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Public Service Delivery and Administrative Efficiency in Nigeria: Challenges, Reforms and the Pathway to Sustainable Governance

Joy Iyeumbe Ogar
Department of Public Administration,
University of Calabar, Nigeria

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Corresponding Author:
Joy Iyeumbe Ogar

Abstract

Administrative efficiency remains a critical determinant of effective public service delivery and sustainable governance in developing countries. In Nigeria, despite successive public sector reforms aimed at enhancing efficiency, transparency and accountability, the quality of public service delivery continues to attract widespread criticism. Bureaucratic bottlenecks, weak institutional capacity, political interference, corruption, inadequate digital infrastructure and poor accountability mechanisms have constrained the ability of public institutions to meet citizens' expectations. This paper qualitatively examines the nexus between administrative efficiency and public service delivery in Nigeria. Drawing on New Public Management (NPM) Theory and Governance Theory, the paper synthesises evidence from scholarly literature, government reports and policy documents to identify the major institutional factors influencing service delivery across public institutions. The findings indicate that administrative inefficiency is reflected in prolonged bureaucratic procedures, weak performance management systems, poor coordination among government agencies, inadequate staff motivation and limited citizen participation in governance processes. Recent initiatives such as digital governance, the Treasury Single Account (TSA), the Integrated Personnel and Payroll Information System (IPPIS), the Government Integrated Financial Management Information System (GIFMIS), the Open Government Partnership (OGP) and the SERVICOM initiative have improved transparency and accountability but have achieved only modest gains due to implementation gaps and institutional resistance. The paper argues that sustainable improvements in service delivery require comprehensive civil service reforms anchored on digital transformation, merit-based recruitment, performance-based management, institutional accountability, citizen-centred governance and continuous capacity development. The study contributes to the discourse on public administration by proposing an integrated framework for improving administrative efficiency in Nigeria's public sector.

Background to the Study

Public service delivery is one of the fundamental responsibilities of government and constitutes an important indicator of state legitimacy, institutional effectiveness and national development. Governments exist primarily to provide essential public goods and services, including education, healthcare, infrastructure, security, water supply, sanitation, social welfare and regulatory services. The effectiveness with which these services are delivered significantly influences citizens' quality of life, public trust in government and socio-economic development. Administrative efficiency refers to the capacity of public institutions to utilise available human, financial and technological resources effectively in achieving organisational objectives with minimum waste, delays and bureaucratic constraints. Efficient administration promotes timely decision-making, prudent resource management, improved employee productivity and responsive service delivery.

In Nigeria, however, administrative efficiency has remained a persistent governance challenge despite numerous public sector reforms implemented since independence. Successive governments have introduced initiatives such as the Udoji Commission Reforms (1974), the Dotun Philips Civil Service Reforms (1988), the SERVICOM initiative (2004), the Treasury Single Account (TSA), the Integrated Personnel and Payroll Information System (IPPIS), the Government Integrated Financial Management Information System (GIFMIS), and more recently, digital governance initiatives. These reforms were designed to improve transparency, reduce corruption, strengthen accountability and enhance service delivery. Nevertheless, public perception of government performance remains relatively low due to inefficiency, weak institutional capacity and governance deficits.

Rapid urbanisation, increasing population growth, rising citizen expectations and fiscal constraints have further intensified the demand for more responsive public administration. Consequently, improving administrative efficiency has become central to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 16, which emphasises effective, accountable and inclusive institutions. This paper therefore examines the relationship between administrative efficiency and public service delivery in Nigeria, identifies the institutional challenges limiting effective service delivery, evaluates ongoing public sector reforms and proposes policy strategies for improving governance outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

Despite decades of public sector reforms, Nigeria continues to experience persistent deficiencies in public service delivery across key sectors such as education, healthcare, infrastructure, social protection, agriculture and public utilities. Many government institutions remain characterised by bureaucratic delays, weak accountability systems, poor service orientation, corruption, inadequate coordination among agencies, low employee morale and insufficient utilisation of digital technologies. These institutional weaknesses have reduced public confidence in government and constrained national development.

Although several reform initiatives—including SERVICOM, TSA, IPPIS, GIFMIS, the Integrated Tax Administration System (ITAS) and broader e-government programmes—have sought to improve administrative efficiency, evidence suggests that implementation challenges, political interference, weak monitoring mechanisms and resistance to organisational change continue to undermine their effectiveness. Furthermore, much of the existing scholarship has focused on evaluating specific reforms or individual agencies, with comparatively less attention given to a holistic examination of how administrative efficiency shapes public service delivery across the Nigerian public sector. This paper addresses this gap through a qualitative synthesis of policy documents and scholarly evidence.

Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to:

1. examine the relationship between administrative efficiency and public service delivery in Nigeria;
2. identify institutional factors affecting administrative efficiency within the Nigerian public service;
3. assess the contributions of public sector reforms to service delivery improvement; and
4. propose policy strategies for enhancing administrative efficiency and sustainable governance.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative documentary research design. Data are drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, government policy documents, reports of oversight institutions, publications from international development organisations (such as the World Bank, UNDP and OECD), and official reform documents relating to Nigeria's public sector. The materials are analysed using thematic content analysis, enabling the identification of recurring themes, patterns and policy implications regarding administrative efficiency and service delivery.

Literature Review

The literature review is organised thematically in line with the objectives of the study. It examines the conceptual and empirical discourse on public service delivery, administrative efficiency, institutional factors influencing service delivery, public sector reforms in Nigeria, and policy strategies for improving administrative efficiency.

Public Service Delivery and Administrative Efficiency

Public service delivery refers to the process through which governments provide essential goods and services that meet the socio-economic needs of citizens. These services include education, healthcare, water supply, electricity, transportation, security, environmental protection, social welfare and administrative services. Effective public service delivery is regarded as a fundamental responsibility of government and a key indicator of governance quality (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). The quality of public service delivery is often assessed in terms of accessibility, responsiveness, efficiency, effectiveness, equity and citizen satisfaction. Administrative efficiency, on the other hand, concerns the ability of public institutions to utilise available human, financial and material resources optimally in achieving organisational goals with minimal waste, delays and unnecessary bureaucratic procedures. According to Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017), administrative efficiency reflects the capacity of public organisations to deliver quality services through effective management systems, competent personnel, appropriate technologies and sound institutional arrangements. An administratively efficient organisation is characterised by timely decision-making, prudent resource utilisation, accountability and continuous service improvement.

The relationship between administrative efficiency and public service delivery has been extensively discussed in public administration literature. Scholars argue that administrative efficiency directly influences service quality because efficient institutions are better positioned to respond to citizens' needs promptly and transparently (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). Conversely, weak administrative systems often result in service delays, increased transaction costs, corruption, poor coordination and diminished public trust. Within the Nigerian context, public service delivery has been constrained by structural and institutional challenges despite significant investments in public administration reforms. The World Bank (2024) notes that inefficiencies in public institutions continue to affect the implementation of government programmes across critical sectors such as education, healthcare, agriculture and infrastructure. Consequently, improving administrative efficiency remains central to strengthening governance and achieving sustainable national development.

Institutional Factors Influencing Administrative Efficiency in Nigeria

Administrative efficiency within public institutions is shaped by several organisational and institutional variables. Among the most significant are leadership quality, human resource management, organisational culture, accountability mechanisms, bureaucratic procedures, technological capacity, financial management and political influence. Leadership has consistently been identified as a critical determinant of organisational performance. Effective leaders establish strategic direction, motivate employees, enforce accountability and promote innovation within public institutions (Northouse, 2022). In contrast, weak leadership contributes to poor decision-making, low employee morale and ineffective service delivery.

Human resource management also plays an essential role in administrative efficiency. Armstrong (2020) argues that employee recruitment, training, performance appraisal and reward systems significantly influence organisational productivity. In Nigeria, however, recruitment processes are often criticised for political patronage, nepotism and limited adherence to merit principles. These practices reduce employee motivation and organisational effectiveness. Another important factor is bureaucratic structure. Weber's bureaucratic model emphasises hierarchy, formal rules and specialisation as essential features of effective administration. Nevertheless, excessive bureaucracy often creates procedural delays, duplication of responsibilities and administrative rigidity. In Nigeria, lengthy approval processes and overlapping institutional mandates frequently hinder timely implementation of government programmes.

Corruption remains another major impediment to administrative efficiency. According to Transparency International (2024), corruption diverts public resources away from service delivery, weakens institutional accountability and reduces citizens' confidence in government. Corruption manifests through procurement irregularities, payroll fraud, contract inflation and political interference in administrative decisions. Information and communication technology (ICT) have emerged as an important driver of administrative efficiency. Digital governance improves information management, enhances transparency, reduces processing time and minimises opportunities for corruption. Countries with advanced e-government systems generally report higher levels of administrative performance than those relying heavily on manual administrative processes (OECD, 2023). Citizen participation equally contributes to administrative efficiency by promoting transparency and accountability. Governance scholars argue that active citizen engagement improves policy responsiveness and strengthens institutional legitimacy (UNDP, 2019). However, public participation in Nigeria remains relatively limited due to inadequate access to information, weak civic education and limited institutional responsiveness.

