

Public Administration and the Challenges of National Development in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

Contemporary Nigeria is plagued with the problems of widespread poverty, large-scale unemployment, technological backwardness, low capacity utilization, inadequate and decayed social and physical infrastructure, high incidence of diseases, high crime rate, among others. These disturbing socio-economic indicators in Nigeria are among the worst in the world. Ironically, these unpleasant indicators exist side-by-side the country's great national wealth and potentials, with an enviable stock of human resources who possess knowledge, expertise and skills especially in the public service. Unfortunately, it appears these knowledgeable public servants are unable to serve as catalysts in the development of the nation. This situation makes the Nigerian case paradoxical. The objective of this study therefore is to identify the challenges preventing Nigerian public administration from playing its catalyzing role in the development of the country as well as to proffer possible solutions. One of the findings is that bribery and corruption are a bane of Nigerian public administration. In fact, they constitute a serious impediment to national development. The paper recommends, inter alia, the empowering of the anti-corruption institutions and introduction of information and communication technology in public governance. The paper submits that the label of poor performance and absence of excellence in the public service has the tendency to undermine development and good governance in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Public Administration, Development, Good Governance, Nigeria and Challenges*

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Background to the Study

Despite the disturbing socio-economic indicators facing Africa today, there is an increasingly broadly-held conviction that efforts toward modernizing African States cannot succeed unless they are equipped with public administrations that are geared toward meeting the new challenges of economic and social development. In that regard, public administrations in many countries in Africa such as Nigeria are today faced with the question of determining what their contribution should be toward resolving social problems in areas such as employment, health, power supply, education, housing and leisure. However, in Nigeria, public administration has had a chequered history resulting into scandals including fraud, abuse of power, governance failure and evasion of accountability among others. The objective of this study therefore is to identify the challenges preventing Nigerian public administration from playing its catalyzing role in the development of the country as well as to proffer possible solutions. One of the findings is that bribery and corruption are a bane of Nigerian public administration. In fact, they constitute a serious impediment to national development. The paper recommends, inter alia, the empowering of the anti-corruption institutions and introduction of information and communication technology in public *governance*. The paper submits that the label of poor performance and absence of excellence in the public service has the tendency to undermine development and good governance in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification

(a) Public Administration: Public administration has no generally accepted definition. This is because the scope of the subject is so great and so debatable that it is easier to explain than define. Public administration is therefore a field of study, that is, a discipline and an occupation. Public administration, by extension has been defined as the putting together of human and material resources in order to achieve the objectives of public policy (Eme and Ede, 2007). Administrative activities can take place in a variety of settings, provided the crucial elements are present such as the cooperation of human beings to perform tasks that have been mutually accepted as worthy of the joint effort (Eme and Ede, 2007). The institutional framework in which administration occurs may be as diverse as business firms, labour unions, churches, educational institutions or governmental units. Public administration is that sector of administration found in a political setting, concerned primarily with the implementation of public policy. According to P. Evans (1995), public administration consists of all operations which have as its purpose the fulfillment or enforcement of public policy. This explains why Mark Grindle (2004) asserts that public administration is the activities that involve the executive branch of government. On their part, Hyden, Court and Mease see public administration as the area of study and practice where law and policy is recommended and carried out (2005). Therefore, public administration refers to both the activities concerned with the management of government business as well as the study of those activities.

(b) National Development: Just like public administration the concept of development and indeed national development has been quite nebulous mainly because of the varied views and perspective from which it is looked upon. Umezurike (2005) argues that it connotes the transformations of the nature and living condition of man as a consequence of his earlier confrontation of the constraints posed by his environment (political, economic, socio-cultural

etc). Conceptualized thus, development is made to transcend the mere acquisition of the artifacts of development (Nnoli, 1981). Development is therefore primarily man-centered. Its encapsulation in national development has been its specific realization in human history.

However, we choose to view it, national development comprises the holistic array of policies, programmes, and actions detailed in confrontation of national challenges, with the intention of improving the internal workings of government, the private sector and the entire citizenry. The relationship between public administration and national development in Nigeria over the years therefore requires an examination. National development is perhaps the bedrock of the agitation for self rule and many years after independence there seem to be an ever increasing agitation for national development. The futile wait for nation transformation and the release of the “all other things” that the political kingdom (independence) was expected to bring may hold a vital answer to why groups like the Niger-Delta militants and more recently Boko-Haram have made the polity quite turbulent. Nigeria therefore is left no other alternative than to walk toward accelerated national development but then, it is doubtful if this is possible in the absence of a viable public administration.

Public Administration and National Development: The Nexus

There is perhaps no greater issue of concern to nations of the world, especially in the third world than national transformation and development. A great deal of resources is deployed in pursuit of this goal, via a multiplicity of projects, programmes and policies. While the success of these endeavours are subjects of great debate, what stands sure is that it is a critical concern of governments across continents and geo-political divides. The reason (s) for these concerns may be many though; while some are borne out of the desire to live up to the demands and expectation of its citizenry, other are pursued in a bid to buy legitimacy, having been brought to leadership in election/political processes that do not reflect the wishes and aspirations of the people. Whatever the reasons are, what remains sure is the fact that national development is the principal pursuit as well as the public identity of contemporary public governance (Ajayi, 2008). Hence, it is accorded its rightful place. Whatever makes national development a priority, naturally underscores the need for an efficient and effective public administration. It is doubtful, judging by either historical antecedents or contemporary realities whether it is possible to achieve meaningful national development without public administration playing a catalyzing role, and the reason is not farfetched; public administration is that unit of political governance that implements the policies programmes and plans of government. As such, leaving public administration out of the process of national development is like attempting to send a message in the absence of the messenger. Interestingly however, the problem with Nigeria is not the absence of the messenger (Public Administration) but that it is overwhelmed by a cascade of impediments that seem to incapacitate it and thereby suffocating the process of national development.

