

Who do politicians target in the distribution of public goods? Evidence from public housing provision in selected states in Nigeria

ABUBAKAR ABDULLAHI

USMANU DANFODIYO UNIVERSITY, SOKOTO

ABUABDU484@GMAIL.COM

Abstract

This paper examines the pattern of public housing distribution in Nigeria. Using qualitative data from Sokoto, Kebbi and Zamfara state housing programmes from 2000-2013, the study revealed that over 6 000 housing units were constructed and distributed in the selected states under various public housing programmes 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 programmes. Similarly, the paper also found that these groups of beneficiaries were selected based on their perceived roles and contributions in voter mobilisation, electioneering campaigns as well as influencing electoral outcome. Thus, the paper concludes that the targeting strategies adopted in public housing distribution have neglected the 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 a 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

Introduction

This paper concerns itself with the question of who 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 a direct link to citizens' affinity for 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 favouritism influences public goods distribution (Kramon and Posner, 2013, Hoffman and Long, 2013). While this pattern of distribution was a subject of debate in the literature, other forms of clientelistic distribution 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 programmes, the paper specifically identifies 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. The third section examines the targeting strategies adopted in the distribution of public housing in the selected state and their implications in adequate housing provision, while the last section concludes the paper.

Explaining the pattern of distributive politics in Nigeria

It is an undeniable fact that the concept of distributive politics has 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 mobilisation 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 the 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 the high level of impunity that characterised 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 benefit from the politicians in return for electoral support.

The second dimension to political clientelism is what I describe as elitist favouritism, 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 public sector organisations were used to distribute public goods in the 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 foodstuffs, location and rehabilitation of infrastructures, etc. in constituencies perceived to be the 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 candidates' posters on streets as well as attending party campaigns/rallies benefit from cash rewards and skill acquisition programmes in order to continue to perform such functions. The second group of beneficiaries are the civil servants who were appointed into public office 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 the political party in power in their constituencies during elections. They

continue to enjoy lucrative postings as gateways to state resources for the benefit of the political party. This patronage network of goods distribution and its sustenance create what Hicken (2011) describes 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 a large concentration of poor voters, the common strategy in Nigeria is the use of needs/demands strategy to distribute household items such as fertilisation, foodstuffs, 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 state governments in Nigeria procure goods such as tractors, fertiliser 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 affect 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 varies from one country to another, with severe implications to national development.

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 organised to generate information from the beneficiaries of the public housing programmes in the selected states. About 6 000 housing units, comprising one, two and three bedrooms, were constructed and distributed in the selected states. Approximately 2 000 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 states under study.

Similarly, the study employed documentary evidence to examine the nature and basis of public housing programmes in the selected states. Some of the documents utilised 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 programmes. 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 Sokoto, Kebbi and Zamfara states, which 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 characterised by inadequate infrastructure such as housing and other basic social services (NPC, 2006; NBS, 2009; CBN, 2012). The choice of the states was due to similarities in terms of their approach in housing programmes and general levels of development.

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, which later extended to indigenous citizens working in the colonial civil service (Abdullahi, 2014). It is instructive to note that the colonial housing programmes 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. Abundant evidence 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 6 000 units were constructed and allocated to people from 2000 to 2013 in the selected states (interview, 2012). This represents less than 10% of households in need of housing in the states. It is important to note that demand for housing among residents in the selected states is a difficult task due to the poor economic status of the majority of the people, the scant attention given to the 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. Although the governments of the selected states have been prioritising the poor households in their

public housing policy statements, empirical evidence shows that civil servants, businessmen and politicians were the major beneficiaries of public housing programmes (Sokoto State Ministry of Lands & Housing, 2012; Kebbi State Ministry of Lands & Housing, 2010; Zamfara State Ministry of Lands and Housing, 2011). Recent housing programmes 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 marketer 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 marketer associations linked to the ruling political party selected beneficiaries among politicians and businessmen 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 mobilisation of funds for the ruling party and support during political campaigns and elections, among others.

In view of the aforementioned, it could be argued that support to a ruling political party remains the yardstick for access to public goods. This support is usually in terms of financial and logistics support provided by members to the party over time. Thus, civil servants, politicians and business associations continuously provide financial and non-financial assistance to a political party to qualify for public goods. This is not only related to public housing provision but also includes other forms of public goods such as employment, deployment to lucrative jobs, enrolment into vocational and skills acquisition programmes, access to subsidised education and fertiliser, 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, influences voter choice during election. In adopting informal strategy,

politicians employ any available means at their disposal to create clientelistic networks in order to control citizens' voting behaviour. This clientelistic network is maintained in different ways depending on the types of voters involved. For instance, politicians and businessmen were awarded lucrative contracts by their party members in government in exchange for their financial support. On the other hand, civil servants were rewarded with lucrative postings in anticipation of their roles in the electoral process. This patronage of 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, increased the prevalence of political corruption and affected government efforts, 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 godsons and daughters of politicians absorbed into civil service without regard for merit and competency. The resultant effects of patronage appointments and postings include excessive politicisation of public service and recruitment as well as retention of incompetent employees interested in mass embezzlement of public resources for political gain. 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 above scenario was the expected role of the civil servants in the electoral process. Empirical evidence revealed that politicians have come to recognise the indispensability of 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 being government appointees, they were also responsible for administration and management of national elections in the country. In this regard, civil servants play an important role in shaping and influencing the conduct of elections and where opportunities arise, politicians connive with them to influence the electoral process. This form of collaboration creates a 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 support during elections. They were also used to punish communities perceived to be opposition strongholds. Civil servants responsible for the provision of municipal services such as water and sewage were instructed to deliberately neglect communities such as the Giza district that provides the highest votes to the Muslim brotherhood in the various national elections (Blaydes, 2011). Based on the aforementioned, it could be argued that politicians adopt a clientelistic form of public housing distribution to build coalitions and support from different social groups based on their perceived role in elections. The experience of the selected states indicates that a political leader is less risk averse to loss of political control if he prioritises politicians, businessmen 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 this, it could be argued that the targeting strategy for distribution of public housing was deliberately designed to exclude the majority of unemployed citizens' access to public goods. This, however, is not meant to punish the citizens as voters, rather as a means of buying support from citizens to win elections. To further exclude the majority of the citizens from access to affordable housing, a repayment arrangement was designed in favour of selected beneficiaries. It is important to note that public housing is a paid service provided by the state at a subsidised rate. The idea of repayment is to provide a revolving fund scheme that could be used for development of public housing programmes. Empirical evidence revealed that there were two modes of mortgage repayments in the selected states, including monthly deductions

