

The Nigerian Public Service System: Challenges and Prospects

Iheanacho, E. N.

ABSTRACT

This work reviews the functioning of the Nigerian Public Service System. Nigerian public service system is saddled with numerous challenges which militate against its performance as an instrument of socio-economic growth. Since independence various governments both military and civilian have taken measures to address the problems that beset Nigerian public service system. It is worrisome that these measures have not achieved the desired results. The basic thrust of this work is to identify those problems that undermine the effective functioning of the Nigerian public service. Based on the findings of this work, the problems include among others corruption, negation of merit principle, lack of adequate training, poor remuneration, lack of working materials, indiscipline, red-tapism and conflicts between the generalist administrators and professionals. It is imperative to increase the wages and salaries paid to public servants. This will enable them to face the rising inflation occasioned by deregulation policies of the government. Only a motivated public servant can be able to discharge his constitutional responsibilities effectively.

Keywords: Public service, system, worrisome.

INTRODUCTION

Public service has been recognized as an instrument of socio-economic development. Their presence encourages rapid social and economic progress from both local and foreign investors. Public service also prevents exploitation. If private enterprises are encouraged to render essential services alone, there will be exploitation and discrimination in the provision of essential services to the people. Therefore “public service helps to eliminate exploitation of services rendered”.

According to Akpan (1982), public service is the “process or act of rendering service to members of the public and in this category, members of all public institutions financed and maintained by the tax payer and the emolument of whose members are regularly authorized by the legislature acting in concert with the executive”. In the opinion of Obikeze and Obi (2004), “public service means the totality of service that are organized under the public or government authority”. According to the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria “public service covers all those employed in the service of the federation or a state in any capacity including service as staff of the National or of a State Assembly, a member or staff of judiciary or any commission or authority established by the National or State Assembly, staff of statutory corporations or educational institutions established or financed principally by the government of a

Iheanacho, E. N., Ph.D, is a Lecturer in the Department of Political Science, Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria. E-mail: emmanueliheanacho32@gmail.com.

federation or of a state, staff of any company or enterprise in which government or its agency owns a controlling share or interest, members or officers of armed forces of the federation or the Nigerian police force or other government security agencies established by law and staff of local government.

It is worrisome that Nigerian public service which is expected to be an instrument of economic growth and social progress is saddled with numerous challenges. These challenges have incapacitated the Nigerian public service to address the basic needs of the people. Since independence successive governments both civilian and military have set-up commissions of inquiry, panels and introduced reforms to revitalize our public service system. These measures would enable the public service to discharge its constitutional responsibilities efficiently and effectively. It is a sad commentary that all these efforts have not achieved the desired objectives. The basic thrust of this work is to identify those challenges that militate against the performance of public service as a veritable agent of national transformation and suggest the appropriate measures to enhance the efficiency of the Nigerian public service system.

ORGANIZATION OF PUBLIC SERVICE IN NIGERIA

Nigeria is a federal state and therefore public service is organized into the federal public service and public services of the various state governments. Both the public services of federal and state governments are structured vertically into ministries and departments. The horizontal structuring of the public service into classes of administrative, executive, clerical, manipulative or operative and professional dates back to colonial era (Nwachukwu, 2011).

The administrative class comprises of the most senior public servants who organized the ministries. They execute high level administrative work and advised the political heads in the formulation and implementation of policies and served as communication link between the political heads and other junior officials. They were responsible for organizing and coordinating the activities of the ministries. Recruitment into this class was based on university degree coupled with competitive written examinations and oral interviews conducted by the Public Service Commission. Recruitment into Administrative Class also depended on reasonable length of service within the executive class. The members of Administrative Class were: permanent secretaries, Deputy Secretaries, Senior Assistant Secretaries, Assistant Secretaries, Grade I, Assistant Secretaries, and Grade II and under Secretaries (Nwachukwu, 2011).

