

Collaborative Governance and Sustainable Development in Africa in the 21st Century

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Abstract

This paper examined the effects of collaborative governance on sustainable development in Africa in the 21st century. The level of development of Africa compared to Europe and America is low. As a result of this, attention is focused on governance issues because it is believed that with good and collaborative governance, sustainable development can be achieved in Africa. This paper is a qualitative one. Therefore, data for the paper were derived from archival and internet materials, and the analysis of the data was done using descriptive methods. The theoretical frameworks adopted in this paper included systems theory and participatory democratic theories. Ultimately, the article found that embedding collaboration within governance systems is not only a normative imperative but also a pragmatic strategy for advancing long-term sustainable development, particularly in contexts marked by diversity, limited resources, and complex socio-economic challenges. The paper recommended, among others, the strengthening of civil society organisations and the enlightenment of the citizens in their roles in governance and community development to enable them to play an active role in collaborative governance, which is a panacea for sustainable development.

Keywords: Civil society, collaborative governance, development, accountability, new public management.

Introduction

The need for African countries to better deliver services to their citizens necessitated the need for the adoption of collaborative governance in the governance systems of various countries in Africa. Governance in Africa in the 21st century has undergone a profound transformation, shifting from traditional, hierarchical, state-centred models to more inclusive, network-based systems that emphasise cooperation, participation, transparency, and accountability (Agagu, 2008; Adamolekun, 1999). This transformation stems from the increasing recognition that governments

alone cannot effectively address the multifaceted and interdependent challenges facing societies today, such as poverty, insecurity, unemployment, corruption, environmental degradation, and inequality. These complex problems transcend administrative boundaries and require the concerted efforts of state and non-state actors, including civil society organisations, private enterprises, community-based groups, and international partners (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). Collaborative governance can be regarded as an aspect of New Public Management in the sense that it emphasises the collaboration, cooperation and partnership of the government, non-governmental organisations, civil societies, as well as individuals to carry out government business. This view was corroborated by Ansell & Gash (2007) when they defined collaborative governance as an arrangement or strategy that allows the public agencies to directly involve non-state actors to take part in the decision-making process. This arrangement can be considered to be a public-private partnership arrangement, which ensures good governance as well as efficient and effective service delivery to the citizens. What the citizens actually desire is their welfare and well-being, as well as overall societal development. In the view of Agagu (2008), collaborative governance is highly desirable in Africa, not only because they are still struggling to develop but also because involving non-state actors in decision-making will give the government legitimacy needed to maintain stability.

Post-colonial Africa, no doubt, is in dire need of development. This is partly because of the exploitation the continent suffered under the yoke of colonialism. This explains why collaborative governance is highly recommended for African countries because of the belief that it accelerates the development of the continent. In the words of Ake (1996), an elitist and exclusionary pattern of governance where citizens are not adequately put into consideration in decision-making, particularly relating to governance, is partly responsible for the failure of development in Africa. He maintained that sustainable development can only be realised when governance becomes democratic, participatory, and people-centred. Ake's position underscores the philosophical foundation of collaborative governance as an instrument for inclusivity, empowerment, and collective problem-solving. Similarly, Onimode (2004) criticises the centralised and authoritarian nature of African governance, which alienates citizens from decision-making and thereby undermines sustainable development. He calls for the reconstruction of governance to reflect African communal values, dialogue, and cooperation.

For development to be sustainable, it must be inclusive, equitable, and participatory, ensuring that all actors have a voice in shaping policies that affect their lives. Ikelegbe (2005) emphasises that sustainable development is not merely a technical process but a political one that requires participatory governance structures capable of mobilising and coordinating diverse interests. Bratton (1999) identified weak institutions of the state, limited citizens' participation in politics and governance and erosion of public trust in government and its officials as manifestations of crises of government and all these and other factors contribute to the low level of development in Africa. This is because of the central and critical role governance plays in development. Collaborative governance promotes rebuilding of trust, transparency and accountability. While Oke (2016) underscores that the decentralisation of governance functions for local actors promotes innovation, responsiveness, and social learning, which are the key principles of sustainable development, Agagu (2004) recommended the adoption of collaborative governance in Nigeria, where there should be the encouragement of partnership and a greater level of participation on issues of governance as well as consensus-building. He asserted that governance is a serious business which affects virtually everything in the country and continent, and as such, should not be left only in the hands of the few people in government. The seriousness and importance of governance require that all hands must be on deck to carry it out. Abegunde

(2019) and Abe (2020) corroborated this view when they asserted that there should be synergy between government and society in order to enhance accountability, ownership and policy sustainability. Their views also reflect the importance of collaborative governance as a panacea for sustainable development.

