

# DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT IN TARABA STATE, NIGERIA: AN ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT

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## Abstract

*Democracy and democratic governance are no doubt a sine qua non for development in the post-colonial state in Africa, just as it is in advance democracies. In Nigeria, which has suffered altogether, 23 years of military rule, the return of the country to democracy on 29 May, 1999 was a giant stride towards returning the country on the path of development. Contending perspectives exist as to whether or not, democratic governance has impacted the development process in Taraba State positively. Using qualitative methodology, in which data was collected through Key Informant Interviews KII, in addition to secondary sources, and using both descriptive and content analysis, this paper examines the impact of democracy on the development of Taraba State. It finds out among others, that between 1999 to 2024, there has been significant improvement in several areas such as infrastructural development, especially roads construction, educational and health institutions; increased political awareness and participation among the citizens; increased employment of citizens in both state and federal agencies; and more expansion of the state's agricultural production. Notwithstanding the progress recorded, the paper also identified some challenges that remain an obstacle to sustainable development, including among others, corruption among public officials; rising insecurity; and lack of adequate inclusion of women in the process of governance. It finally made recommendations for more entrenched democratic governance for sustainable development in the state.*

**Key Words:** Democracy, Democratic Governance, Development, Taraba State, Nigeria

## Introduction

The perception that democracy and democratic governance is a *sine qua non* for development in African states, just as it is in other democratic societies across the world is well entrenched within scholarly literature (Oparanma & Nweke, 2014; Saka, 2014 and Adamolekun, 2018). However, whether or not this perception translates to reality in the case of Taraba State, north east Nigeria is subject to research, which this paper seeks to explore. Nigeria's democratic journey has been rather intermittent due incessant military incursion into the country's politics (Ojo, 2014), until 1999, when the current experiment started and has remained sustained without any interruption. Expectedly, much from the citizens have been expected in terms of good governance and development.

Taraba State, which was carved out of the former Gongola State on 27<sup>th</sup> August 1991 by the then Federal Military Government under General Ibrahim Babangida (Rtd), has had its experience, like its contemporaries, of the ups and downs of democratic journey recording different levels of development under successive administrations. Different perspectives exist among scholars as to the effectiveness of democracy and democratic governance on development in Taraba State. Whereas some are of the view that the state has recorded significant progress, others are of the view that very little has been achieved, when juxtaposed with the amount of federally allocated revenue that flows into the state monthly. Those who share the later persuasion argue that massive corruption, mismanagement of resources and inefficiency, among several other factors, account for why the state is yet to be at par with some of its contemporaries, developmental wise. Some of the factors that account for this is poor leadership and lack of unity among the people and the incessant ethnoreligious conflicts which claimed many human lives and scared away investors (Isa & Oruonye, (2021). To be objective on the impact of democracy on

Taraba State's development, a number of critical questions need to be answered. First, to what extent is the theoretical postulation that democracy and democratic governance is a *sine qua non* for development true in the case of Taraba State? Secondly, how have successive democratic governments provided development to the citizens of Taraba State? Thirdly, what are the challenges of achieving sustainable development in Taraba State in the current democratic dispensation?

### **Methodology**

This research is qualitative. Desk review as well as in-dept interviews were used to generate data for analysis. Key informant interviews were used and respondents were drawn from subject matter expert.

### **Conceptual Framework**

To adequately capture the essence of this paper, it is proper to attempt a conceptual and theoretical framework, within which we will critically analyse democracy and development in Taraba State. The conceptions of democracy mean different things to different people, because it depends on the specificity of its adoption and applicability within a given context of definition and operationalization (Onuoha, et. al., 2021). Universally, there is a commonality on perceptions of democracy as regards its emphasis on the “the people” (Held, 1996; Almond et al, 2007). Johari (1989) conceptualized democracy as a form of state, and it prevails where people are powerful or the sovereign authority is vested in the people.