Public Sector Reforms and Public Service Delivery in Nigeria

Nigeria has implemented several public sector reforms aimed at enhancing administrative efficiency and improving service delivery. These reforms have focused on restructuring the civil service, strengthening financial accountability, improving human resource management and promoting digital governance. One of the earliest comprehensive reforms was the Udoji Public Service Review Commission of 1974, which introduced modern management principles, unified grading structures and performance-oriented administration. Although the reforms improved remuneration and professionalisation, implementation challenges limited their long-term impact.

Subsequent reforms included the 1988 Civil Service Reforms, which sought to strengthen ministerial accountability and decentralise administrative responsibilities. However, these reforms were criticised for excessive politicisation of the civil service and weakening institutional professionalism. The introduction of SERVICOM (Service Compact with All Nigerians) in 2004 represented a major citizen-centred reform initiative. SERVICOM established service standards for government agencies and encouraged responsiveness, transparency and customer satisfaction. Although the initiative improved public awareness regarding service rights, compliance across MDAs has remained inconsistent. Financial management reforms have equally sought to improve accountability. The Treasury Single Account (TSA) consolidated government revenues into a unified account, thereby reducing revenue leakages and improving financial transparency. Similarly, the Integrated Personnel and Payroll Information System (IPPIS) has significantly reduced payroll fraud through biometric verification of public employees. The Government Integrated Financial Management Information System (GIFMIS) has enhanced budget execution, expenditure monitoring and financial reporting.

Recent digital transformation initiatives have expanded electronic procurement, online tax administration, electronic licensing systems and integrated public financial management platforms. These reforms have reduced administrative delays in some MDAs while improving transparency and operational efficiency. Nevertheless, infrastructural deficiencies, inadequate digital skills, resistance to organisational change and inconsistent policy implementation continue to limit their effectiveness. Overall, available evidence suggests that while public sector reforms have generated measurable improvements in financial accountability and administrative transparency, they have not fully addressed broader institutional weaknesses affecting service delivery across Nigeria.

Strategies for Enhancing Administrative Efficiency and Sustainable Public Service Delivery

Improving administrative efficiency requires comprehensive institutional reforms that address organisational structures, human resource capacity, technology adoption and governance practices. Contemporary public administration literature increasingly advocates citizen-centred governance, digital transformation and evidence-based decision-making as key drivers of service improvement. Digital governance represents one of the most significant strategies for enhancing administrative efficiency. E-government platforms automate routine administrative processes, facilitate information sharing, reduce processing time and improve service accessibility. According to the United Nations E-Government Survey (2024), countries investing in digital public administration generally demonstrate higher levels of transparency, accountability and service effectiveness.Performance management systems have also become central to modern public administration. These systems establish measurable performance indicators, monitor institutional outcomes and promote accountability among public officials. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017) argue that performance-based management encourages organisational learning and continuous improvement.

Merit-based recruitment and continuous professional development are equally essential for strengthening institutional capacity. Skilled and motivated public servants are better equipped to implement government policies effectively and adapt to emerging governance challenges. Capacity-building programmes should therefore focus on leadership development, digital competencies, ethics and strategic management. Strengthening accountability institutions constitutes another important strategy. Independent oversight agencies, internal audit systems, anti-corruption commissions and legislative oversight mechanisms promote responsible use of public resources and improve institutional credibility. Likewise, citizen feedback mechanisms, service charters and social accountability initiatives enable governments to evaluate service quality from users' perspectives.

