



Concrescence: Journal of Multi- Disciplinary Research

Volume 2, Number 2, 2025, E-ISSN: 1595-9287

Available:

<https://journals.casjournals.com/index.php/CJMR/index>

Public Administration, Good Governance & Public Accountability in Nigeria: A Theoretical Exposition

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Abstract

Even though Nigeria is one of the world's highest producers of petroleum products, the country has remained backward in socio-economic and political development. Consequently, poor infrastructure, unemployment, poverty, insecurity, and public protest have been the country's hallmarks. One of the major factors that accounts for the failure of most African countries, including Nigeria, to attain development has been the absence of good governance and public accountability by elected and appointed officials. One can conclusively submit that without good governance being institutionalized through accountability, development will continue to elude the country. The yearly budgetary allocations to government ministries and parastatals received little or zero implementation, with nobody accounting for the whereabouts of the allocations. At the same time, the refusal of the government to cut down the cost of running the government despite public calls by Nigerians is enough reason to suggest that there is no accountability in the country. Until public officials, elected or appointed, as mandated by law to manage the resources, are made accountable for their actions and inactions, the public outcry and underdevelopment will continue to be our sorry story. This paper, therefore, addresses the nexus between good governance and accountability in public administration in Nigeria. The paper also identifies the challenges faced by the government in budgetary implementation, such as corruption by public officials, lack of funds, and lack of accountability, and recommends that the way out of bad governance is public accountability and proper management of material and financial resources by elected and appointed officials of the government.

Keywords: Public Administration, Good Governance, Development, and Accountability

Introduction

Public administration exists to provide good governance through public policy initiation and implementation by the political leadership. For effective public administration of resources, people must be held accountable for their actions and inactions, especially those in government positions. The development of any society, including Nigeria, is tied to the practical, efficient, and transparent utilization of its material and human resources. Despite Nigeria's rich oil deposits, the country is still in a sorry state with all kinds of socio-economic challenges such as chronic poverty among its citizens, poor infrastructures, poor healthcare system, insecurity resulting in kidnappings, unemployment, inflation resulting in

increased prices of food items, increased in the price of fuel, and total collapse of the Nigeria economy which is evident in the face of foreign exchange.

The underdevelopment of the African continent and, indeed, Nigeria can be traced to the failure of the public officials to provide good governance and accountability. During campaigns, African politicians make many promises, some resulting in gestures like roasting corn by the roadside. When they assume office, they renege on all the promises and concentrate on building their empires and estates throughout the country and abroad. Government appointees, elected or appointed, see public office as an opportunity to amass wealth for their generations yet unborn. They are not accountable to anybody, and not even government agencies are mandated to hold them accountable. It is a known fact in Nigeria that these government agencies often play to the gallery, thereby allowing government officials to continue in this primitive theft of the people's commonwealth. Official government contracts, especially at the state level that demand legislative budgeting and approval before funds can be released, are hurriedly approved by a single individual (Governor), violating approval limits and contractual protocols, with nobody holding them accountable.

Government work is simply public administration, and public administration has two facets: the first denotes the academic discipline, and the second refers to the activity. Our focus here will be on the latter, the activity aspect of public administration. As an activity, public administration is as old as civilization, and it preceded the academic discipline long before systematic study could begin in the 18th Century. Whereas the history of Western political thought shows that Aristotle's *Politics* and Machiavelli's *The Prince* were important contributions to administrative thought and practice, those scattered thoughts did not constitute a discipline (Basu, 1994: 10). It is interesting to note, however, that even without a systematic study discipline, great empires, cities and public works were built and administered, huge armies were organized, taxes collected, and law and order were maintained and enforced (Basu, 1994: 11). Recognizable administrative activity existed in ancient Egypt during the building of the pyramids and during the process of administering irrigation from the river Nile. Managing the affairs of the Roman Empire with available resources and organizing nation-states out of medieval feudalism were administrative and political feats.

The daily allocation of material resources in terms of human and financial resources for effective provisions of the needs of the public by elected and appointed officials of government is the segment of public administration that this work intends to focus on. The whole idea of governance that involves the capture and control of power is targeted at providing good governance to the public. When budgetary allocations are approved by the legislative organ of government, as submitted by the executive organ of government, their implementation is supposed to follow the provisions captured in the written budget. The monitoring of these projects by the legislature through its oversight functions ensures accountability and an effective check on the proper implementation of the budget by the executive, as government officials provide good governance to the public, and this is public administration, accountability, and good governance. This paper examines the nexus between public administration, accountability, and good governance.