Also, democracy implies a degree of social equality and not necessarily a form of government (Birch, 1995). Within this context, the whole essence of democracy is the people and enhancing the wellbeing of the people. There is a primacy to the people, as they participate in governance directly as in the case of Athens or indirectly through their representatives. Democratic governance on the other hand presupposes a system that upholds the ideals of having institutions function according to democratic processes and norms, both internally and in their interaction with other institutions (Gberevbie, 2014). Democratic governance is factored from the action-ability of the political institutions in a democratic system to perform certain responsibilities and to be accountable at all times, which can manifest through policy decisions and actions as well as laws carried out by the institutions, which include principally the legislature, judiciary and executive branch, and other political parties, private sector and a variety of civil society (Dahl, 1989; Held, 1996). The operation of democratic governance must be situated within the rules that regulate the public realm, the processes and institutions where the state, as well as economic and societal actors (both national and international), interact to make decisions because of the effects of their activities on the people.

From the foregoing, it is deductible that democratic governance involves transparency, accountability, low levels of corruption and a decentralized decision-making structure and programmes which have been a critical contributor to one's country development (David, 2010). In this sense, democratic governance brings to the fore the question of how a society organizes itself to ensure equality (of opportunity) and equity (social and economic justice) for all citizens. The emphasis on democratic governance from the above context goes beyond the procedural processes of democracy and the establishment of democratic institutions, to the promotion of the sustainability of democracy through an enduring capacity for the separation of powers and independence of the branches of government, the exercise of power under the rule of law, the respect for human rights and fundamental freedom; and, the transparency and accountability of responsible civil service, functioning at both the national and local levels. The overarching goal of a democratic governance should be towards provision of social services to the citizens at whichever level. Social service constitutes a set of programmes that are developed to achieve certain goals within a given social system or political community called the state. Social service generates from deliberate social policies of the government directed at the making of positive changes not only in the structure and institutions of the state but to also improve the quality of life of the people in the state.

Social service, therefore, cannot be complete without the making of decisions and actions, which manifest in terms of programmes carried out by the government and its agencies that are directly related to the provisions of welfare services to people and the community. Some of the social programmes include child protection, free education, healthcare services, and housing. These programmes enable the people to attain the level of self-actualization and also help prevent the spontaneous reactions against the state for being non-responsive and accountable to the people as a matter of democratic regime. The central focus of the provision of social service is about empowering people and alleviating them from poverty. Democracy is an important system that is being practiced by many nations. Nigeria is one of those countries that is practicing democratic system, although its initial attempt from 1960 was interrupted by military interregnum, from 1966-1979, and 1984-1999. Thereafter, in the same year, 1999, the current democratic system was inaugurated, and has lasted till date.

Nigeria's practice of democratic governance is deeply rooted in provisions of its Constitution. Section 2c (1 and 2) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provides for Nigeria's democratic state, which is Federal and structured into 36 states, with a Federal Capital Territory (FCT), and 774 Local Government Areas. Section 14(1) also stipulated "the Federal Republic of Nigeria shall be a state based on the principles of democracy and social justice". It further states in sub-section 2(a, b and c) that "sovereignty belongs to the people of Nigeria from whom this constitution derives all its power and authority"; the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government and the participation by the people in their government shall be ensured in accordance with the provision of the constitution" this shows the recognition of the people in a Nigerian democratic arrangement, due to the fact that, their welfare and general development is not only paramount but a constitutional requirement of which democratic government must address (Madu, et. al., 2015; Adam, 2019).

### **Historical and Geographical Profile of Taraba State**

Taraba State was carved out of the former Gongola State on 27<sup>th</sup> August 1991 by the then Federal Military Government under General Ibrahim Babangida (Ota, et.al., 2020). The creation of states and local governments in Nigeria was towards decentralization of the country's federal system, in order to bring government to the door steps of the citizens, in order to enhance maximum participation of the citizens in the process of governance, especially under a democratic system. Theoretically, democratic system of governance is said to be ideal for the promotion of good governance and development (Bashir & Muhammed, 2012)

