
Who do Politicians targets in the Distribution of Public Goods? Evidence from Public Housing Provision in Selected States in Nigeria

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Abstract: *This paper examines the pattern of public housing distribution in Nigeria. Using qualitative data from Sokoto, Kebbi and Zamfara states housing programs from 2000 -2013, the study revealed that over 6,000 housing units were constructed and distributed in the selected states under various public housing programs since 2000. The study further revealed that the housing units were distributed to public servants and politicians. However, other social groups such as business and miscreant groups based on political considerations also benefitted from the programs. Similarly, the paper also found that these groups of beneficiaries were selected based on their perceived roles and contributions in voter mobilization, electioneering campaigns as well as in influencing electoral outcome. Thus, the paper concludes that the targeting strategies adopted in public housing distribution have neglected majority of the people who desperately need housing. These targeting strategies have transformed public housing into clientelistic goods designed to reward supporters and financiers of the ruling political party. It thus creates clientelistic networks employed by politicians to influence, control and maintain existing power relations in their favour. Given the number of people in need of housing, the paper recommends the adoption of basic needs approach in targeting beneficiaries of public housing in order to ensure equitable distribution of public goods in the selected states.*

Keywords: *distributive politics, public housing, public goods, clientelism, Nigeria*

1. Introduction

This paper concerns itself with the question of who do politicians target in the distribution of public housing in selected states of Nigeria. Public goods distribution is increasingly becoming an interesting topical issue among students and scholars in Political Science. This is because of the significance of public goods distribution in understanding power relations as well as providing a template for assessing the quality of governance in developed and developing democracies. Moreover, the pattern and manner with which public goods are distributed have direct link to citizens' affinity to democratic rule.

It is an undeniable fact that public goods are distributed in both democratic and non-democratic regimes. However, different targeting strategies and selection of beneficiaries are adopted from one regime to another. This variation is increasingly making distributive politics an interesting subject of debate among Political scientists. While in some cases politicians distribute goods to increase their political fortunes during elections such as in the United States of America (USA) and United Kingdom (UK), in several others such as Kenya, Egypt and Ghana to mention a few, ethnic favoritism influences public goods distribution (Kramon and Posner, 2013, Hoffman and Long, 2013). While this pattern of distribution had been a subject of debate in the literature, other forms of clientelistic distributions are yet to be explored. This paper examines why and what types of targeting strategies were adopted by politicians in public goods distribution in Nigeria. Exploring the experience of Sokoto, Kebbi and Zamfara states public housing programs, the paper specifically identify the targeting strategies adopted in public housing distribution and their implications to adequate housing provision in the selected states. This will no doubt contribute to the growing debate on distributive politics, service

delivery and the prospects of democratic governance in Nigeria. The next section of the paper is an overview of the pattern of distributive politics in Nigeria, followed by the methods of data collection and analysis of the study. Section three examines the targeting strategies adopted in the distribution of public housing in the selected state and their implications to adequate housing provision, while the last section concludes the paper.

2. Explaining the pattern of distributive politics in Nigeria

It is an undeniable fact that the concept of distributive politics had little definitional ambiguity as most studies relate it to the methods and ways adopted by politicians, patrons and public authorities in the distribution of public goods to citizens (see Hicken, 2011; Wantchekon, 2003; Weitz-Shapiro, 2012). It is equally related to mobilization of taxes and transfers as well as decisions made concerning allocation of government goods and services to identifiable localities or groups (Golden and Min, 2013). This implies that tax payment is a condition for public goods distribution and thus, public goods provision to citizens is a contract entered into between the state and its citizens. Perhaps, this explains why Laswell (1936) and Easton (1957) described politics as resource allocation or who gets what. However, in African scholarship, there is a gap in the literature as to who and why politicians distribute public goods in ways different from others. The relevance of these questions at least in African context lies in their capacity to provide answers and justify the legitimacy of the pattern of public good distribution. It may interest us to note that African conflicts could be partly explained as a product of state failure to distribute public goods judiciously and fairly to all citizens. While some of the emerging civilian governments in Africa emerged through vote buying and other forms of electoral frauds, many others could not distribute goods due to high level of impunity that characterized way of governance. These factors partly gave rise to political clientelism in Africa and could be used to explain distributive politics and the pattern of goods distribution on the continent.

Political clientelism as opined by van de walle (2007) exists in all polities but in different dimensions and ways. This therefore suggests that political clientelism is a framework adopted by politicians across the world to distribute goods and services such as education, roads, cash transfers, infant mortality services and municipal services. Essentially, the choice of political clientelism as a method of public goods distribution in Africa is to offer politicians the opportunity to secure more votes even in areas described as opposition stronghold. Hicken (2011) maintained that politicians supply benefit to individuals or groups that support or promise to support them regardless of their ethnicity or geographical locations. The essence of this support is to create clients who often benefits from the politicians in return for electoral support.