Therefore, after the introduction, this paper reviews concepts such as public administration, good governance, development, accountability, and the nexus between public administration, accountability, and good governance. The last part deals with some

important suggestions for ensuring good governance and accountability in Nigeria's public administration.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the resource-curse theory as a framework of analysis, and it suggests that the abundance of mineral resources is often a curse rather than a blessing, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria. Scholars like Malomo (2008) and Ezirim (2008) noted that natural resources are often seen as more of an economic curse than a blessing. This assumption emerged in the 1980s, and scholars widely deploy it. The resource curse theory was first used by Richard Auty in 1993 to describe how countries with rich natural resources could not use their wealth to boost their economies. In similar studies, Jeffrey (2005) and Warner (2008) have shown a link between natural resource abundance and poor economic growth. They noted a disconnection between natural resources, wealth, and economic growth.

The application of this theory in this study shows the abundance of natural resources available in Nigeria and the Nigerian state's high corruption, poverty, and underdevelopment. Since oil was discovered commercially in Nigeria, the country started witnessing dependence on oil while neglecting other natural resources. For over 40 years, Nigeria has explored over 2 million barrels of crude oil daily, yet the funds are not being accounted for. Basic infrastructures such as roads, healthcare systems, water, and shelter are still major problems Nigerians face. We see a government come and go with billions of dollars missing, with nobody to give an account of how the country has been run. Any political group that captures power adopts a strategy of looting the state's commonwealth with its loyalists until another group takes over. Nigeria was better under the mainstay of the groundnut pyramids. During this time, farmers were encouraged to farm, and the proceeds were used to develop the country. Today, laziness is the order of the day, and all Nigerians are waiting for their opportunity to be in government, where they can take their share of the national cake.

Conceptual Clarifications

Public Administration

According to White (1955: 1), public administration consists of all those operations that fulfill or enforce the public policy for their purpose. Pfiffner and Prethus (1960: 6) emphasize the coordinating role of administration when they consider public administration as getting the work of government done by coordinating the efforts of the people so that they can work together to accomplish their set tasks. For Hughes (1998), public administration is how the administrative parts of government are organized, information is processed, and outputs are produced into policies, laws, or goods and services. In this case, public administration is an activity serving the public servants who implement public policies. It is an activity concerned with translating policies into public goods. Bailey (1986) defines public administration as a human attempt by the government to harness natural and human resources to approximate politically legitimate goals by constitutionally mandated means. Basu (1994: 2) defines public administration as managing government affairs at all levels: national, state, and local.

The seeming consensus from the above is that public administration is a generic expression of the entire range of activities involved in the management of government business through the establishment and implementation of public policy within the confines of public

agencies aimed at the production and distribution of goods and services designed to serve the needs of the citizens. The public realm, therefore, generally connotes decisions that affect people's lives, use public resources, and are made in the name of the public (Harmon and Mayer, 1986). Such activities in the bundle of public administration include decision-making, setting the objectives and goals, planning the work to be done, working with the legislative and citizen organizations to promote public programs, establishing and revising organizations, providing leadership, appraising performance, determining work methods and procedures, exercising controls and other functions performed by government functionaries.

Good Governance

Like any other concept in the social sciences, the concept of good governance has no universally accepted definition. Scholars and public analysts define the concept based on their standpoints and understanding. Gyong (2000), in his analysis, concluded that good governance, as a concept, is problematic. For one, it is value-loaded and therefore subjective. The meaning attached to it may largely be a function of the intents and purposes of the analyst. Nevertheless, it remains a useful concept for obvious reasons. The concept of good governance could invite judgment about how the country concerned was being governed: it raises evaluative questions about proper procedures, transparency, the quality and process of decision-making, and other such matters. It helps to differentiate the professed or actual self-understanding of the ruling groups from their real causal contribution to the prosperity or misery of their subjects.

Kukah (1998) sees good governance as governance that is responsible, accountable, responsive, and transparent. Good governance is about the distribution of political power and means. It means the inclusion of women and other marginalized groups. Good governance may also require power shifts (Anna, 2004). In the views of Igbuzor (2009), good governance entails respect for the rule of law, ensuring effective delivery of public goods and services, participation of all men and women in the decision-making process, institutional effectiveness, and accountability.

Ilufeye (2010) also defines good governance as the process of allocating resources through the state's instrumentalities for the attainment of public good. Thus, good governance includes institutional and structural arrangements, decision-making processes, policy formulation and implementation capacity, personnel development, information flows, and the nature and style of leadership within a political system. Hence, governance is largely about problem identification and solving.