The Executive Class is concerned with implementation and execution of policies and programmes and decision given to them by the Administrative Class which had been approved by the political leaders. This class deals with the day to day conduct of administration involving supply and petty duties, internal organization of offices, supervision and control of the work and workers of clerical staff (Nwachukwu, 2011). Occasionally, personnel of Executive Class occupy posts that were normally meant

for Junior Administrative Class. Appointment to Executive Class is by written examinations and oral interviews which is conducted by Public Service Commission. Entry requirements into Executive Class is high school certificate or the Advanced level of General Certificate of Education (GCE) and equivalent qualifications and promotions from Clerical Class. The members of the Executive Class comprised the following: The Executive Officers (General duties, Executive Officers (Accounts), Senior Executive Officers, Principal Executive Officers II, Principal Executive Officer I. The greatest problem of Executive Class was lack of recognition in the entire public service system. Although the personnel of Executive Class were more experienced and “Demonstrated greater expertise in specialized fields than officers of Administrative Class” but generally, they were regarded as inferior officers.

The job responsibilities of Clerical Class are: keeping of records, movement of files, payment of claims, preparation of vouchers etc. The personnel of Clerical Class in both the federal and state public services included: Clerical Assistants, Clerical Officers, Senior Clerical Officers and typists. The minimum entry qualification into the clerical class was General Certificate of Education or its equivalent. Clerical Staff who showed strong commitment for hard work could be promoted to the Executive Class from the grade of Senior Clerical Officer.

The Manipulative or Operational Class, which workers include messengers, cleaners, drivers, mechanics, electricians, night guards are responsible for carrying files from one office to another and keeping the office and the environment tidy and other minor duties.

The Professional Class comprises those personnel who were recruited into public service based on their specialized training, skill, scientific and technical knowledge. Professional Class comprises doctors in the Ministries of Health, architects, surveyors in the Ministries of Works, accountants in Auditing and Finance Departments and lawyers in the Ministries of Justice. The functions of Professional Class were to render advice in their specialized areas both in the formulation and execution of government policies and programmes.

Present Organization of Public Service

Based on the recommendations of Udoji, Public Service Review Commission, the Federal government abolished the five classes system and replaced it with a unified grading. Instead of having five classes system, the jobs in Nigerian public service are now graded from level 1 to 17. Grade 17 is the highest level while grade I is the lowest level (Nwachukwu, 2011). All the workers in the Nigerian public service system are now integrated into the new unified grading system. This new arrangement is not only result oriented but encourages any hard working officer to attain any level of his potential. This is an improvement over the old rigid system of classes under which it was impossible to move from Clerical to Administrative Class (Nwachukwu, 2011).

CHALLENGES OF PUBLIC SERVICE IN NIGERIA

The public service in Nigeria is beset with the following challenges:

1. ***Excessive Corruption:*** Corruption has been recognized as a major problem in the Nigerian Public Service system. Corruption exists in various forms such as inflation of contracts, bribery, nepotism, embezzlement, misappropriation, favouritism, diversion of public resources for personal gain, violation of procedures to advance personal interest, over or under invoicing etc. corruption has led to wastage of government property and militates against the growth of public institutions and agencies.

According to Justice Mustapha Akambi as cited in Chuta (2004), “corruption is a dangerous foe-the endemic nature and debilitating effect of corruption on the cultural, economic, social and political foundation of the society has been harrowing and disconcerting. Corruption is, indeed the bane of our society. It has been the harbinger of the messy situation in which we find ourselves today. Our economy has been ruined, our hopes for greater tomorrow have been dashed, our value system is destroyed so much such that the world begin to see us as men and women without honor and dignity” Commenting on the effect of corruption on Nigerian public service, Ofosu, Nwadike and Esiagu (1992) observe “corruption exacts heavy economic costs, distorts the operations of free markets, slow down economic development and destroys the ability of institutions and bureaucracies to deliver the services that the society may expect. Implicitly, corruption is among the major courses of ineffectiveness, waste and low productivity in public agencies”.

It is observed that the Nigerian public service system is beset with excessive corruption. Corruption is persistent and pervasive to the extent that it has drained the “critical resources away and sap the vitality of public service” thereby preventing it to serve as instrument of social transformation. It is a sad commentary that the country is lacking basic infrastructure and many government projects are either uncompleted or abandoned. All these are attributed to corruption that infest Nigerian public service system.