The second dimension to political clientelism is what I described as elitist favoritism where politicians grant favours to politically loyal bureaucrats and political elites regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds. These loyalists and elites are used as vehicles for the transfer of public goods to targeted groups such as miscreant youths for electoral favours. In this regard, the bureaucrats collaborate with political elites to distribute goods such as job offers and lucrative appointments to their supporters. In most cases, public sector and political parties provide the channels for distribution of public goods. While the public sector organizations were used to distribute public goods in form of job offers and lucrative postings to their perceived supporters within the civil service, political parties were employed as the vehicle for exchange of public goods such as food stuff, location and rehabilitation of infrastructures etc in constituencies perceived to be politicians stronghold. Political parties and youth associations such as ward or local party offices served as the chain for the distribution of public goods. In this regard, collaborative arrangements were made between politicians, bureaucrats and youth groups to identify loyal supporters who were chosen based on their perceived roles in the electoral process. For instance, it was observed that youth groups who usually perform symbolic functions such as pasting of

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candidates posters on streets as well as attending party campaigns/rallies benefits from cash rewards and skill acquisition programs to continue to perform such functions. The second group of beneficiaries are the civil servants who were appointed into public offices through patronage and were used as the gateways for the delivery of goods to target groups. The anointed civil servants embezzled public funds to support political party in power in their constituencies during elections. They continue to enjoy lucrative postings as gateways to state resources for the benefit of political party. This patronage network of goods distribution and its sustenance create what Hicken (2011) described as volition.

Volition is a strategy that binds clientelistic relations together and includes the use of power/force, needs/demands or voluntary obligations (Muno, 2010). Politicians adopt different volition strategies to deliver goods to target groups. But this depends on the situation, type of voters, their level of income and circumstances. In rural areas with large concentration of poor voters, the common strategy in Nigeria is the use of needs/demands strategy to distribute household items such as fertilization, food stuffs, detergents and other domestic items before or at the peak of the election period. Similarly, such goods could also be distributed by imposition of forceful deduction from local government allocation by the state governments. For example, some states governments in Nigeria procure goods such as tractors, fertilizer and generating plants and impose it on local government areas without recourse to their needs and demands. In this regard, local government councils are subjected to indiscriminate deductions from their monthly federal allocation. This unprofessional conduct of the state governments does not only affects the financial capacity of local government areas but also expose the weakness of Nigeria's fiscal federalism. In view of the foregoing, it could be argued that political clientelism is a strategy developed to create a network of dominance and accumulation of state resources by the politicians for political gains. But how this network is created and maintained vary from one country to another with severe implications on national development.

3. Sources of data and the study area

This study is a qualitative piece and it employed varieties of qualitative instruments such as structured interview and focus group discussions for the collection of data. The study employed purposive sampling method and selected respondents from among the staff of the Ministry of Lands and Housing to elicit information on housing policies in the selected states. On the other, focus group discussion was organized to generate information from the beneficiaries of the public housing programs in the selected states. About 6000 housing units comprising of one, two and three bed rooms were constructed and distributed in the selected states. Approximately two thousand housing units of various types were constructed in each state from 2000-2013. In this regard, 12 respondents were selected for the focus group from each of the selected state under study.

Similarly, the study employed documentary evidence to examine the nature and basis of public housing programs in the selected states. Some of the documents utilized include relevant literature on distributive politics, public housing policies and budget documents of the selected states. Essentially, the documents were reviewed to examine general and specific contexts relating to government housing programs. This would no doubt enrich the quality of the study particularly as it relates to providing useful recommendations to aid distribution of government housing units in the selected states and Nigeria in general.

The study area comprises up Sokoto, Kebbi and Zamfara states. The states were carved out from the old sokoto state created in 1976, 1991 and 1996 respectively and are all located in the north-western part of Nigeria (NPC, 2006). Currently, the selected states have a combined population of over 10 million people largely living in rural areas characterized by inadequate infrastructure such as inadequate housing and other basic social services (N.P.C, 2006; N.B.S, 2009; C.B.N, 2012). The choice of the states

was due to similarities they have in terms of their approach in housing programs and general levels of development.

