

It is appropriate to state that the Ministry of Economic Development, the precursor of the State Planning Commission is strategically placed to facilitate the establishment and operations of these various institutions; it in turn deriving its mandate from the Federal level. It is also noteworthy that the committees have been energized in several ways to perform its functions effectively. One of this was the organization of seminars at national, state and local government levels to sensitize stakeholders on their roles in identification, selection, formulation and implementation of their programmes and projects. Other seminars in collaboration with national agencies such as Nigerian Institute for Social and Economic Research (NISER) were also held on capacity strengthening for officials having responsibility for plan articulation and on data generation, collection, collation and analysis. Finally, there were recommendations that each Local Government Area should create its Planning and Statistics units.

3.3 Problems and constraints to effective project planning and implementation

The successful planning and implementation of local government projects and programmes has been hampered by a number of factors, notable among which are

(a) Lack of Qualified Manpower

Manpower shortages have remained the bane of effective project planning and implementation in the local government areas. Professional and trained planners are virtually non-existent while administrative officers performing planning functions lack any from of training and experience. The result of this scenario is the poor quality of project proposals emanating from the LGAs for screening and assessment. The double jeopardy here is that not only is plan formulation poor but also that continuity is not ensured.

(b) Paucity of Data

Although inadequacies in the quality and scope of data for planning purposes is a general phenomenon in the country, it is more pronounced at the local government level. Yet adequate and reliable data is indispensable to effective project planning and implementation. Data is required for analyzing situation on ground and in determining areas to be served to engender equity and even development.

(c) Inadequate Finance

Local Governments have continued to experience inadequate finance to execute their projects in spite of their enhanced share from the Federation Account. This is attributable to increasing recurrent expenditure outlays, additional responsibilities, high inflation rates, erratic economy all acting in concert to increase the cost of governance. Added to this is the inability of planners to forecast accurately the estimated cost of projects.

(d) Lack of Effective Project Monitoring

As in planning a project, local government officials charged with the responsibility of supervising and monitoring projects lack the exposure, focus and the prerequisites of a tough task. This is compounded by lack of collaboration and cooperation due to differences in orientation and training. In addition, field officers are known to compromise roles and standards due to lack of motivation and logistic supports. The result is that projects have collapsed shortly after handover, boreholes have been drilled without water (Oladipo, 2004), contractors get paid for not doing or doing shoddy jobs and incidence of abandoned/uncompleted/white elephant projects adorns the landscape.

4. Lessons of Experience and Implications for Policy

Project planning and implementation at the local government level using the Kwara State experience as locus of study has thrown up a number of issues which border on lessons and have deep-rooted implications for policy. Clearly, these are many. For the purpose of this paper, however, six such issues are highlighted. First, formulation of programmes and projects at the local government level has not achieved desired results because the process has not embedded certain requirements including organizational arrangements to ensure full participation of development agencies, decentralized decision-making, adoption of explicit criteria for the choice of benefiting communities, putting in place guidelines relating to the investment – mix of projects and deliberate arrangements for involving the beneficiaries in the planning process. A policy decision that affects these areas would most certainly review the spirit of village self-help programmes already heading for extinction. Second, too frequent reorganization of decentralization structures leaves little or no room for them to settle down and become stabilized. Every reorganization which ab-initio is intended to check perceived corruption, social instability and ethnic jingoism end up creating more serious problems in these areas. It is instructive to give enough time and space for the local government to let it be. Third, policies which

are external to the local government system but have wide ranging implications for them have been designed and implemented with a rapidity that tends to make them work at cross-purposes. For example, the planning paradigm in the country has continuously shifted from medium-term to rolling plan and now perspective planning. Some of the plans (e.g. fifth plan, 1985-90) have had to be suspended and replaced with other programmes such as the structural adjustment programme which was mounted during the so-called national economic emergency period. In the wake of such confusion, some institutional and administrative structures which were approaching stability and maturity were forced into untimely oblivion. Although this type of inconsistency may be of a macro nature, it nonetheless calls for redress. Fourth, administrative and institutional structures such as the zonal planning centres and area plan implementation committees established in the late 70s to ensure effective and efficient project planning and implementation and thus of resource allocation were abrogated by the 1988 civil service reforms. The local government planning committee which remained untouched by the reform lacked the capacity and wherewithal to perform their functions. Recent events showing the yawning gaps created by this abrogation reveal and suggest a reversion to old times. Fifth, lack of funds has remained a perennial problem with the LGAs, in my view, not so much resulting from the quantum of funds accruing to this level of government as the abuse they are subjected to. There are deductions from source, state governments are not remitting the statutory 10% of its IGR while spurious collaborative and partnership projects are entered into between state and local governments cunningly to seize part of Federal allocations meant for the development of local areas. Policy must deter these smart alecks. Lastly, is the "Nigerian factor", an omnibus term for corruption, favouratism, parochialism, posturing etc which has been a subject of serious intellectual ferment in Nigerian and can rightly be identified as being responsible for systems collapse and unworkability. It is not for us here to posit a policy in its respect but simply to wonder why systems such as the local government work in other climes but not in Nigeria.

5. Conclusion

Public projects have their origin in government plans and they make great demands on government resources and institutions even though the private sector may be involved in their implementation. They derive their importance from acting as planks for the socio-economic development of the country and are the main targets of aid-flows. Unfortunately projects have not realized their full potentials because of lack of capacity to prepare and analyse them. Trained planners are difficult to come by especially at the local government level and administrators who act in their place pay too much attention to policy formulation and planning on a macro scale that it is often forgotten that serious development cannot take place unless specific projects are designed on which to spend money available. This problem has been well focused on at both international and national levels by the outpouring of efforts on regular training courses mounted by the World Bank through its Economic Development Institute, FAO and UNDP, a process adequately replicated within the country through seminars and workshops on project formulation by agencies such as NISER. However, the scorecard reveals that goals and objectives remain largely unrealized. Budgeted development funds remain unspent during the plan period (Waterson, 1965) and phrases such as "below the line account" "roll-over funds" etc have occupied permanent positions in budgetary matters. Capital development funds continue to shrink because people in positions of authority even in the era of democracy and EFCC's (Economic and Financial Crimes Commission) zero tolerance for corruption, at state government level do not only fail to pay 10 percent of their IGR to the local governments as statutorily required, they also fail to release in full the allocations to the LGs from the Federation Account. However, all hope is not lost as modest achievements already recorded can be built upon borrowing wisely from lessons of experience. In the final analysis, what the system of project planning and implementation at the local government level is and will be is a function of how much and how well stakeholders, and indeed

Nigerians, learn or are willing to learn from their success, failure and failings in the past. As Hyden (1992) notes on the legacies of governance, the past is so strong that it looms very large in the present.

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