

LEAD DEBATE ON CONSTITUENCY PROJECTS BILL, 2016

Sen. Stella Oduah (*Anambra North*)

Mr. President, Distinguished colleagues, permit me to lead the debate of this important Bill which seeks to grant legal backing to the provision of Constituency Projects in the Annual Budget of the Federation by a minimum of 20%.

The Bill was read for the First time on the floor of the Senate on Tuesday, 15th November, 2016.

Mr. President, Distinguished colleagues, one of the unique features of our democratic journey so far is the concept of 'Constituency Projects'. Available statistics show that seventy (70%) per cent of Nigerians live in the rural areas and the intention of the bill is to ensure that good governance is delivered to these crucial areas. The bill is also intended to correct the top-bottom approach of governance and replace it with the bottom - top approach.

Mr. President, Distinguished colleagues, constituency project in recent time is one of the ways to attract federal presence to our people. If not for these projects, majority of federal constituencies would not have a single federal project due to lopsided nature of project allocation in the budget. The constituency project is not peculiar to Nigeria alone. There are similar mechanisms in other developing Countries. For instance the constituency development fund has been institutionalized in Kenya, Uganda, India and Tanzania. Instead of vilifying the National Assembly on the constituency project, people should advocate for an institutional framework for the implementation of the constituency projects as it is the case in Kenya. This Bill therefore is an attempt at providing both institutional and legislative framework for the operation of constituency projects in Nigeria thereby making it part of our National Budget.

While it is true that Local Government council has the responsibility of the development of local communities, the Federal Government has the overall responsibility of providing federal presence in these areas through developmental projects and there is no way this can be achieved without the input of the parliamentarians who are the representatives of the people at the federal level.

Mr. President, my respected colleagues, by so doing the parliamentarian who knows the needs of the people will articulate them in the form of projects for injection into the Budget in the form of constituency projects.

The most interesting thing about this Constituency Projects Bill includes:-

1. Projects under this Act when passed shall be community based in order to ensure that the prospective benefits are available to a widespread cross-section of the inhabitants of a particular area.
2. Any funding under this Act shall be for a complete project or a defined phase of a project and may include the acquisition of land and buildings.
3. All projects shall be projects as defined under this Act when passed and may include costs related to feasibility studies, planning and design or other technical input for the project but shall not include recurrent costs of a facility.
4. Projects may include the acquisition of vehicles, machinery and other equipment for the constituency.

Most legislators around the world angle for such projects such that they can appeal to the voters in their constituents since they seek votes just as the executive does. In most democracies, it is a process used to obtain funding from a central government to finance projects benefiting the legislators' local constituents. It is also known as earmarking, pork barrel in the USA.

The Constituency Projects shall constitute 20% of the Annual Budget by ensuring that certain portion of the nation's annual budget be set aside for rural development.

Mr. President, my highly respected colleagues, the Greek Philosopher Aristotle averred that the state exist for the greater good of humanity. Democracy on the other hand gives people the opportunity to determine how they are governed. Naturally, the electorate looks up to government for democracy dividends. The National Assembly in response to the yearning of their constituents for development and federal presence demanded and got the "Constituency Projects", we must therefore seek for ways at institutionalizing it and that is what this Bill seeks to provide.

Mr. President, Distinguished colleagues, since the inception of constituency project in Nigeria there have been misconceptions, misinterpretations and judgment of the constituency project administration. This and indeed some other factors have painted the hallowed chambers of National Assembly in bad light.

It is instructive to note by way of educating the general public that members of the National Assembly merely identify the needs of the constituents and recommend same to the Executive during budgeting. Ultimately, they have no direct control over their implementation; hence the award, financing and supervision of constituency projects are the preserves of appropriate agencies other than the National Assembly.

This Bill is therefore an attempt to give the constituency project a legislative frame work to quench ones and for all the controversies surrounding the issue.

I therefore urge my distinguished colleagues to support the passage of this Bill to make for the acceleration of development in our various constituents.

Thank you.