4. Pattern of public housing distribution in the selected states

Public housing provision is not a new phenomenon in Africa. This is due to the fact that since the colonial period public housing provision has been a major strategy for providing housing accommodation to expatriate colonial staff and later extended to indigenous citizens working in the colonial civil service (Abdullahi, 2014). It is instructive to note that the colonial housing programs were designed to lure the beneficiaries to work for the colonial government. In view of its enormous significance to consolidation of post-colonial government, the Nigerian government placed housing provision under concurrent powers in which both the national and state governments are empowered to provide housing to citizens (National Development Plans, 1968, 1974, 1980; Nigerian Constitution, 1999). Against this background, various state governments came up with different housing schemes to provide affordable housing to citizens. Evidence abound shows that thousands of housing units were developed and distributed to people across Nigeria. In the selected states, housing units were developed through different initiatives, which include owner-occupier, outright purchase, sight and service schemes (Interview, 2012). It was revealed that over 6000 units were constructed and allocated to people from 2000 to 2013 in the selected states (Interview, 2012). This represents a mere less than 10% of the households in need of housing in the states. It is important to note that demand for housing among residents in the selected states is almost a difficult task due to poor economic condition of the majority of the people, the scant attention given to housing sector by the state as well as the inability of the informal sector to provide housing to people.

Given the dire need of housing among households in the selected states, different targeting strategies were employed in the distribution of housing

units to people. Though, the government of the selected states have been prioritizing the poor households in their public housing policy statements, however, empirical evidence shows that civil servants, business men and politicians were the major beneficiaries of public housing programs (Sokoto state ministry of Lands & Housing, 2012; Kebbi state ministry of Lands & Housing, 2010; Zamfara states ministry of Lands and Housing, 2011). Recent housing programs in the selected states revealed that over 50% of public housing beneficiaries were the civil servants, 30% were members of political parties and the remaining 20% were selected from the business groups (see records of housing allocations from ministries of Housing of Sokoto, Kebbi and Zamfara states, 2012). These groups of people were identified based on their employment status; membership or affiliation to the party in power (Interview, 2012). Consequently, the beneficiaries according to a respondent were selected through the office of the secretary to the state governments, head of service, party offices and marketers associations (Interview, 2012). While the office of the secretary to the state government and head of civil service selected beneficiaries from the civil service, local party offices and marketers associations linked to the ruling political party selected beneficiaries among politicians and business men respectively. In addition, a respondent revealed that the ruling political parties regularly requested its leadership at the constituency levels to identify supporters among people to benefit from distribution of public goods (Interview, 2013). Some of the requirements for selection of beneficiaries include their roles in mobilization of funds for the ruling party, support during political campaigns and elections among others.

In view of the foregoing, it could be argued that support to ruling political party remains the yardstick for access to public goods. This supports is usually in terms of financial and logistics supports provided by members to the party over time. Thus, civil servants, politicians and business associations' continuously provide financial and non-financial assistance to political party to qualify for public goods. This is not only related to public housing provision but also include other forms of public

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goods such as employment, deployment to lucrative jobs, enrolment into vocational and skills acquisition programs, access to subsidized education and fertilizer among others. This argument was affirmed by some respondents that their names were submitted through local party offices for allocation of housing units. They further argued that some of them have to lobby politicians to be included in the housing distribution (FGD, 2012). Lobby for public goods by the electorates creates informal networks and loyalty to politicians and their parties. Thus, regardless of the party, electorates support politicians that could provide them access to public goods. Consequently, informal networks are increasingly becoming alternative strategies to formal bureaucratic structure in the delivery of public goods to citizens. In their separate studies van de walle (2007) and Weitz-Shapiro (2012) maintained that politicians adopt different strategies and means to buy support which in the long run influence voter choice during election. In adopting informal strategy, politicians employ any available means at their disposal to create clientelistic network in order to control citizens' voting behavior. This clientelistic network is maintained in different ways depending on the types of voters involved. For instance, politicians and business men were awarded lucrative contracts by their party members in government in exchange for their financial supports. On the other hand, civil servants were rewarded with lucrative postings in anticipation of their roles in electoral process. This patronage appointments and postings provided civil servants access to public funds to finance local party activities in their constituencies. Evidently, civil servants' access to public resources had over the years increase the prevalence of political corruption and affected government effort towards equitable provision of public goods. Reported cases of abandoned development projects due to financial constraints resulting from the activities of corrupt civil servants were eminent across the selected states. These groups of civil servants are anointed godsons and daughters of politicians absorbed into civil service without regards to merit and competency. The resultant effects of patronage appointment and postings includes excessive politicization of public service and recruitment as well as retention of incompetent

employees interested in mass embezzlement of public resources for political gains. Regardless of their incompetency, politicians often choose to work with civil servants who promote their political interests. This was aptly echoed by Holmgren that:

As long as politicians believe that bureaucrats will act in their interest, they delegate generously and leave the details to be filled in at the agency's discretion. If, however, they find reason to believe that delegated powers may be used against them, they write detailed instructions, screen and select for loyal personnel, monitor agency activities, mandate regular reporting requirements, enfranchise affected constituencies, embed veto-points in administrative procedures, and direct appropriations. In this way, the staff, structure, and process of the bureaucracy emerges, not as a set of impartial administrative institutions, but as a vehicle for advancing and protecting the partisan interests of the political coalitions responsible for its enactment (Holmgren, 2015).