Taraba State is named after the Taraba River which traverses the southern part of the state. Taraba's capital is Jalingo. With an estimated population of 3,066,834, as at 2016 (National Bureau of Statistics, ND), it is comprised of sixteen Local Government Areas, namely: Ardo-Kola, Bali, Donga, Gashaka, Gassol, Ibbi, Jalingo, Karim Lamido, Kurmi, Lau, Sardauna, Takum, Ussa, Wukari, Yorro and Zing. Located in the North Eastern part of Nigeria, the State occupies 54,473 square kilometres (Mohammed, et.al., 2020). Taraba state is bounded in the West by Plateau, Nassarawa state and Benue state to the south, on the eastern border by Adamawa State and the Republic of Cameroon; and on the northern border by Gombe State. Geographically, the state lies largely within the middle of Nigeria and consists of undulating landscape dotted with a few mountainous features. These include the scenic and prominent Mambilla Plateau and mountainous areas of the Mummuye Communities which lies to the East of the state. The state lies largely within the tropical zone and has a vegetation of low forest in the southern part and grassland in the northern part. The Mambilla Plateau with an altitude of 1,800 meters (6000 ft) above sea level has a temperate climate all the year round. Rivers Benue, Donga, Taraba and Ibi are the main rivers and rise from the Cameroon Mountains, straining almost the entire length of the state in the North and South direction to link up with the River Niger. The present ruling party in the state is the People Democratic Party (PDP). The State House of Assembly is comprised of twenty-four (24) members (Mohammed, et.al., 2020).

The major occupation of the people of Taraba State is agriculture. Cash crops produced in the state include coffee, tea, groundnuts and cotton. Crops such as maize, rice, sorghum, millet, cassava, and

yam are also produced in commercial quantity. In addition, cattle, sheep and goats are reared in large numbers, especially on the Manbilla Plateau, and along the Benue and Taraba valleys. Similarly, the people undertake other livestock production activities like poultry production, rabbit breeding and pig farming in fairly large scale. Taraba State is among the leading states in the production of livestock with its dairy farms at Jalingo, Gembu and Nguorje. Communities living on the banks of River Benue, River Taraba, River Donga and Ibi engage in fishing all year round. Other occupational activities such as pottery, cloth-weaving, dyeing, mat-making, carving, embroidery and blacksmithing are also carried out in various parts of the state.

Taraba State is richly endowed with potentials for the development of tourism, and mineral resources and that include recently discovering of uranium in huge quantities in the state. In recognition of this, the government has made concerted efforts to improve areas of tourist attractions like Mambilla Tourist Center, Gumpti Park and game reserve in Gashaka, the Nwunyu Fishing festival in Ibi which usually holds in April of each year where activities such as canoe racing, swimming competition and cultural dances were held. Effort is been made to attract foreign investors by the state government to go and invest in the natural resources that abound in the state. Other festivals are Purma of the Chamba in Donga, Takum and Bali, the Puje of Jukuns, Kuchecheb of Kutebs in Takum and Ussa, Kati of the Mambilla and host of others. Taraba is called "Nature's gift to the nation" as the state is rich and have many ethnic groups, including Fulani, Jukun, Mumuyes, Yandang, Chamba, the Mambila, Wurunkums, Jenjo Kuteb, Ichen, Tiv and Ndoro among others (Ali, 2023).

### **The Democratic Journey of Taraba State (1999-2024): Towards an Analysis**

Since its creation on the 27th August, 1991, Taraba State has undergone various changes in the political, economic and social aspects under both military and democratic regimes. In all, it has had eight years of military administration, and twenty-four years of democratic administration (Agbu, et.al., 2020). Taraba State's first experience of democratic rule was between January, 1992 and November, 1993, when Rev. Jolly Nyame was sworn-in as the first civilian Governor of the state. Though this took place under a military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida at the federal level, it worthy of note as the first step by the state in the democratic journey. By November, 1993, General Sani Abacha took-over power to succeed General Babangida as Military Ruler, thereby ushering yet another period of military interregnum, which lasted until 29 May, 1999, after General Abdulsalam Abubakar, who succeeded General Sani Abacha successfully handed over power to a democratically elected government (Chatham House, 2022).

