

Public Service Ethics and the Fight against Corruption in Nigeria: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

This paper critically analyses contemporary administrative and philosophical issues – public service ethics and the fight against corruption in Nigeria. Ethics are continuous efforts of striving to ensure that people and institutions they shape, live up to the standards that are reasonable and solidly based (Amundsen, 2009:6). The paper argues that ethics and anti-corruption campaign have become an integral part of the Nigerian public service and governance but with little relevance, and large scale evidences of failure. In other words, the effectiveness of ethical codes of conduct among civil servants, politicians and the noise about anti-corruption campaign remain doubtful in the face of the rising spade of ineptitude to work, embezzlement of public funds, bazaar mentality, insecurity of lives and property, bribe-taking, and the likes. Inability to arrest these vices in Nigeria has circumvented sustainable development in the country. It is therefore recommended that government and leaders at federal, state and local government levels should enthrone ethical codes through living by example and the various anti- corruption agencies like the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) and Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) through capacity building and the employment of men of integrity to work in them.

Key words: Ethics, public service; anti-corruption agencies and civil servants

Introduction

The public service of any country is regarded as a transformational institutional because of its timeless responsibility of implementing public policies and programmes and the rendering of essential services to the masses. These goals are usually accomplished through the application of ethical codes of conduct which are provided to guide the conduct of civil servants in the course of discharging their duties. With reference to Nigeria, the public service has been branded with derogatory names which scholars like Adebayo (2000) has aptly summarized by noting that the Nigerian public service has degenerated or fallen into a state of comma and it will take years to wake it up if this is ever possible.

The subjects of ethics and the fight against corruption in public organizations in a developing country like Nigeria have attracted the attention and interest of scholars in management, public administration, philosophy, social sciences, and the government. This zest of interest in ethical issues in the continent of Africa is because its public service faces ethical crisis manifested in the pervasive absence of accountability,



unethical behaviour and institutionalisation of corrupt practices (Rashed, 1995; Ezeani, 2006) and new forms of cutting corners or what can be described as *briberisation*.

One of the most fundamental characteristics of contemporary society and professional or modern organisations is the existence of some form of ethical principles and norms which ensures that standards are maintained and that bureaucratic powers are not abused by the bureaucrats, for selfish purposes (especially for personal or family aggrandizement). Such principles like impartiality, meritocracy, honesty, loyalty, transparency, discipline, fairness, courtesy, cooperation, rules and regulations, etc. provide the ethical environment within which the Nigerian public service has to and should operate. Unfortunately, these principles have been abandoned in practice and acts of corrupt practices have become institutionalized and the norm of the day in the Nigerian public service and political life. The effects of this are that unemployment, underdevelopment, poverty, and the like have more than double in the country.

The crux of the matter in this paper is to critically examine public service ethics and the fight against corruption in Nigeria. For purpose of exposition, the paper is decomposed or divided into sections. Section one of the paper and which has already been considered focuses on introduction. In section two, attempt is made in providing the methodology of the paper and a review of literature. The conceptual elucidations treated in this section is aimed at enhancing the understanding of the paper while in section three, the purpose of ethics was examined and in section four the paper took a brief look at ethics of the Nigerian public service. In section five, we re-examined the Nigerian public service ethics and in section six we considered the fight against corruption in Nigeria from 1999 to 2012. The paper concludes with brief recommendations in section seven.

Methodology

The methodology adopted in the paper is essentially a content and observational analysis. Documentary ideas on the issues analysed as expressed in textbooks, journal articles, government publications, bulletins, and internet based materials are utilised. These documentary materials are complimented with the observation methodology of data collection. The period covered in the paper is from 1999 to 2012. The paper also adopts a multidisciplinary analysis by relating disciplines like public administration, politics, development studies, management sciences and philosophy. Thus the paper adopted multidisciplinary approach encouraged in international scholarships.

Review of Literature

Having seen the methodology adopted in the study, what then are the concepts that beg for elucidations and clarity in the paper?