Added to the foregoing scenario was the expected role of the civil servants in the electoral process. Empirical evidence revealed that politicians have come to recognize the indispensability of the civil servants in the electoral process. For instance, the appointments of the national chairman and senior directors of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Nigeria had been from the civil service. Apart from been government appointees, they were also responsible for administration and management of national elections in the country. In this regard, civil servants play important role in shaping and influencing the conduct of election and where opportunity offers politicians connive with them to influence the electoral process. This form of collaboration creates clientelistic network which has become a common trait in African politics. For example, in Mubarak's Egypt civil servants were provided with various forms of social welfare packages such as soft loans, vehicles and access to internet facilities in anticipation of their supports during elections. They were also used to punish communities perceived to be

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opposition stronghold. Civil servants responsible for provision of municipal services such as water and sewage were instructed to deliberately neglect communities such as Giza district that provides highest votes to Muslim brotherhood in the various national elections (Blaydes, 2011). Based on the foregoing, it could be argued that politicians adopt clientelistic form of public housing distribution to build coalitions and supports from different social groups based on their perceived role in election. The experience of the selected states indicated that a political leader is less risk averse to loss political control if he prioritizes politicians, business men and civil servants in public goods distribution. Similarly, it was also observed that public housing provision was used in the selected states as a means of fighting opposition, a campaign tool as well as a way of improving electoral fortunes of the politicians. This finding concurred with the argument of Golden and Min (2013) that politicians distribute goods to their loyal supporters to reward them for voting during elections. In fact, a lot of benefits accrue to electorates that support politicians to win elections. Perhaps, this explains why citizens are increasingly forming associations in support of politicians in anticipation of distributive benefits across the selected states. In view of the foregoing, it could be argued that the targeting strategy for distribution of public housing was deliberately designed to exclude majority of unemployed citizens in having access to public goods. This however, is not meant to punish the citizens as voters rather a means of buying support from citizens to win elections.

To further exclude the majority of the citizens from access to affordable housing, repayment arrangement was designed in favour of selected beneficiaries. It is important to note that public housing is a paid good provided by the state at subsidized rate. The idea of repayment is to provide a revolving fund scheme that could be used for development of public housing programs. Empirical evidence revealed that there were two modes of mortgage repayments in the selected states including monthly deductions from workers salary and out-right payments. Benefitting civil servants paid through deductions from their monthly salaries for a period

of 10 to 15 years, whereas politicians and business men payment was in form of out-right purchase. This implies that informal sector employees and un-employed households who constituted 35% of the population and are in dire need of houses in the selected states were completely ignored (FGD, 2013). More so, the repayment arrangements transformed the selected states into a one party state because distribution of public goods is often tied to citizens' support to electoral victories of politicians. Thus, citizens due to their poverty level always would want to support ruling political party. It is interesting to note that repayment of public housing was also selective as some families, friends and supporters of politicians with unshakable loyalty were allocated public houses free of charge. This further exposed sharp irregularities that characterized housing programs with serious implication on the state revenue and development.

5. Conclusion

This paper examines the pattern of housing distribution in Sokoto, Kebbi and Zamfara states of Nigeria. The study revealed that unlike other African countries such as Kenya, Malawi, and Zambia where ethnic or religious favors influences who gets public goods, support to political parties in the electoral process is a major determining factor for access to public goods in the selected states. This is evident in the way public officials target supporters that provide financial and logistics supports to ruling political parties. This discredit to some extent the utility of core and swing voter theories and models in explaining the pattern of goods distribution in some African countries. In this regard, there is the need for further studies of African countries in order to develop new distributive frameworks that take into cognizance the peculiarities of some African political settings. As the study shows, targeting beneficiaries of public goods based on class, income status or political considerations would deny majority access to public goods. In this regard, it is recommended that basic-need approach be adopted in the distribution of public housing and other public goods in the selected states. This however requires

comprehensive review of public housing policies, expanding targeting strategies to include the poor majority, create and make available non-interest fund by the state, conduct housing census to establish number of household in need as well as involvement of community-based associations in the determination of beneficiaries of public goods.

Increase budgetary allocation to housing sector is crucial in improving and expanding access to public housing. It is evident that many housing projects in the selected states could not be executed due to meager amount of funds allocated to the sector as revealed in the budget documents of the selected states. This was further compounded by irregular release of fund and culture of impunity that characterized public financial management in the selected states. Thus, proper system of accountability in the management of public fund needs to be instituted to ensure judicious utilization of state resources.

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