Upon Nigeria's return to democratic governance on 29<sup>th</sup> May, 1999, successive administrations have ruled Taraba State in the following order: Rev. Jolly Nyame – Governor, from the People's Democratic Party (PDP), 29 May, 1999; Danbaba Danfulani Suntai – Governor (PDP), 29 May, 2007; Garba Umar – Acting Governor (PDP), October, 2012; Abubakar Sani Danladi – Acting Governor (PDP), 2013; Darius Dickson Ishaku – Governor (PDP), 29 May, 2015; and Agbu Kefas – Governor (PDP), 29 May, 2023 (Wikipedia, ND; Taraba State Government, 2015 and Mohammed, et.al., 2020). From available documented literature and oral interviews conducted during field survey, it is a fact that a lot of progress has been recorded in Taraba State since the inception of the current democratic dispensation, though some challenges still exist.

In terms of political participation in the state, there has been a steady increase in the level of participation of citizens of the state in democratic activities, although there are still some gaps in terms of the level of women participation. The low level of participation of women in politics is becoming alarming and disturbing. Hence, hampers women from contributing their quota to the development of Taraba and Nigeria at large. Research has shown Nigerians prefer voting men over women not minding the competency they can bring into governance due to the patriarchal dominant factor in the Nigerian society. Some women that contested for key political positions were either refused to be voted for by the men or see as weaker folks for governance. In addition, some group of politicians, especially the men, rejected a call for gender equality bill and calling it a means for women empowerment above the men (Tama & Maiwuya, 2022).

Also, in terms of institutional development, suffice to say that every functional democratic system is supposed to not only create the enabling environment, but also guarantee the protection and promotion of human rights of its citizens (Kirchschlaeger, 2014). The enthronement of democratic order in Taraba state since 1999, has witnessed a steady and systematic improvement in not only institutions that promote the rights of citizens, but also developing the human rights culture. Most respondents during field survey in the state maintained that the establishment of civil society groups such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), Labour and Trade Associations, has created an atmosphere in which the struggle for the defence and promotion of citizen's rights will be actualized.

Moreover, in the area of media development and its role in promoting democracy and development in the state, it is instructive to note that the media has played in the entrenchment of democracy in Nigeria is not in doubt (Zainawa & Maitama, 2022). Among the critical roles the media has played are educating and sensitizing the citizenry; creating platforms for constructive engagement between the elected and the electorate; service as the watchdog of the society; and being an agenda-setter to government, among several others (Riaz, 2011). The establishments of both public and private media organizations in the state, especially in the state capital have no doubt helped towards not only entrenching the democratic culture, but also achieving the overarching goal of development in the state.

Furthermore, in the aspect of relationship between the federal government and the state government in the context of democracy, the state continues enjoy close ties with the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN). In the context of federal, which Nigeria operates as a structure of government, powers are devolved from the central government to the states and local governments, each having its areas of jurisdictions as enshrined in the country's constitution. The 1999 Constitution as amended outlines the powers of each tier of government under the Exclusive, Concurrent and Residual Lists, with the Federal Government controlling matters under the Exclusive List, while both the Federal and State governments control matters under the Concurrent List, and the local governments having control over matters under the Residual List (Kutigi, et.al., 2017).

The implication is that for the purpose of proper representation and equitable distribution of resources within a democratic federal republic of Nigeria, there has to be representation of states in the federal legislature, which is bicameral – comprising of the Senate and House of Representatives. Also, there should be monthly allocation of resources to the states and local governments by the Federation Allocation Accounts Commission (FAAC), towards their survival. For Taraba State, just like other states of the federation, there has been a steady flow of the monthly allocation from FAAC into the state. Taraba state monthly allocation from the Federation Allocation Account Committee (FAAC) as at January, 2024, stood at N6.6 billion. With prudent management of resources, many respondents interviewed are of the opinion that this will make meaningful impact on the development of the state.

Also, citizens of Taraba origin have enjoyed appointments into various positions at the federal level since 1999. Although perspectives differ as to the adequacy of what comes to the state from the federal government, the fact that the state government has been able to execute some critical infrastructural developments in addition to payment of its workers' emoluments since 1999, it is a clear indication that democracy has indeed, yielded some dividends to the state, especially in terms of its relationship with the federal government. Finally, in terms of infrastructural development, there has been a steady increasing in the execution of both federal and state government projects in the state. Some of the notable projects executed are the Federal University, Wukari, Federal Polytechnic Bali, Kashimbila Dam, where the Kashimbila Hydroelectric Power Station is located in Wukari, the Jolly Nyame Stadium, Jalingo, and several road networks. There have also been the establishment of several healthcare facilities by both the state and federal governments in the state.