This paper explores the nexus between collaborative governance and sustainable development. Institutionalisation of collaborative governance is indispensable for realising sustainable development in Africa in the 21st century, as it embodies the principles of participation, transparency, accountability, and shared responsibility upon which enduring development must rest.

Literature Review

Collaborative governance is defined as a process and structure of public policy decision-making that engages people constructively across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and the private and civic spheres (Ansell & Gash, 2007). It seeks to harness the expertise, resources, and legitimacy of diverse actors to address common societal goals.

Ikelegbe (2005) asserts that collaboration strengthens governance by ensuring that the voices of marginalised groups are heard in policymaking processes, thus enhancing policy legitimacy. Collaborative governance can be viewed as part of the New Public Management that is designed to move away from the traditional public administration that depended only on the government to provide services to the citizens, to the involvement of other agencies and institutions in the process of delivering effective and efficient services to the citizens. With this, sustainable development can be achieved.

In 2015, the United Nations introduced the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was designed to provide a roadmap, strategies and actions geared towards poverty alleviation, protection of the planet and ensuring prosperity through interconnected sustainable development goals (SDGs). This agenda acknowledges that achieving it can only be done through partnership between the public and private sectors. This is in line with the thrust of collaborative governance, which advocates the partnership between state and non-state actors in governance. Goal 17 of the Sustainable Development Goals emphasises “partnership for the goals”, stressing the importance of collaborative efforts and multi-stakeholder participation as the strategy of implementation for all other goals (UN, 2015). This view is in line with Agagu’s (2008) assertion that collaborative governance places more emphasis on inclusivity, dialogue and shared responsibility, to ensure that development processes are not left only in the hands of state actors but through multi-actor participation.

Bratton (1999) argues that governance quality in Africa depends largely on the ability of state institutions to interact productively with non-state actors. Oke (2018) asserts that in order to achieve sustainable development, there should be synergy between the state and non-state actors such that the stakeholders contribute their unique capacities to achieve collective goals. While the government provides leadership and laws, the private sector brings innovation and investment, and the civil society mobilises communities and champions the course of accountability. The responsibility of the local communities is to bring indigenous knowledge and social legitimacy to the process. This arrangement can be likened to division of labour, which brings about efficiency, effectiveness and better service delivery, which is the essence of the existence of government. This view is in line with Abe’s (2020) opinion that participatory collaboration has the capacity to strengthen social cohesion and democratic resilience, which are critical and essential for the achievement of sustainable development

According to Agagu (2004), the monopolisation of governance by political elites excludes citizens from decision-making. This exclusion breeds apathy, distrust, and resistance, which in turn undermine policy implementation. In Ikelegbe's (2005) contribution on the discourse of the relationship between collaborative governance and sustainable development, he opined that top-down policies alone cannot help in achieving sustainable development, but horizontal linkages and multi-level collaboration that make community, local governments, and regional bodies to work together. This view is in line with the argument of Onimode (1988) that African development strategies must put indigenous values of collective responsibility and solidarity into consideration. However, Ake (1996) asserted that any strategy of development that does not involve the people is bound to fail because it will be engulfed in a legitimacy and sustainability crisis. In the words of Abegunde (2019), when communities are empowered to take part adequately governance processes, they become serious partners in achieving world development goals.

