



## Ethical challenges and institutional corruption in Nigeria's civil service

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### Abstract

This paper discusses ethical challenges and institutional corruption in Nigeria civil service and relied on the premise of the classical bureaucratic theory as a theoretical direction. The theory upholds that bureaucratic organizations must have certain characteristics which inform its relationship within the organization/bureaucracy for results to be achieved. The paper argues that institutional corruption arises mainly as a result of ethical violation in the civil service. In Nigeria Civil Service today factors such as ethical, political learning, primordial interest and private considerations more often than not take precedence over competence and merit in employment process and promotions. These challenges leave the institution unsound, tainted and as such corrupt and little strength to produce result. The paper recommends the adoption of the French method of recruitment into the civil service as well as committed exercise in external ethical auditing in the Nigeria civil service.

**Keywords:** accountability, civil service, ethics, institutional corruption

### Introduction

The civil service in any nation is a veritable institution for the development of the country. The will of the state is implemented through the effective deployment of the instrumentality of the civil service. The works of economic developments, political accountability, poverty eradication, social development are objectives pursued by government. However, how well these objectives are achieved would depend largely on the quality of the institution of the service. A major factor in ensuring quality institution is the ethical considerations. According to Anyim and Ufodima (2013) <sup>[18]</sup>, the platform for the prevention and handling ethical issues and practices in Nigeria public services are contained in the modified civil service regulations and handbook. Part four of service handbook focuses on code of ethics in state administration.

The Handbook states plainly that the civil services must be adequately restraint, with its principles and directions held fast. However, service quality must be the central objectives that is conscientiously sought after, while corrupt practices in the third schedule in the 1999 constitution mandates the maintenance of elevated requirement of ethical quality in carrying out state business and that the activities and conduct of public officers must be in line with the highest public morality and responsibility.

However, Kwagha (2014) has observed that the Nigeria civil service is plagued by moral responsibility issues which have throughout the years constituted a noteworthy drag in the general development and advancement of the Nigerian state. Corroborating the above view, Oladumi (2000), cited in Olufemi (2013), Contended that the pervasiveness of unethical conduct and absence of responsibility has resulted to mismanagement and crease crumple of the economy in number of developing nations.

He accentuated that one noteworthy rationale why Nigeria's economy stays in the doldrums is due to ethical violations and accounts for why according to Eteng and Agbor (2016) <sup>[12]</sup> public programmes fail in Nigeria.

The consequences of these ethical and accountability problems are enormous. The aim of this paper therefore is to attempt a critical examination of ethical challenges and its consequences on the intuition of the civil service in Nigeria. The paper adopts the critical discourse analysis method in discussing ethical issues in the Nigerian civil service.

### Conceptual clarification

**Civil service:** The concept civil service has been defined by many scholars from different perspectives. Anyaele and Edoh (2005), define civil service as an aspect in the executive arm of the state which has a duty of carrying out the state policies and programme. They noted that the civil service is made up of people who constitute the permanent staff of the ministries. Duru and Anigbata (2015) <sup>[11]</sup>, see civil service as a body of personnel who obtained training in diverse fields and employed by the government on permanent basis to render services to the state. On the other hand, Nwosu (1985) <sup>[19]</sup>, indicated that the term civil service is utilized to cover those public servants who work for the government, other than those in the Military, police, judicial personnel and teachers. Ethics: Denhardt and Grubbs (1999) <sup>[10]</sup>, view ethics as a systematic endeavor using motivation to comprehend our individual and social good involvement so as to decide the tenets which should govern human behaviour. Ethics has to do with the procedure by which we identify what is good and bad and by which we follow up on what we assumed to be correct. It includes the utilization of reason in deciding an appropriate plan. It is the hunt for moral principles. Morals call us without hesitation; it requires to reason, to examine and to look for direction as to appropriate strategy (Denhardt & Gubbs 1998).

### Institutional corruption

Institutional corruption is relatively a new field of study. Lessig (2013) <sup>[18]</sup> in his work, sees institutional corruption as being consequentialist. He defined it as being a manifestation when there is a systemic and strategic

influence that undermines the institution's effectiveness, including the degree of significance to its aim, debilitating either the public conviction in that organization or the establishment's characteristic dependability. System and strategic influence mean plenty of influence that weakens an institution's effectiveness or performance, examples is laziness at work, and money (bribes) (Lessig 2013) <sup>[18]</sup>.