2. ***Negation of Merit Principle:*** The general belief is that the Nigerian public service is based on merit principle. The implication is that all appointments, promotions and grants of benefits are made on the basis of merit. The merit principle would ensure efficient public service by appointing competent and capable public servants through competitive examinations to manage government affairs. It is worrisome that the Federal Character Principle has undermined the objective of merit principle. The Federal Character Principle which was enshrined in 1999 constitution of the Federal Public of Nigeria has clearly stated that all appointments into federal public sector, all allocation of values, should reflect proportionately the diverse composition of the federation.

The state and local governments are not exempted from this principle. The main objective of the Federal Character Principle is to ensure that all parts of the country is treated fairly and no part is being marginalized or neglected. The truth is that the principle encourages sectionalism and ethnicism. The Federal Character Principle also militates against the appointment of the most qualified and competent persons into the Nigerian public service system. With the appointment based on Federal Character Principle instead of merit system, can the Nigerian public service function effectively as an instrument of economic growth and social progress (Iheanacho, 2012).

3. ***Lack of Adequate Training:*** Another challenge that confronts the public service system in Nigeria is lack of adequate training. Many Nigerian public servants lack the necessary managerial and technical competence to discharge their responsibilities. This has contributed to their poor performance as agents of socio-economic transformation. Even with establishment of administrative staff colleges, the problem still persists. For example, by January 1985, about 2000 management level federal civil servants were yet to attend induction courses which ought to have been provided within the first three months of employment (Iheanacho, 2012). Again, in Nigerian public service system, there is lack of adequate training policy. This has made the ministries to adopt quick fix measures which made the officials to see training as a period of relaxation and hence they do not pay attention to it. The implication is that the bureaucrats assumed increased responsibilities in socio-economic policies and management without imparting necessary training to acquire techno-managerial skills which is fundamental to increase productivity (Iheanacho, 2012).
4. ***Poor Remuneration:*** Another serious challenge to public service in Nigeria is that wages and salaries are generally poor. It is a fact that public servants are poorly paid when compared with their counterparts in private sector and the present economic realities. It is beyond doubt that the average Nigerian public servant is facing rough weather. The high rate of inflation and depreciation in the value of naira have created a lot of problems for the public servants.
5. ***Lack of Working Materials:*** Inadequate working materials disrupts effective functioning of Nigerian public service. Such working materials like office equipment and furniture, stationeries and other essential instruments are lacking in our public service system. A committed and competent public servant is always demoralized when he observes that there is no equipment to discharge his duties effectively. It is regrettable that medical personnel in our public hospitals are lacking the necessary equipment and drugs to discharge their responsibilities. Even our public schools are not exception. These schools lack classrooms, offices, furniture, equipment etc. The same is applicable to other government institutions.

6. ***Indiscipline:*** This is another problem that beset Nigerian Public Service particularly at the lower level. Commenting on indiscipline among junior public servants, Nwosu (1977) observes “an awareness on the part of the subordinates that they have “good-fathers” who will protect them at all times leads to disturbing growth of insubordination and disobedience in carrying out lawful instructions or directive of supervisors who are not well placed in the hierarchy of ministry or department. Another source of indiscipline in the Nigerian public service is lack of incentives. If adequate incentives are not provided for the workers, they are bound to have negative attitude to work, absenteeism is bound to be high as some of them devote more time to secondary occupation (Ezeani, 2005).
7. ***Deffective Recruitment Process:*** Recruitment process in Nigerian public service is defective. Due process is not observed. Instead of laying emphasis on merit as a condition for recruitment into public service, mediocrity becomes the common phenomenon. It is true that independent public service commissions are set up; post are advertised, rules for filling each post are carefully laid down, examinations and interviews are held and an impression is given that everyone is being selected on merit basis but in actual recruitment process, politicians and senior bureaucrats manipulate the entire exercise to favour their candidates. Recruitment is now assumed by political office holders as a means of political compensation. This practice makes the competent person to be sacrificed on the altar of the incompetent in favour of the incompetent.
8. ***Red Tapism:*** According to Dike (1995), red-tape are senseless rules and procedures that are supposed to involve interminable and form filling, multiple approval and endorsement, extended consultations and such other processes that cause delays and inconvenience to the irritation and frustration of the public. Red tape is a ‘bureaucratic phenomenon’ which emphasizes on application of rules, regulations, procedures and paper work. The existence or application of red-tapism is a serious challenge in Nigerian public service system. There is usually rigid adherence to rules and procedures even if such rules and procedures are not necessary. This encourages conservatism and formalism which eventually reduces the efficiency and productivity of public service in Nigeria.
9. ***Conflicts between Generalist Administrators and Professionals:*** Conflicts between the generalist administrators and professionals create its own problems in Nigerian public service system. This problem could be traced back to colonial era when top management positions were controlled by the professionals. When Nigeria embraced parliamentary form of government in 1948, these positions were taken by generalist administrators as it was practiced