### **Challenges of Development in Taraba State**

Notwithstanding some of the progress recorded in Taraba State under democratic governance, some critical challenge exists, which hamper sustainable development. These are discussed below. First,

is the lack of quality representation by federal legislators. In the view of Nwanegbo, et.al., (ND:113), “the House of Representatives members from Taraba state are not effectively representing their constituents in the performance of their duties as legislators”. Effective representation in the federal legislature is key to enabling constituents not only have a sense of belonging as far as governance is concerned, but very importantly, it allows them have access to federally allocated benefits such as employments, contracts for federally funded projects and many others. Where representatives do not maintain strong ties with their constituents after assumption of office, it becomes challenging for the people to be able to channel their wishes and aspirations to government, and it makes them feel disconnected in the democratic process.

Also, in terms of peace and security, Taraba State is still experiencing challenges. In Taraba State, there is a general situation of insecurity occasioned by activities of kidnappers and armed bandits as well as header-farmer conflicts plus communal clashes among rival ethnic groups. Hundreds of people have lost their lives and livelihoods in various parts of the state. Conflicts between Tiv and Jukun ethnic groups in Wukari, Donga and other neighboring Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Benue State (Chi, 2019; Dyikuk & Obateru, 2021; and Nigerian Tribune, 2023). It is equally reported that there has been increase in crime rate in Jalingo metropolis of late. Crimes such as kidnapping for ransom, house burglary and theft, among others, are on the increase (Ategb, et.al., 2022).

Moreover, corruption is pointed out as one of the critical challenges Taraba State faces as far as development is concerned. Corrupt public officeholders in Taraba state have hindered the provision of good road networks through political interference in contract procurement (Ayeni, et.al., 2023). It is instructive to note that corruption depletes resources that would have been used to provide quality governance to a state. This view on the role of corruption is also shared by some respondents during field survey. Furthermore, notwithstanding the progress that has been made in the area of agriculture, the inability of successive governments to fully tap the vast agricultural potentials of the state constitutes yet another challenge. Agriculture being the predominant economic activity in the state, when fully tapped, can be a major source of Internally Generated Revenue (IGR) to the state, which will augment the monthly allocation that comes to the state from the federal government.

### **Concluding Remarks and Recommendations**

Based on the forgoing discourse on the impact of democracy on development in Taraba State, it is clear that the state, like its contemporaries and even those that were created after it, has recorded some level of progress in the areas of infrastructural development such as road networks, institutional development, agricultural production, trade and commerce, and several others. However, some challenges including rising insecurity, criminality, corruption and mismanagement of resources remain obstacles to sustainable development in the state.

This paper therefore proffers the following recommendations for a more sustainable development in Taraba State. First, there should be greater synergy between elected representatives and constituents. This will help constituents effectively channel their demands to the government, and will enable elected representatives be conversant with the needs of their constituents. Towards this end, functional constituency offices should be established by each representative in their respective constituencies, and be equipped with state-of-the-art facilities for research, documentation and publication. This will enhance communication and feedback.

Secondly, efforts should be stepped up towards providing security in the state, especially in conflict flashpoint areas and areas with high rate of criminality. Security is key towards to achievement of any developmental goals. Providing security in the state will require efforts of all stakeholders – the government at all levels (federal, state and local governments), Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), religious organizations, and several others.

Thirdly, deliberate steps should be made to minimize, and if possible, totally tamp out corruption in governance in the state. In this regard, citizens should be given proper orientation on budget tracking and monitoring, to ensure that funds allocated to the state monthly from the FAAC, and those from

Internally Generated Revenue (IGR) are not siphoned, but efficiently utilised for the development of the state.

Finally, the vast agricultural potentials of Taraba state should be effectively harnessed by both the state and federal governments. In this regard, more attention should be given to the Mambila tea industry; expansion of pastoralism – using modern best practices; introduction of mechanized farming in food and cash crop production; and establishment of modern food storage and processing facilities.

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