### Literature

The institution of the civil service is an important arm or branch of the executive. Implementation of public programmes and projects are carried out by the civil service. As a body of men and women the service functions with regulations otherwise known as ethics and conducts of the service. As Kinchin (2007) noted, "ethics of the public service should be based on five basic virtues; namely fairness, transparency, responsibility, efficiency and no conflict of interest". Harping on the importance of institutional framework for effective service delivery, Walsh (1995) indicated that the degree and nature of progress in the administration of public service are reliant on the current institutional structure and the structure of the regulatory framework. He noted that there are situations where institutional structure makes it hard to make a condition for positive change in light of the structure of intrigue, portrayal, and moral infringement. To this extent, therefore the degree to which an institution of service is vulnerable to change would halfway rely on the quality with which it was set up. For instance, weak institution would be less impervious to change, particularly where they can observe to have been underperformed. Having failed means, they respond to such vagaries in the system like bribery, circumvention of rules, personal interest, leadership values and nepotism. This failure in the Nigerian case has brought much hardship on the citizenry to the extent that professionals migrate out of the country for better existence in what Agbor (2009) <sup>[2]</sup> refers to as brain drain in education and the health sector. When institutions are strongly established they would embody all necessary bureaucratic norms, rules, belief, value that would be beneficial to the citizenry and nation at large and become more effective and result oriented. In less advanced nations, private arrangement of urban services are common, this is because of disappointment of existing public institution to performed as expected (Walsh, 1995). He noted that in shanty towns in Latin America, administrations were frequently carried out by self-help through casual economy. Likewise in Egypt, Islamic groups provide healthcare, training and accommodation facilitates in the light of state disappointment (Sullivan, 1992). In Nigeria, urban transport framework, healthcare, education and security are heavily depended upon a moderately casual private sector in light of the fact that people in public sector are poor and weak. Sorka (2003) cited in Kwagha (2014), called attention to the fact that ethics can be depicted as the standards and qualities joined to what is correct or wrong, suitable or unfortunate behaviour within experts or amongst workers. However, when discussing the issue of ethics in the public service, it is fundamentally a reference to when government workers separately or by and large utilize their position or seem to do as such in a way that is in opposition to public conviction and trust. It is also largely driven by ethnic consideration in determining the affairs of the state (Agbor, 1999). Such untrustworthy conduct could be an endeavor to accomplish

some kind of private benefit to the disadvantage of the citizenry. This moral depravity according to Agbor (2006) is driven by poverty which the state is failing to address. Ethical violations arise in the relationship between civil servants and citizens in terms of service delivery. In the efforts to meet citizens expectation in Nigeria, civil service have subscribed to the SERVICOM charter. The charter was expected to be complied within a manner "that does not compromise the principle of confidentiality of official information". However, according to Wali (2006) and Many (2010) as noted in Gundu (2011), in practice the selection of best course of action had often depended on the administrative and discretionary, choice of the civil service. This situation raises ethical questions such as:

- a. Would preferred administrative discretionary choice demonstrate discipline, equity, impartiality, fairness, honesty, integrity, pursuit of excellence, accountability and loyalty as well as protecting the best interest of the citizen? and
- b. Would the civil servants' decision offend the sensibilities of the citizens and be a damage on public confidence and trust in the public service?

The scenario above is corroborated by the view of Ibaba (2010), who observed that "unfortunately in Nigeria's public administration there is large yawning gap between administrative behaviour and administrative rules and regulations". The implication of this is the existence of crisis of ethics which endangers performance and lowers productivity in the service. In Nigeria, ethic remains the biggest challenge for the service. Unethical political interference in the activities of the public service of Nigeria contributes largely to the failure of public institutions to address public needs (Agbor & Akpan, 2019). For Anyanda (2012), fraud, extortion, misappropriation and nepotism among others are some of the unscrupulous behaviours in Nigeria's civil service. Also, Rasheed (1995), noted that unethical conduct and corrupt practices have turned out to be exceptionally unavoidable and regulated in Nigeria.

### Theoretical Framework

Theories in the social sciences are necessary for organizing and explaining concrete realities. The classical theory of Bureaucracy is applied in the analysis of this paper. The theory was propounded by Max Webber (1864-1920) in 1910. Max Weber observed organizations and authorized that every bureaucratic administration must have certain characteristics which informs relationship within the bureaucracy. This ideal type is a mental construct that categorizes thought and help capture the manifestation of reality (Duru and Anigbata, 2015) <sup>[11]</sup>. The characteristics developed by Weber, were espoused by Duru and Anigbata (2015) as follows:

1. Hierarchy of authority; this means worker reports to a position one level higher and it creates a chain of command (Scalar chain).
2. Division of labour: Tasks are divided among employees who have competence and authority to carry them;
3. Impersonality: This ensures that emotive considerations are not allowed to affect the way and manner in which a bureaucrat treats members of the public that he serves. Everybody should be treated equally without fear or favour.