To a very large extent, collaborative governance is both a means and an end to sustainable development. It has to do with the principles of inclusivity, transparency, partnership, and shared responsibility that characterise the Sustainable Development Goals. According to Oke (2018), sustainable development cannot be achieved by governments alone but in combination with the coordinated efforts of all sectors in society. For Nigeria and other African countries, adopting a collaborative governance model in their governance system is a pathway towards achieving the 2030 United Nations Agenda. It ensures that development is not only economically viable but also socially just and environmentally sound; a truly holistic realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Mechanisms of Collaborative Governance

Cooperation, dialogue and joint problem-solving are part of the mechanisms of collaborative governance. Trust-building, knowledge sharing, joint decision-making, and policy co-production constitute the operational pillars through which collaboration becomes institutionalised within governance systems. They determine not only the quality of interaction among stakeholders but also the effectiveness and sustainability of policy outcomes.

(a) Trust-Building

According to Ansell & Gash (2007), trust-building is the cornerstone of collaborative governance. To him, it refers to confidence between and among actors that everyone will act in good faith, respecting agreements and pursuing collective objectives. Consistent communication, accountability and transparency are major factors that contribute and help to rebuilding trust. In most African countries, because of failed promises and corruption, there is weak public trust because there is a huge gap between the promises by the ruling class and the actual tangible services delivered to the people. This explains why there is voter apathy in most African countries

(b) Knowledge Sharing

Collaborative governance provides a platform for multi-directional information exchange between government, academia, civil society, and local communities. Knowledge sharing also enhances transparency, as information asymmetry, a common feature in bureaucratic governance, is minimised through open communication channels. According to Oke (2016), in decentralised systems, sharing of knowledge between central authorities and local actors facilitates innovation, synergy and responsiveness, which are very imperative to the achievement of sustainable development goals.

(c) Joint Decision-Making

Joint decision-making is simply the act of collaboration between state and non-state actors in making decisions. Many actors contribute greatly and positively in making decisions which to a very large extent promote their well-being, and they do so through deliberation and consensus building. In this view, Agagu (2004) posited that the true meaning of democracy is derived when the citizens take part in making policies that can positively affect their lives.

Moreover, joint decision-making empowers marginalised groups, amplifies community voices, and institutionalises democratic values of equality and justice. When people are made to be involved in decision-making, there is a tendency that they will contribute to making decisions that would positively impact their lives. With this, the government is likely to implement those decisions that are favourable to the citizens, and this will make the people happy and, in turn, inspire patriotism and loyalty in them. This situation not only brings about peace in the system but also stability that is conducive and needed for effective and efficient governance and development.

(d) Policy Co-Production

Policy co-production extends beyond consultation or joint decision-making to the active involvement of stakeholders in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs. It reflects a shift from “doing for” to “doing with” citizens. According to Abegunde (2019), policy co-production engenders ownership and inclusiveness, which are conditions necessary in achieving sustainable development.

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks adopted in this paper are the systems and participatory democratic theories.

(a) Systems Theory

The systems theory in the field of social and management sciences is known to have been propounded by David Easton because it applied the systems approach to the analysis of the political process. According to David Easton, the political system is considered to be a system of interactions in any society through which binding or authoritative decisions are not only made but also implemented. The systems theory points out the fact that sub-systems exist in the political system in such a way that the nature of the operation of the sub-systems determines, to a large extent, the operation of the system as a whole. This is why it is often said that the system is sub-system dominated. This is because the system cannot be in a good state if the sub-systems are not functioning optimally, just like the human body, which can be considered a system. That system cannot be said to be normal if abnormalities exist in part(s) of the body.