Challenges of Nigerian Public Administration

A number of problems have been hindering Nigerian public administration over the years from playing its role as an instrument of national development. Such challenges include the following factors

Bribery and Corruption

Corruption is perhaps the greatest bane of the Nigerian public service. It is so endemic that it runs through from the recruitment process down to retirement. The public sector no doubt is responsible for about 80% of the vices that gives Nigeria her very high world corruption ranking. The Nigerian public service is so grievously plagued by bribery and corruption that the country now ranks very high on corruption ranking (Transparency International, 2019). This problem ranges from public servants accepting bribes, grafts and gratifications for carrying out their lawful duties to inflation of contract awards so as to collect kick-backs from contractors in return. It also ranges from embezzlement and misappropriation of public funds to direct looting of the treasury (Achimugu, et al, 2013; Igbuzor, 2015; Arthur, 2016).

Ineffective Leadership

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership (Achebe, 1983). What this legendary author implies is that the country does not often have effective leaders. It is the unwillingness or inability of Nigerian leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership. It is clear that one of the major challenges staring Nigeria in the face regarding national development is the lack of firm and purposeful leadership, that will be full of integrity, hard work and sound knowledge of what to do, where, when and how.

Crimes and Insecurity

Safety and security of lives and property are necessary for the development of a nation. However, Nigeria is currently bedeviled with the problems of crime and insecurity. The vices manifest in frequent cases of armed robbery, pen robbery, religious riots, inter-ethnic clashes, youth restiveness, political thuggery, rape of women, Boko Haram insurgency, ethnic militias, secret cult activities, herdsmen attacks, child trafficking, kidnappings and a host of others (Njoku, 2007; Adegbe et al, 2013; Ugwueze, 2014; Ani, 2017). These are serious issues of concern as they make lives and property unsafe and threaten to dampen the country's quest for national development.

Excessive Rigidity and Red-Tape

The Nigerian public service is characterized by gross inflexibility Ezeani (2005). There is a tendency to cling tenaciously to baseless routines and absolute laws and procedures. You may call it red tape. Katoko (1971) puts it in better perspective, "one of the major impediments to quick action can be traced to excessive layering". After a file has worked its way through the various departmental levels, the customary procedure requires that it begins all over again at the lowest clerical level, proceeding for notations through the various secretarial ranks up to the permanent secretary's desk. Procedural sluggishness and dilatory tactics at lower levels have created bottlenecks which only heroic action can break. Inflexibility not only stifles innovation it also leads to waste of time and delay in the implementation of public policies (Ezeani, 2005). National development requires a whole lot of innovative thinking and actions. Palma (1985) however argues that innovative behaviour requires an appreciable amount of flexibility and willingness to bend formal procedures to meet the task at hand. It is clear that Nigeria public administration falls far below this vital requirement.

The Federal Character Principle

In address of our diversities as a nation, the 1979 constitution of Nigeria and subsequent ones have continued to provide for a fair representation of all ethnic groups in the federal public service. This is referred to as the Federal Character Principle. The aim is to ensure that every sector of the polity is represented in the public service. As laudable as this may look, Olowu et al (1997) argues that its application undermines democracy and excellence in the civil service. It means that the best can be left out of the service and the worst picked. This system has continued to weaken Nigerian public administration, making the processes of national development more challenging than it could otherwise have been.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that there are many challenges obstructive of national development in Nigeria, which include bribery and corruption, inadequate education/training opportunities, rigidity and red tape, ineffective leadership, increasing rates of crimes and insecurity and national cake mentality. These are the factors that stand in the way of Nigerian public administration in its bid to play its catalyzing role in national development. Possible solutions to these problems have also been proffered, and they include the revitalization of the organizations and agencies empowering the anti-corruption institutions, efforts to be made to have effective leadership. The government should also endeavour to address the material poverty (needs) of Nigerians as a deliberate move to curb crimes and insecurity. These suggestions are capable of repositioning Nigerian public administration so as to play its role in ways that will effectively engender national development.

Recommendations

The following suggestions are capable of re-engineering this machinery of government to be able to cope with the arduous demands of national development.

- i. Empowerment involves equipping one with the ability to act or do something, control or exercise rights or authority in one's sphere of responsibility (Apeh, 2013). It is synonymous with capability or enablement. Anti-corruption institutions in Nigeria that require such empowerment include the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission(ICPC), the Public Complaints Commission (PCC), the Public Accounts Commission (PAC), to mention but a few. The existence of these institutions notwithstanding, corruption in Nigeria continues to increase, especially in the public sector. There is the need for the government to garner the necessary political will, finance and the training and re-training of staff needed to ginger the institutions into more acceptable performance.
- ii. The country needs leaders who are knowledgeable, intelligent, honest, hardworking and ready to face and tackle challenges with an apparent sense of commitment. Therefore, for national development to take place, the government should ensure that men and women of sound pedigree are appointed to the helm of affairs.

- iii. For national development to be successful in Nigeria, the government should take steps urgently to reorient Nigerians on the need to be patriotic, sincere, hardworking and committed to nation-building. These virtues can be taught as core values in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions in form of civic education. It can also be taught to Nigerians generally through a national orientation programme.
- iv. The Nigerian government should ensure that recruitment, and promotion of civil servants is based on merit system as opposed to current system of federal character. This is because the entrenchment of federal character principle of recruitment and other techniques will sacrifice efficiency and effectiveness in the Nigerian public service.
It is the suggestion of this paper that to properly engage the numerous challenges affecting public administration in Nigeria for good governance and quality service delivery, far-reaching reforms are inevitable.

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