

Peer Reviewing Niger State BY BODE AIYENIMELO

Niger State, which the Peer Review Team visited from Thursday 30th July, 2009 has an extensive land mass, and as big as it is, so the state government in close collaboration with the Local Governments have endeavoured to spread development across every nook and cranny of the state.

In the process of giving the citizens the proverbial dividends of democracy, the team discovered certain benchmarkable practices by the state government in some sectors of the economy. The first project visited on the team's entry into the state capital, Minna was a housing estate. Below are observations on different sectors of the state's economy:

HOUSING

Like in most other parts of the country, Niger State is experiencing acute shortage of modern, functional accommodation for its teeming population, and the current administration has tried to address it by providing them through PPP arrangement whereby it provides the land and the contractor/developer comes with his funding.

An example of this collaborative arrangement is the Talba Housing Estate which cost N1.8bn. The infrastructural cost is N370m. Another one is the N1.5bn.M.I. Wushishi Housing Estate of 500 units also in Minna. The state government is also erecting 250 units in Bida and another 250 units in Kontagora at a cost of N1.4bn without infrastructure. There are also arrangements for at least 50 units in each of the 25 Local Government areas of the state.

The state commissioner for Lands & Housing, Mrs Sabome Ndakotsu explained that it was a policy of the state government to provide all housing estates with all facilities – schools, clinics, restaurants etc for the convenience of the residents.

As at the time of the visit, the 500 units at M.I. Wushishi Housing Estate for civil servants had already been allocated. Access roads were provided by the state's Housing Corporation.

WATER.

Water in most parts of the state including the state capital has always been a challenge. Most of the water projects in existence at the inception of the current administration were incapable of meeting the demands of the people because they had been constructed several decades earlier and had not been upgraded to meet the needs of the rising population.

An example is the Bosso Water Treatment Plant and its dam which were contracted some 62 years ago, precisely in 1947. There was no turn-around-maintenance (TAM) for so long until around 1982 when an attempt was made to upgrade it slightly from its initial 500,000 cubic litres per day capacity. The Niger government has invested N210m on the treatment plant and dam as well as some booster stations to upgrade it to 10million cubic litres per day. Right now, it can supply 3 million cubic litres per day. There is another N1.7bn dam around Chanchanga to enhance supply. Scores of boreholes are being sunk across the state while 10 new water tankers have been purchased to supplement water supply.

Currently, coverage of water supply in Niger is about 50% but hopefully, it will attain 80% before the end of this administration. Towards this end, a N103m standby gen set has been purchased to help out. Two boreholes are also being planned for each senatorial district while under the MDG project, some 66 boreholes are being planned to be distributed around Minna, especially the schools. But there is no water testing laboratory near the water treatment plants which has health implications.

AGRICULTURE

Like most states in the North Central, Niger is an agrarian state with wide expanse of fertile land that is begging for cultivation to meet not only the state's food needs, but also the country's.

To increase food production, the government has taken a number of measures. These include the provision of fertilizer for the farmers. A fertilizer distribution programme is already in place to avoid the diversion of this all-important agricultural input. For example, 23,000 metric tonnes of the vital input have been purchased for distribution in the year 2009.

Some 200 brand new tractors at a cost of N1.035bn have been purchased for distribution to farmers. Some are for hiring at the rate of N8,000 per day in accordance with the Talba Agricultural Regeneration Programme. There is also an animal traction programme which is aimed at helping poor farmers who can't afford caterpillars. Rice production has received a boost and Niger claims to be the highest producer in the country because it is grown there in 3 cycles in a year.

Also, the government is partnering with the private sector by bringing some 12 South Africans recently towards large-scale cultivation of maize and rice in two cycles, both rain-fed and irrigation. A replication of the Zimbabwean exploits in Kwara.

Above all, the government has initiated a Bumper Stock Programme whereby grains are bought from farmers when there is always glut and they are sold off when prices begin to rise steeply.

There is also the Badeggi Rice Mill which is an old mill which over time went into disuse. An Indian company has been contracted to rehabilitate it but there's complaint of lack of spares, which the firm is beginning to get around. The firm's engineers speak of investment of one to two billion naira so far. But as for the state, there is no cash involvement. It's another one of those PPP arrangements. The Indians said they had already conducted a test-run and were poised to take off within 45 to 60 days of the Peer Review Team's visit.

EDUCATION

One of the progressive measures introduced by the current government in Niger State is the introduction of free education from primary to secondary levels. As a sweetener, the government pays the WAEC examination fees of candidates in the state. There are also scholarships and bursaries for students in tertiary institutions.