For this study, good governance is the transparent and efficient use of resources, both human and public funds, by appointed and elected government officials to provide the basic needs of the people. This means that governance must impact the lives of the generality of the people living in a country. The government must be public acceptable, suggesting that the public has recognized its activities and accorded it legitimacy.

Bad Governance

According to Akpa (2011), bad governance is the opposite of good governance. It is exercised through bad leadership. It is a complete absence of good leadership and transparency. It means a lack of respect for the fundamental human rights of citizens, a lack of judicious use of natural resources, fraud, and other corrupt practices. In short, it has no respect for accountability and transparency. Bad governance refers to how decisions are

made in government and business. It is also the polar opposite of good leadership. Bad governance entails systemic corruption and a lack of openness and accountability, arbitrary policymaking, and the deception of those who are ruled. Bad governance occurs when governing entities refuse to listen to the voices of those they manage and are unwilling to take responsibility for their conduct. By dismissing the voices of the people, the governing body no longer hears or considers their ideas. Democratic governments emphasize accountability to ensure that the public knows what is happening and has a plan of action if something goes wrong. In turn, a lack of accountability breeds distrust between the two parties, leading to instability.

Development

The term development has various meanings and can be explained in different contexts. For example, the developmental needs of people living in an IDP camp must be different from the developmental needs of people in a community with available basic amenities. The concept of development connotes different things to different categories of people, political scientists, psychologists, Marxists, welfarists, capitalists, sociologists, and the common masses on the streets all view development depending on their standpoint.

According to Pearson (1992), development involves “an improvement qualitative, quantitative or both in the use of available resources.” He also asserts that development does not refer to one particular perspective on social, political, and economic betterment. Instead, it is a hybrid term for many strategies adopted for socio-economic and environmental transformation from the current state to the desired one.

According to Filani (2000), development can be defined as a sustained increase in total and per capita incomes accompanied by structural transformation and modernization of the socio-economic environment. Development is a process that results in the transformation of socio-cultural, economic, and political structures in a manner that improves the capacity of the society to fulfill its aspirations. According to Ogbu et al. (2017), development refers to changes that result in positive benefits to the generality of the citizens and other residents of a country/community/town. A country/town can improve the standards of living, security, and welfare of its people. According to Jande (2024), development is simply a poverty reduction and yet an improvement in the standard of living of a greater number of the population of a community/state/country. When this happens, the greater majority of the people in the society have access to basic life needs such as food, shelter, healthcare, security, and peace.

Accountability

The concept of accountability or public accountability is a universally accepted standard for Public Administration in theory and practice. However, its specific meaning and institutional application may vary from one place or institution to another. Traditionally, accountability involves individual responsibility for the performance of specified duties and the top-down control within an official hierarchy (Wolf, 2000). Fox and Meyer (1995: 1-2) define accountability as the “responsibility of government and its agents towards the public to achieve previously set objectives and to account for them in public.” It is also regarded as a commitment from public officials, individually and collectively, to accept public responsibility for their actions and inaction. In this case, the burden of accountability rests on each public functionary to act in the public interest and according to his or her conscience, with solutions for every matter based on professionalism and participation (Fox

and Meyer, 1995: 5). Haque (2000: 612) looks at public accountability from the entire governance system as the “answerability of public officials to the public for their actions and inactions for which they are subject to both external and internal sanctions.” Similarly, Basu considers public accountability as the liability of government servants to give a satisfactory account of the use of official power and/or discretionary authority. It is an obligation to expose, explain, and justify actions taken on behalf of delivering services to the public (Basu, 1994: 472).

According to White (cited in Basu, 1994, 472), accountability consists of the constitutional, statutory, administrative, and judicial rules and precedents and the established practices through which public officials may be held responsible for their official actions. The following elements/tenets capture the concept of accountability as advocated in the public sector realm:

1. Transparently undertaking official decisions/activities, capturing various stakeholders' interests;
2. Making optimal use of resources - taking consideration of value for money and cost-benefit analysis, with no tolerance to waste and corruption, adhering to ethical and professional standards and regulations;
3. Responding to community needs as much as possible with prioritization;
4. Implementing viable mechanisms of providing feedback and information to the public; and,
5. Making an effort to foster awareness and civil society participation.

In general, accountability can be understood as the answerability for performance and the obligation that public functionaries (elected and appointed officials) have to give a satisfactory explanation for the exercise of power, authority, and resources entrusted to them on behalf of the public (taxpayers).