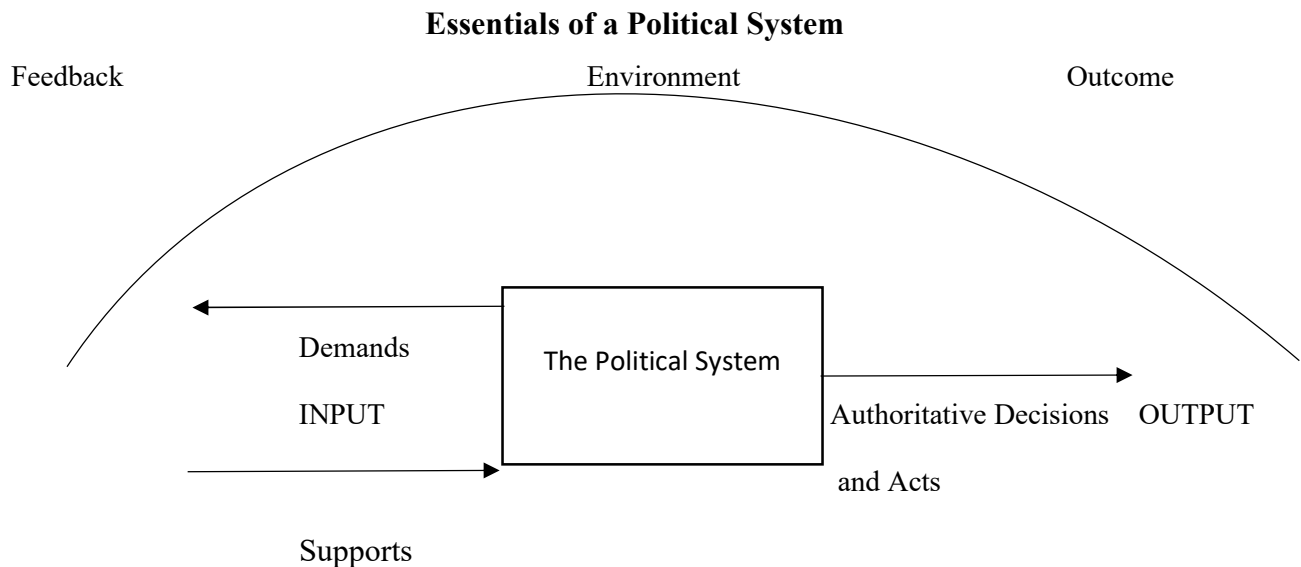
In the political system, according to David Easton, there are inputs, outputs, outcomes, and feedback mechanisms. Under the input, there are demand input and support input. These inputs are used to explain the interaction and relationship between the citizens and those in power. It shows that citizens from time to time make demands to government officials in terms of what they want the government to do for them, for example, they can demand from the government the provision of some infrastructure, such as schools, roads, bridges, electricity, etc. This is very important in governance because without this type of demand, the government may not know the actual needs of the people. By the time people make demands, governments become aware of people’s needs and are expected to respond positively to those demands by providing them.

The support input is often derived from the people when they feel the government has gone a long way in providing their needs as requested. The support input takes the form of obedience to

law and order as well as constituted authority, paying of taxes, being patriotic in terms of performing civic responsibilities, such as voting and being voted for. They also help to maintain peace and security, particularly by cooperating with security agencies to protect the citizens and the country's territorial integrity.

David Easton's systems theory can be said to give vent to collaborative governance because it explains the nature of interaction between the state and non-state actors in the state administration, for the purpose of improving governance and service delivery. If the government is left alone to carry out its functions without adequately involving non-state actors, there would be governance and development crises. This explains why it is very imperative to involve non-state actors in one way or another in the process of governance.

The diagram below is the summation of David Easton's system model.



Source: Austin Ranney: *The Governing of Men*, 4th Ed. Hinsdale cited in Enemu (2015)

(b) Participatory Democratic Theory

The pioneer proponent of this theory is Jean Jacques Rousseau. The basic thrust of this theory is that people's participation in politics is the hallmark of democracy. To Garuba, cited in Egugbo & Abang (2017:106), "Political participation has to do with active involvement of individuals and groups in the governmental processes affecting their lives". People all over the world aspire and desire good governance because of its potential for delivering quality, effective and efficient services to the people. It is important to state that good governance can be derived from the active participation of the people in the political and governance processes.

The social contract theory by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and J. J. Rousseau provided that, because of the nature of the lives of the people in the state of nature, which was unpleasant because of lawlessness and war of all against all, life was solitary, nasty, brutish, poor and short. The people decided to surrender and abandon their personal rights to govern themselves to a leviathan or constituted authority, which is known as the state, so that the state will, in turn, protect their lives and properties as well as provide them with their welfare needs.

The social contract theory also made us understand that the people having formed the state also constantly engage with the state to ensure that it provides the citizens with the essential services, because that was exactly one of the reasons the state was created. Miliband, cited in Ekekwe (1986:10), opined that “the state is not a thing, it does not, as such, exist. What the state stands for is several particular institutions which together constitute its reality, which interact as part of what may be called the state system”. What constitutes the state system includes the bureaucracy, the coercive apparatus (police, army, prisons), the judiciary and the lower levels of government that exist in the formation.