But visits to some schools in the state by the team shows that their facilities are inadequate. For example in Maitumbi Primary School, Minna no sickbay; even the borehole had just been sunk by Her Excellency, wife of the governor; same with the state polytechnic in Zungeru where hostel accommodation was inadequate with not enough beds for the students to sleep on. In addition, some of the institution's courses have not been accredited.

Although some relief measures like the purchase of 10 buses to take students and civil servants to work in the morning for a token fee of N20 before embarking on commercial activities have been put in place; for a state with such grandiose plans of becoming one of the leading states in the federation in no distant future, more needs to be done to tackle the outstanding problems in the education sector.

ROADS

Because of the wide expanse of Niger state's land mass, it also has long stretches of roads. Most of the federal roads are pot-hole filled.

In accordance with the philosophy of the government to enhance mobility in the state, the government has embarked on the construction of roads across the state. So far, some 134 kilometres have been constructed at a total cost of N9.5bn. There is also joint collaboration between the state and local

governments for the construction of 5 kilometres per Local Government in each of the state's 25 Local governments.

HEALTH & MDGs

The state's healthcare systems was in a state of disrepair before the current administration came on board. The government resolved immediately to ensure accessibility and affordability of health services to all the residents of the state by two approaches. First, to improve accessibility, the state government constructed 100 new Primary Health Centres (PHCs) across the 25 LGAs of the state, that is, 4 per LGA. Second, 100 PHCs in the 25 LGAs were also renovated and upgraded to comprehensive health centre status. They were all equipped and funded through the Millennium Development Goals Conditional Grants Scheme.

The MDG Fund committed N300m to equipment and drugs for the health institutions, renovation consumed N150m and construction gulped N275m. Both the Federal Government and Niger State contributed counterpart funds of N504m each towards the programme. All these have helped reduce the maternal mortality rate drastically.

Best practices are (1) There is a community monitoring committee in place to monitor it and prevent pilfering. It is headed by the village heads.

- 2) Local contractors used to fabricate some of the materials in use in the PHCs, including auto-disabled syringes
- 3) Use of tricycle rural ambulances for easier and cheaper transportation in referral cases since the motorized ambulances are too costly.
- 4) Collaboration with Federal University of Technology, Minna to establish a degree awarding Nursing Department for the capacity improvement of Nurses and Midwives in the state.

COLLABORATION BETWEEN STATE, LGS.

One of the most interesting aspects of governance in Niger State is the close collaboration between the state and its Local Governments which is enhancing the overall development of the state. Above all, Niger unlike some other states, does not withhold funds due to the LGs, which consequently are able to embark on some capital-intensive and revenue-generating ventures.

For examples, Wushishi LG is able to put up Beji International Modern Market for an unspecified sum and Zungeru Fertilizer Blending Plant at a cost of

N45m, while Bida LG has put up Etsu Nupe Central Market with 80 shops and other facilities at a cost of N179millions.

Another area of collaboration between the two tiers of government is in the establishment of micro-finance banks to empower rural dwellers and small investors. The one visited by the Peer Review Team on Thursday 30/7/2009 is the Aja-Yejebwo Micro Finance Bank Ltd (Let's love one another) on Kilometre 8 along Minna – Zungeru Road.

They are all LG initiatives with collaborative work from the state government. One is earmarked for each of the 25 local governments in the state and so far, as at the time of the team's visit, eight (8) of them had obtained anticipatory approval from the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) and were only waiting for equipment which were centrally purchased for their office buildings from the Micro Finance Agency of the state.

These banks, if properly run, are bound to enhance grassroots development in the state.

COLLABORATION BETWEEN NIGER, FG

There is no doubt that Niger State's policy to support every federal project located in the state is a healthy one, even if not altogether altruistic, since the state government believes it is for the benefit of the state. The state has also rehabilitated the terminal building and the control tower while it has also rehabilitated the terminal building and the control tower while there is plan to extend the collaboration to FG roads. The idea is for Minna Airport to serve as alternative to Abuja Airport.

TOURIST ATTRACTIONS

The Niger State Governor, Dr. Mu'azu Babangida Aliyu, has always stressed that the state is swarming with tourist attractions waiting to be tapped. One of them is the Zuma Rock which with the telescope mounted on it, one can view any city in Nigeria.

But another one, among several others, is based in Zungeru, the birth place of Nigeria's first post-republic ceremonial president, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe. There, the colonial cemetery where those old colonial masters were buried is located. For several years, the place was restricted to the burial of whites only but around the 1920s, the indigenes (blacks) were able to penetrate the place for their burial. It is noteworthy that the descendants of some of those colonial masters have been travelling down there on pilgrimages to the tomb of their forebears.

Although the Zungeru birth place of Nnamdi Azikiwe is being reconstructed into a tourist centre, there is need to speed up the beautification of that place and the mounting of sensitization campaigns and publicity blitz, especially in Britain to attract tourists to the historical site.