- (a) **Public Service:** This generally means the activities of government employees and institutions aimed at formulating and implementing governmental policies and programmes for the interests of the masses (public). According to Adebayo (2000), civil service or public service is responsible for the management of the machinery of government and carrying out the day-to-day duties that public administrations demand. For Ezeani (2006), public service is much broader than the term civil service as the former (public service) refers to the totality of services that are organized under public (that is, government) authority. Reduced

to practical terms, public service comprises of civil service, local government, the military and other security forces, the judiciary, public agencies and other government or quasi-governmental agencies. As change agent and mechanism for rapid socio-economic transformation of any country, it becomes inevitable to have established ethical codes to guide the actions of civil servants, public servants and politicians. Thus, we turn to the meaning of ethics.

- (b) **Ethics:** According to Mautner (2000), ethics from a normative perspective is a rational inquiry into or a theory of, the standards of right and wrong, good and bad, in respect of character and conduct, which ought to be accepted by a class of individuals. Put differently, ethics could be described as a body of standards that the professionals in question ought to accept and observe. Ethics means principles by which to evaluate behaviour as right or wrong, good or bad (Amundsen, 2009). Similarly, a code of ethics is a set of guidelines that defines acceptable behaviour for members of a private or public organization. Ideally, an organization tailors its code of ethics to its needs and values

(Redstone, http://www.ehow.com/fact_549008_purpose-code-ethics.html).

Public service ethics are broad norms that stipulate how public servants should behave and exercise judgment and discretion in carrying out their official duties (Tunde and Omobolaji, 2009). Ethics is synonymous with morality (Ezeani, 2006). Thus, it is defined by Walking (1956) as “a system of moral principles” governing or influencing a person’s behaviour. From the consequentialism’s point of view, the failure or relegation of every ethical standard or questions of morality will inevitably produce corruption and corrupt practices in public organizations thus hindering sustainable development and quality of service delivered to the public and private sectors. According to UNDP (2001:9), this realisation has been corroborated by the emergence of agreement that good governance and sound public administration is the pathway to sustainable development. The effects of ethical erosion and criminal practices in the public sector is unsupportable in the development of contries, resulting in a loss of confidence in public institutions and an erosion of the rule of law itself. Agba (2010) supports the above view and argues that anti-corruption agencies in Nigeria will need to network with organizations and individuals who are known for their straight forwardness in their effort to stamp out corruption in the country.

Purpose of Ethics

Ethics play important role in the society. First, ethics provides man with guidelines for regulating and controlling his conducts or actions in life (Ezeani, 2006). For instance, the code of conduct for public officers which government provides for its workers is to regulate their actions and conducts to ensure quality and standard of services rendered. Even institutions like universities, polytechnics and private organisation have guidelines for appointment, promotion and discipline of erring workers. They are therefore provided to ensure uniformity, fairness and standard in appointment, promotion and discipline of erring workers in the system. This constitutes the second purpose of ethics. Thirdly, according to Uduigwomen, (2001, 2003), ethics serve the purpose of helping man to discover the general or universal principle to guide human conduct. For example, the following questions of morality in a way provide a general principle to guide the conduct



of public officers: should bribery and embezzlement of public funds be encouraged? Should doctors spend more time in their private practice or clinics to the neglect of their official duties where they are employed? Should money be extorted from a customer by a public worker before treating his file? Is it right for a lecturer or public servant to demand sex or extort money from helpless students as condition for passing with a good grade? These are questions of morality, ethics and quality service in public service and may provide a strong basis for analyzing the contributions of public organisation in the development of Nigeria in the 21st Century.

It is apt to say that the relaxing of ethical principles and norms in most public organizations accounts partly for the high level of corruption and inefficiency that has greeted the Nigerian public sector. For example, there are ethical standard or laws spelling out punishment for embezzlement of public funds and other corrupt practices but which are hardly implemented. Thus, corruption strives in the system and where it appears that some persons are above the law.

Ethics in the Nigerian Public Service

Citizens expect government (and its actors) to be ethically just as they expect from any other kind of business (Ezeani, 2006:385). Thus, Bonzek (1991), observed that today's public managers face increasingly complex ethical dilemma, often having to weigh personal and professional values against current public opinion and the law. Their personal value of giving a job to an unqualified relative may conflict with the professional value of employing a qualified applicant who is not related to the public manager.

Ethics in the Nigerian Public Service can be briefly summarized into impartiality, meritocracy, honesty, transparency, loyalty, discipline, courtesy, etc. In the Public sector, the acceptance of bribes and secret profits, and the use of spare time are regulated by statute. The fifth schedule of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provides that a public officer must not put himself in a position where his personal interest conflicts with his duties and responsibilities. A public officer must not ask for or accept any property or benefits of any kind for himself or any other person on account of anything done or omitted to be done by him in the discharge of his duties (FGN, 1999 and Uvieghara, 2001).