from workers' salaries and outright payments. Benefitting civil servants paid through deductions from their monthly salaries for a period of 10 to 15 years, whereas politicians and businessmen's payment was in the form of outright purchase. This implies that the informal sector employees and unemployed 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 the electoral victories of politicians. Thus, citizens, due to their poverty level, always would want to support the 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 characterised housing programmes with serious implications on the state revenue and development.

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 favours influence 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 who provide financial and logistical support to ruling political parties. This discredits, 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 a need for further studies of African countries in order to develop new distributive frameworks that take into cognisance 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 the majority access to public goods. In this regard, it is recommended that the basic-need approach be adopted in the distribution of public housing and other public goods in the selected states. This, however, requires comprehensive reviewing of public housing policies, expanding of targeting strategies to include the poor majority, creating and making available non-interest funds by the state, conducting housing census to establish number of households in need as well as determining the involvement of community-based associations in the determination of beneficiaries of public goods.

Increased budgetary allocation to the 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 a meager amount of funds allocated to the sector as revealed in the budget documents of the selected states. This was further compounded by an

irregular release of funds and a culture of impunity that characterised public financial management in the selected states. Thus, a proper system of accountability in the management of public funds needs to be instituted to ensure judicious utilisation of state resources.

Acknowledgement

I wish to thank Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the American Political Science Association (APSA) for providing me with a Professional Development Grant to write and present this paper at a conference at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

References

1. Abdullahi, A. (2014). The Politics of Housing Policies in Nigeria: A Study of Public Private Partnership in Sokoto State. Unpublished PhD thesis submitted to the Department of Political Science, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto.
2. Blaydes, L. (2011). The Politics of Infrastructure Provision, in Blaydes, L. (ed.) *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt*. USA: Cambridge University Press.
3. CBN. (2012). CBN Annual Report. *CBN Bulletin*, Vol. 3(4).
4. Easton, D. (1957). An Approach to the Analysis of Political Systems. *World Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 3: pp. 393-400.
5. Golden, M. & Min, B. (2013). Distributive Politics Around the World. *The Annual Review of Political Science*. Vol. 16, pp. 73-99.
6. Hicken, A. (2011). Clientelism. *Annual Review of Political Science*. Vol. 14, pp. 289-310.
7. Hoffman, B.D. and Long, J.D. (2013). Parties, Ethnicity, and Voting in African Elections. *Comparative Politics*. Vol. (n. i), pp. 127-146.
8. Holmgren, M. (2015). *Endogenous Bureaucracy*. Working Paper Series 2015:3, the Quality of Government Institute and Department of Political Science: University of Gothenburg.
9. Kebbi State Government (2012). *State Annual Budget from 2000-2012*. State Ministry of Budget: Government Printers: Kebbi.
10. Kramon, E. & Posner, D.N. (2013). Who Benefits from Distributive Politics? How the Outcome one Studies Affects the Answer one Gets. *Perspective on Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 461-474.
11. Laswell, H.D. (1936). *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

12. Muno, W. (2010). *Conceptualising and Measuring Clientelism*. Paper presented at a workshop on Neo-patrimonialism in various World Regions. GIGA: Hamburg.
13. NBS. (2009). *Social Statistics in Nigeria*. National Bureau of Statistics: Abuja, Nigeria.
14. NBS. (2012). *Social Statistics in Nigeria*. National Bureau of Statistics: Abuja, Nigeria.
15. NPC. (2006). *National Housing and Population Census Result*. National Population Commission: Abuja, Nigeria.
16. Saliu, H.A. (2010). *Democracy, Governance and International Relations*, Ilorin: College Press and Publishers and African Centre for Peace Research, Empowerment and Documentation (ACPRED).
17. Sokoto State Government (2012). *State Annual Budget from 2000-2012*. State Ministry of Budget and Economic Planning: Sokoto State Government Printers.
18. Stokes, S. Dunning, T. Nazareno, M & Brusco, V. (2013). *Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism: The Puzzle of Distributive Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
19. Van Vliet, W. (ed.) (1990). *International Handbook of Housing Policies and Practices*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
20. Van de, W. (2007). Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss? The Evolution of Political Clientelism in Africa. In Kitschelt, H. and Wilkinson, S.I. (ed.). *Patrons, Clients, and Policies*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
21. Wantchekon, L. (2003). Clientelism and Voting Behavior: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Benin. *World Politics*, Vol. 55(3): pp. 399-422.
22. Weitz-Shapiro, R. (2012). What Wins Votes: Why some Politicians Opt Out of Clientelism. *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 56, No. 3, pp. 568-583.
23. Zamfara State Government (2012). *State Annual Budget for 10 Years*, Zamfara State House of Assembly: Gusau.