In a truly democratic state, it is impossible to separate governance from elections. This is because virtually all who are to administer the state are products of election. On the basis of this, it becomes incumbent and imperative for the people to take an active part in elections. This is to enable them to elect credible people to occupy positions of governance. Since elections take place periodically, they are expected to follow up the governance process to enable them to know those who are satisfying their wishes and aspirations in order for them to decide who to retain and those to be removed from office through legal and lawful means. The essence of people participating actively in the political and governance processes is to ensure that they are well served by government so that there can be the greatest happiness of the greatest number, according to Jeremy Bentham. That is also the major purpose of collaborative governance, which is seen as the panacea for sustainable development.

Complementing the systems theory is the participatory democratic theory, which emphasises the role of citizens as co-producers of governance and development outcomes. Bratton (1999) argues that institutional reform and civic engagement are essential for achieving responsive governance in Africa. The theoretical foundations of collaborative governance, systems theory and participatory democratic theory all emphasise power redistribution, inclusion, and partnership as essential for sustainable development.

Challenges of Collaborative Governance in Africa

Since collaborative governance is the sine qua non for sustainable development, countries of the world that are desirous and ready to achieve development are adopting the collaborative governance model. Despite this, there are still challenges facing collaborative governance in Africa. Below are the challenges of collaborative governance in Africa.

(a) Power Asymmetries

One of the most persistent challenges to collaborative governance is the imbalance of power between political elites and civic actors. In most African countries, state institutions are heavily centralised, and decision-making authority is concentrated in the hands of political elites who often use their power to serve personal or group interests (Agagu, 2008). This concentration of power marginalises civil society organisations, grassroots associations, and ordinary citizens, reducing collaboration to mere symbolism. Onimode (1988) attributes this problem to structural and ideological constraints embedded in the post-colonial political economy of African states, where governance was inherited as an authoritarian apparatus rather than a participatory institution. As a result, power asymmetries create distrust, hinder cooperation, and weaken the authenticity of participatory processes.

(b) Weak Institutional Capacity

This is another obstacle affecting collaborative governance. In many African countries, there are many strong men in political and government offices rather than strong institutions and because of

the penchant of many African leaders to use their offices to enrich themselves, families and friends, they tend to make the state institutions to operate according to their whims and caprices instead of according to the law. A leader whose mindset is in this category will definitely want to monopolise power and exclude the vast majority of the citizens.

(c) Resource Constraint

There is never a time when resources are in abundance; they are always scarce. This is because resources are in high demand due to their value and importance to man's existence. Resources are needed for governance and development; the shortage of these resources poses a serious challenge to collaborative governance because even the state and non-state actors sometimes spend more time and energy struggling for the limited resources for themselves, leaving little for the purpose of service delivery. This constitutes a major challenge for collaborative governance.

(d) Corruption

Corruption is a factor that constitutes a serious challenge to collaborative governance and sustainable development. This factor has actually contributed seriously to governance and development crises in Africa.

African and Global Experiences of Collaborative Governance

Experiences from both developed and developing nations provide valuable insights for African states seeking to strengthen participatory governance. In advanced democracies such as Finland and Canada, collaborative frameworks are well-established in environmental management, education, and social policy (Ansell & Torfing, 2014). These countries have institutionalised participatory councils, intergovernmental forums, and community-based partnerships that encourage joint decision-making among government, civil society, and private sector actors. Such arrangements promote innovation, accountability, and the integration of diverse knowledge systems.

In Africa, Ghana and South Africa are countries where participation in local governance is practised reasonably. This is made possible in Ghana due to the reforms carried out in the country, which makes it possible for members of the community to participate in the planning of the budget and its monitoring. This measure has helped to ensure greater transparency, accountability and reduction in corruption, particularly at the municipal level. In Ghana, there is also this social protection and poverty alleviation programme. This programme is a partnership between the government and some non-governmental organisations that involves a cash transfer that is designed and executed through active coordination across multi-levels of government, traditional authorities and civil society organisations.