in Britain. Since independence, several measures have been taken to resolve the conflicts but the problem persists. For example, the Udoji, Public Service Review Commission which addressed this problem, recommended the abolition of the class system and introduced “a unified and integrated structure” (Iheanacho, 2012). It is worrisome that in spite of the abolition of the class system and the introduction of unified system, tension between the generalist administrators and professionals continue. This conflict militates against the effectiveness and productivity of public service in Nigeria.

10. ***Policy Inconsistency:*** In politics these days, there is gross show of inconsistency across board. For instance, successive government does not want to continue with the projects of the past administration. Always, they have their own list of projects to settle for or promote (with merit or without merit), award contracts etc. Some lofty policies of past government are jettisoned for political reasons or as political vendetta.

CONCLUSION

We have examined the "Nigerian Public Service System, its Challenges and Prospects". In the study, we identified those problems that undermine the performance of the system. These problems include excessive corruption, negation of merit principle, lack of adequate training, poor remuneration, lack of working materials, indiscipline, red-tapism, policy inconsistency; conflicts between the generalist administrators and professionals. In order to enhance the efficacy and capability of the Nigerian public service system, it is hoped that sincere implementation of the suggested measures would go a long way to make Nigerian public service function effectively as a veritable instrument of socio-economic progress and nation building.

For Nigerian public service to serve effectively as an instrument of economic growth and social progress, the following measures should be taken into consideration.

1. It is imperative to adopt sound recruitment process. Effective recruitment policy can be sustained if appointments in Nigerian public service are made on the basis of merit principle. In her efforts to ensure that no part of the country is marginalized in appointment in Nigerian public service, the federal government has introduced Federal Character Principle. This principle which is also applicable to state and local governments has undermined the objective of merit principle. For the Nigerian public service to function effectively as an instrument of national transformation, recruitment must be based on merit principle. To achieve sound recruitment process, politicians and senior bureaucrats should not interfere in the exercise.
2. The Nigerian public servants should be exposed to appropriate managerial training. This would equip them to improve their performance in economic

management and also help them to provide effective leadership in different directorates and agencies. According to Olaniyi (2008) "the developing countries must embark on large-scale training of public administrators. They must be trained and retrained to imbibe the spirit of innovation, ingenuity, efficiency, achievement, prudent use of resources, and do away with all forms of waste that have characterized public bureaucracies over the years".

3. There is an urgent need for the government at all levels to devise appropriate strategies to address the menace of corruption in Nigerian public service system. The easiest approach to reduce the level of corruption in Nigerian public service is that leaders at all levels of governance must be credible and transparent. This is quite necessary because corruption militates against socio-economic growth and has continued to destroy or weaken efficiency, effectiveness and productivity of public service.
4. Dedicated and committed leaders who are always ready to address the basic problems of the masses should guide and supervise the activities of the Nigerian public service. According to Adamolekum (2006), this kind of political leadership must exist on permanent basis because political power has to be exercised on continuous basis.
5. It is imperative to increase the wages and salaries paid to public servants. This will enable them to face the rising inflation occasioned by deregulation policies of the government. Only a motivated public servant can be able to discharge his constitutional responsibilities effectively.
6. That political officers come and go while the public servants remain until retirement; the political appointees should come in only to be enlightened in some areas of public service by the public or civil servants. This will help them in policy formulation and action plan.

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