4. Existence of rules and regulations: Rules and regulations govern operations of a bureaucracy. Actions of officials are regulated by a predictable arrangement of dynamic standards and use of these tenets to specific cases;
5. Rules and procedures: A system of rules and procedures define the activities of employees and is enforced so that the actions of all members of the organization are controlled and predicted on technical competence.
6. Technical competence: The identification and promotion of personnel are based on technical capabilities and merit.

The perfect harmony and working of these characteristics would produce an efficient, effective and result oriented organization. As opined by Agbor (2011) <sup>[6]</sup> the effective application of these bureaucratic norms in the public service is a function of leadership attitude, which in the context of Nigeria, is thoroughly depraved. This view is in line with the observations of Inyang (2007), that there is no doubt that under certain specific circumstances an organization which adheres to these principles is capable of achieving large scale efficiency and massive comprehensive output.

### Discussion

Goke Adegnye One of the issues which set the stage for a Nigerian public service reform was "the need for a renewed focus in ethical and moral issues". This concern shows the damaging effect of violated ethical principles in the institution of civil service. The civil service in Nigeria exists to enhance economic advancement and ensure adequate control of government activities from failing. Sadly, the performance of the institution has been loaded with differing inconsistencies (Adeyemo & Salami, 2008) <sup>[1]</sup>. For instance, the service has been "unable to cope with the prevailing ideological, political and economic changes" such that the institutional ability flaw of the civil service is often viewed as major reasons for socio-political cataclysm and economic emergency (Chukwuemeka & Erne, 2011) <sup>[9]</sup>. Okpala (2012) <sup>[21]</sup> stated that Nigeria lost billions of Naira in recent decades because of outrageous abuse of processes, the absence of straightforwardness and legitimacy in the award of contracts. The issues of disloyalty in the service among civil servant breed unhealthy relationship. As cited by Kwangha (2011), in trying to implement state policy, government employees regularly break the moral values of loyalty, trustworthiness and lack of bias. Manifestation of traitorousness is found in insubordination and lukewarm attitude at work and influences the accomplishment of the objectives and goals for which the administration is made. The characteristics of impersonality in service, is largely lacking. More often civil servants bring to bear primordial sentiments and nepotism when treating matters in their offices. This emotive considerations wherever applied harms the institution. Achieving technical competence is key factor in public bureaucracy. But achieving this in civil service in Nigeria over the years has posed a problem, this is due to overwhelming influence of culture and environmental factor. Factors such as ethnicity, political leanings, zoning and other private considerations take precedence over competence and merit in employment and promotions in the service. The implication is clear. You cannot reap good harvest when chaffs are planted. Such development

overburdens the institution. Instead of being a source of strength, it constitutes a cog in the wheel of progress.

Corollary to the problem of technical competence is the distribution and division of tasks and jobs according to competence. In the civil service in Nigeria more often than not, tasks, assignments and duties are distributed on factors that serve personal interest rather than competence. The result of such biased task distribution is what Oladumi (2000) argued as the main rationale for the persistency of Nigeria economy in the doldrums till date. From the above analysis, the application of ideal type bureaucracy as propounded by Max Weber would be near impossible given the social, political and cultural context in which the institution operates.

Ethics is a major moral burden which every person whether in public service or private life owes to himself or his organization. But unfortunately, in the institution of Nigeria Civil Service, ethics of the service had been abused many times over and the result of such abuse is glaring for all us to witness - from poorly conceived policy, too poorly implemented program and project. We find ourselves in situation where we produce strong personalities and weak institutions. Of course it serves the interest of these personalities as they continue to manipulate and circumvent rules to their own selfish ends. As Okoro, Ingwe and Agbor (2012) <sup>[20]</sup> observed, this moral depravity is not common in the public services of advanced societies such as the United States of America.

### Conclusion and Recommendation

The work has shown that the Nigeria civil service much as it is a veritable institution for the implementation of government policies and programmes, has been riddled with ethical challenges. These challenges have to a large extent left the service very unsound, tainted and in a depraved state.

An institution that is so depraved, with lots of ethical errors, to say the least, is corrupted. This is the position and the condition of this civil service in Nigeria. This paper therefore recommends as follows

1. The civil service must look inwards and sanitize itself by developing a mechanism to flush out the ethically poor. This can be done by annual ethical audit by external independent auditors who should report their findings to a special tribunal set up to deal with ethical failures in the civil service.
2. Employment into this civil service career should be through training in Administrative institutions. The example of France is instructive. In France, after the conventional education in the universities, graduates who intend to pursue a career in the civil service would then proceed to Administrative institutions for professional training. On graduation, they go through the prescribed examination before entering the service.

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