The integrated development planning model adopted in the governance system of the post-apartheid South Africa brought about increased public participation. This mandates local governments to involve the local communities in administration and governance at the grassroots level.

Through collaborative governance, local rural communities in Zimbabwe were empowered to manage and benefit from wildlife resources on their land. This was done through the state provision of technical guidance, and the local communities participate actively in the conservation and economic decisions involving wildlife and also try as much as possible to reduce poaching.

In Namibia, the government gives local communities legal rights over natural resources and tourism. Local communities engage in co-managing wildlife populations with state authority.

Conclusion

There is no gainsaying the fact that collaborative governance is highly required for the achievement of sustainable development; as such, it has to be encouraged. In comparison with Europe, America and other developed continents, it is obvious that Africa is lagging as far as all indices of development are concerned. So, for Africa to develop, the ingredients of collaborative governance have to be observed and implemented. The situation most African countries find themselves is not palatable; there is xenophobia in South Africa, where immigrants are subjected to inhuman treatment and are being forced to leave South Africa. High level of international migration from Africa to the developed countries is also a source of concern because of the social and economic implications of this on Africa. The low level of development as well as bad governance is also causing problems manifesting in corruption, armed robbery, prostitution, banditry and other vices. All these in turn contribute to worsening the development crisis in Africa.

Recommendations

For sustainable development to be achieved through collaborative governance, the following recommendations arising from the findings based on the challenges of collaborative governance are made, and they include:

1. There should be proper political education to enable the citizens to know their rights, duties and responsibilities regarding governance so that they can participate actively in politics and governance. This is because there is a high level of political apathy in many African countries, particularly in Nigeria, where voter apathy is on the increase in virtually all elections. This condition creates a conducive atmosphere for the political class to alienate the masses more in the governance process.
2. There should be a constitutional amendment to reduce the cost of elections and governance. The amount of money political parties charge for forms for those willing to contest elections is extremely high. This, on its own, is an automatic exclusion for those who have the capacity to govern but lack the money to contest elections. This implies governance because people who spend so much money to contest and win elections are prone to embezzle public funds to recoup their expenses and save more for future elections.
3. There should be deliberate effort by all and sundry for effective and efficient harnessing and prudent utilisation of available resources in African states. Africa is blessed with abundant human and material resources, which are not adequately tapped for the benefit of the masses. When these resources are adequately tapped, equitably and fairly distributed, the living standard of the people will increase; this will reduce incidences of vote buying and inducement to avoid scrutiny and criticism of those in power.
4. The institutions of the state should be strengthened to make them strong to the extent that they can operate without being subjected to the whims and caprices of strong men. When state institutions are not independent to act in accordance with the law but are subject to the dictates of those in power, the result is bad governance and a low level of development. Many state institutions in Nigeria are accused of not operating in line with the laws of the land, but to the satisfaction of the interests of the political class and the ruling party. This situation does not augur well for the country
5. Civil society and local governance institutions should be strengthened: Collaborative governance thrives on the vibrancy of civil society and the autonomy of local institutions. In Nigeria and many other African countries, many civil society groups remain weak, underfunded, and dependent on external donors, which limits their influence. Governments should, therefore, create enabling environments where civil society organisations can function

freely and effectively. This includes simplifying registration processes, ensuring access to information, and protecting civic space. Likewise, local governments — being the closest to the people — should be empowered and decentralised to drive community-based development initiatives. According to Agagu (2010), true local governance can only emerge when local councils possess both administrative and fiscal autonomy to collaborate meaningfully with communities.

6. Promote capacity building and stakeholder dialogue platforms: The government should try to create and establish a conducive environment for the training of government officials and non-government officials, particularly civil societies, to make them function optimally.
7. Ensure transparency, inclusivity, and resource equity in partnerships: The place of transparency, accountability and equitable distribution of resources in governance cannot be overemphasised. This is because when states and non-state actors imbibe these virtues, it will lead to greater confidence of the people in government. And the government, on the other hand, will be better positioned to deliver quality services to the citizens. It will also engender peace, security, citizens' well-being, as well as overall societal development.

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