Collaborative governance has also gained prominence as governments increasingly partner with civil society organisations, private sector actors and development partners in service delivery. Such partnerships enhance innovation, resource mobilisation and institutional learning while improving service responsiveness. Finally, policy coherence and effective inter-agency coordination remain critical for achieving administrative efficiency. Fragmented institutional mandates often result in duplication of responsibilities and inefficient resource utilisation. Strengthening coordination mechanisms among Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) would improve policy implementation and service delivery outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on **New Public Management (NPM)** and **Governance Theory**, both of which provide a robust analytical framework for examining public service delivery and administrative efficiency in Nigeria. New Public Management emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a response to the perceived inefficiencies of traditional bureaucratic administration. Prominent scholars such as Christopher Hood (1991) and Osborne and Gaebler (1992) argue that public institutions should adopt private-sector management principles to improve organisational performance and service delivery. NPM advocates results-oriented management, decentralisation of decision-making, customer-focused service delivery, performance measurement, competition, managerial autonomy, cost-effectiveness and accountability for results. The theory assumes that public organisations perform better when managers are granted greater flexibility while being held accountable through clearly defined performance indicators. Within the Nigerian public sector, the principles of NPM are reflected in reforms such as the Service Compact with All Nigerians (SERVICOM), the Treasury Single Account (TSA), the Integrated Personnel and Payroll Information System (IPPIS), the Government Integrated Financial Management Information System (GIFMIS), and various e-government initiatives aimed at improving transparency, reducing corruption and enhancing service delivery. Consequently, NPM provides an appropriate lens for evaluating how managerial reforms and performance-driven practices influence administrative efficiency and the quality of public services.

The paper also adopts **Governance Theory**, which broadens the understanding of public administration by recognising that effective governance extends beyond government institutions to include collaboration among the state, private sector, civil society organisations and citizens. Governance Theory emphasises principles such as participation, transparency, accountability, responsiveness, inclusiveness, the rule of law and consensus-building as essential ingredients of effective public administration (Rhodes, 1996; Pierre & Peters, 2000; UNDP, 1997). Unlike the traditional public administration model, which focuses primarily on hierarchical authority and bureaucratic control, Governance Theory views policy implementation and service delivery as collective processes requiring interaction among multiple stakeholders. In the Nigerian context, where challenges such as corruption, weak institutional capacity, political interference, bureaucratic bottlenecks and limited citizen trust continue to undermine administrative effectiveness, Governance Theory highlights the importance of strengthening institutional accountability, promoting citizen engagement, fostering inter-agency collaboration and encouraging participatory decision-making. By integrating the managerial efficiency perspective of New Public Management with the collaborative and citizen-centred principles of Governance Theory, this study provides a comprehensive framework for analysing the institutional and governance factors that shape public service delivery in Nigeria. Together, the two theories demonstrate that sustainable improvements in administrative efficiency depend not only on internal organisational reforms but also on the quality of state–society relationships, institutional integrity and inclusive governance systems.

Conclusion

This paper examined the relationship between administrative efficiency and public service delivery in Nigeria through a qualitative review of existing literature and public sector reform initiatives. The review revealed that efficient public administration is essential for delivering timely, accessible and quality public services. However, persistent challenges such as bureaucratic delays, corruption, weak institutional capacity, inadequate accountability, political interference and limited digital infrastructure continue to undermine the performance of Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) in Nigeria.

The paper further established that reforms such as SERVICOM, the Treasury Single Account (TSA), the Integrated Personnel and Payroll Information System (IPPIS), the Government Integrated Financial Management Information System (GIFMIS) and other digital governance initiatives have contributed to improving transparency and administrative efficiency. Nevertheless, their overall impact has been constrained by implementation gaps, resistance to change, inadequate capacity and weak monitoring mechanisms. Addressing these challenges requires sustained investment in institutional reforms, merit-based human resource management, digital transformation, effective leadership and stronger accountability systems.

Drawing on the principles of New Public Management and Governance Theory, the paper concludes that improving public service delivery in Nigeria requires a citizen-centred, transparent and performance-driven public administration. Strengthening institutional capacity, promoting innovation, enhancing stakeholder participation and ensuring effective implementation of reforms will be critical to building an efficient public service capable of supporting sustainable development and restoring public confidence in government institutions.

Policy Recommendations

The paper recommends that Nigeria should:

1. Institutionalise merit-based recruitment, promotion and succession planning across the civil service;
2. Strengthen performance management through measurable key performance

indicators (KPIs) linked to service outcomes;
3. Expand digital governance platforms to reduce bureaucratic delays and improve transparency;
4. Enhance continuous professional development in leadership, ethics and digital competencies for public servants;
5. Reinforce anti-corruption institutions and internal accountability mechanisms;
6. Strengthen inter-agency coordination to minimise duplication of functions;
7. Institutionalise citizen feedback and service charters across all MDAs;
8. Increase investment in ICT infrastructure and data-driven decision-making; and
9. Ensure regular monitoring and independent evaluation of public sector reform programmes.

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