Employment into the Federal Public Service is to be based on the principle of meritocracy and is to reflect the federal character principle. More so, promotion is based on merit and performance. Every recruited worker must be medically examined to determine his physical fitness to do the job for which he is employed and the employer must provide transport to the place of employment. With the recent emphasis on result-oriented public service, public servants are ethically expected to treat the public (customers) with courtesy and services rendered in a timely, qualitative and satisfactory manner.

Despite the above ethical principles, the Nigeria public service has come to be associated with corruption, inefficiency and ineffectiveness thus calling for a mechanism of curbing the tide of corrupt practices.

Ethics in Nigeria: Re-examined

This is a general call for ethical and moral rectitude in Nigeria which must be taken seriously because as Independent Policy Group (2003:1) maintained “.....*the Nigerian society harbours so many people who behave opportunistically, as free riders, rent seekers, people who have their eyes on public funds or who are quick to bribe their way out of situations*”. The underlying ethical process and procedures governing tendering for government contracts, employment, financial system and political electoral exercise are being eroded or discarded with calamitous effects on the development of the country. According to IPG (2003), without ethics and values, government business and the whole development process stand threatened. Monies for public projects like construction of roads are siphoned with impunity thus causing untold hardship on the masses.

As aptly observed by the Independent Policy Group (2003:4), in Nigeria, all the professions have their codes but, characteristically, the current trend is to set aside these codes and adopts personal codes which are based on greed, selfishness, lack of concern and care for others, intolerance, dishonesty and falsehood. There seems to be an inordinate desire to make money and more of it regardless of the means of making it. As IPG (2003:9) further explains, in the simple matter of employment especially in government service, applicants are now required to pay huge sums of money before securing placement. In some organizations and government parastatals, monies meant for salaries and supplies are held in fixed deposits for long periods of time while the people suffer. High level civil servants refuse to proceed on leave for fear that their dubious fiddling with files will be discovered. For fear of retirement actual ages are changed in order to hang on in the service. Inappropriate or refusal of disclosure of ownership of properties by government officials even though the law requires this has become the order of the day (IPG, 2003:12).

The Fight against Corruption in Nigeria

Corruption in its simplest form is the misuse of authority (or one's position) as a result of consideration of personal gains which may not necessary be monetary (Ikejiani – Clark, 2001). It is a deviation from acceptable norms, values and standard of a society (Agba, 2010). In Nigeria, corruption has been identified as the major bane of urgently needed development (Agba, 2010) and as Nuhu Ribadu (ex-chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission-EFCC) noted about \$220 billion (about 65 trillion Naira) has been stolen by past Nigerian leaders within the 46 years of independence (Okoi – Uyoyo, 2008). Corruption has given Nigeria a bad image internationally and locally thereby instigating the initiation of such programmes like the rebranding project by the federal government to redeem the image of the country (Agba, Ushie and Akwara, 2009).

Recommendations and Concluding Remarks

The following prescriptions are made in the paper which we believe if implemented will go a long way in solving the problem of unethical behaviour and corruption in the Nigerian public service:

- (a) Since ethics and morality constitute the core of what is good, right and just it is imperative that leaders and the led should consider their stand by abiding by the

principles of ethics. This will demand that our leaders must lead by example and the led should follow suit.

- (b) Parents, community and religions leaders and the government must be involved in the campaign and fight for ethical orientation in the country through workshops, conferences, radio and church programmes. This must be backed up a strong political and administrative will and a firm commitment by all to maintain the sanctity of Nigeria.
- (c) It also recommended that the government should strengthened the anti-corruption campaign through employing honest, dedicated, and fearless men and women to run the affairs of anti-corruption agencies like EFCC and others.
- (d) It is important that the problems that make people to behave unethically should be addressed. For example, because civil servants are poorly remunerated cases of absenteeism of workers, ineptitude to work, embezzlement of public funds abound. Therefore, public servants should be well paid and be encouraged to reciprocate such pay with high performance.

We conclude that public service ethics and the fight against corruption in Nigeria will continue to attract attention of the government and scholars in as much as the problems of corruption and unethical practices have not been sufficiently addressed.

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