Nexus between Public Administration, Accountability, and Good Governance

Good governance means accountability, security of human rights and civil liberties, devolution of powers, and respect for local autonomy. Good governance has been closely linked to ‘the extent to which a government is perceived and accepted as legitimate, committed to improving the public welfare and responsive to the needs of its citizens, competent to assure law and order and deliver public services, able to create an enabling policy environment for productive activities; and equitable in its conduct’ (Landell-Mill and Seragelden, cf Simbine, 2000; 17).

Despite having all the needed resources to take Nigeria out of its current underdeveloped state, the country is still backwards in all development indices. Bad governance and a lack of public accountability in the country's public administration have kept the country in its sorry state. We have seen the president and state Governors govern as if the government is their empire. These politicians hijack the government and go to any level to loot and embezzle public funds at will without accounting for it, despite all the developmental challenges that we have in the country. Meanwhile, no country in the world can be developed if its leaders are not accountable and good governance is in deficit, as in Nigeria.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), good governance has eight major characteristics. It is participatory, consensus-oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective, efficient, equitable, inclusive, and follows the rule of law. It assures that corruption is minimized, the views of minorities are taken into account, and that the voices of the most vulnerable are heard in decision-making. It is also responsive to society's present and future needs (OECD, 2001). These characteristics are further discussed as follows:

1. Participation: Participation is a key cornerstone of good governance. Participation could be either direct or through legitimate intermediate institutions or representatives. Participation needs to be informed and organized. This means freedom of association and expression on the one hand and an organized civil society on the other hand.

2. Rule of law: Good governance requires a fair legal framework enforced impartially. It also requires complete protection of human rights, particularly those of minorities. Impartial law enforcement requires an independent judiciary, an impartial and incorruptible police force, and patriotic Armed Forces.

3. Transparency: This means that decisions are made and enforced according to rules and regulations. It also means that information is freely available and directly accessible to those affected by such decisions and their enforcement. It also means that enough information is provided and that it is provided in easily understandable forms and media.

4. Responsiveness: Good governance requires that institutions and processes serve all stakeholders within a reasonable time frame.

5. Consensus-oriented: A given society has several actors and many viewpoints. Good governance requires mediation of different interests to reach a broad consensus on what is in the best interest of the whole community and how this can be achieved. It also requires a broad and long-term perspective on what is needed for sustainable human development and how to achieve such development goals. This can only result from understanding the historical, cultural, and social context of a given society or community.

6. Equity and inclusiveness: A society's well-being depends on ensuring that all its members feel that they have a stake in it and do not feel excluded from the mainstream. This requires all groups, but particularly the most vulnerable, to have opportunities to improve or maintain their well-being.

7. Effectiveness and efficiency: Good governance means that processes and institutions produce results that meet society's needs while making the best use of the resources available. The concept of efficiency in the context of good governance also covers the sustainable use of natural resources and the protection of the environment.

8. Accountability: Accountability is a key requirement of good governance. Governmental institutions, the private sector, and civil society organizations must be accountable to the public and their institutional stakeholders. Who is responsible to whom varies depending on whether decisions or actions taken are internal or external to an organization or institution. Generally, an organization or an institution is accountable to those affected by its decisions or actions. Accountability cannot be enforced without transparency and the rule of law.

Statistically speaking, Nigeria has consistently ranked low in the World Governance Index in areas such as government effectiveness, accountability, political stability, and the presence of violence and terrorism, rule of law, and control of corruption. Nigeria is perceived in the 2020 Transparency International Corruption Perception Index as a highly corrupt country with a score of 25/100, while its corruption ranking increased from 146 in 2019 to 149 in 2020 out of 180 and 145 out of 180 in 2023 countries surveyed. While President Muhammadu Buhari won the 2015 election on his promise to fight insecurity and corruption, his promises went unfulfilled. Boko Haram continues to unleash unspeakable violence on civilians, while the fight against corruption is counterproductive.

At the core of Nigeria's systemic failure and corruption is the crisis of good governance, which manifests in the declining capacity of the state to cope with a range of internal political and social upheavals. There is an expectation for political leaders to recognize systemic risks such as high inflation, increased fuel prices, terrorist attacks, herder-farmer conflict, and police brutality and put in place the necessary infrastructure to gather relevant data for problem-solving. However, the insufficiency of political savvy required to navigate Nigeria's challenges has unleashed unrest across the nation and exacerbated existing tensions. The EndSARS protest against police brutality in 2020, and the ENDBADGOVERNANCE Protest of 2024 are manifestations of bad governance.

Since 1999, the democratic space has been dominated by political elites who consistently violate fundamental principles of a liberal democratic system, such as competitive elections, the rule of law, political freedom, and respect for human rights. The outcome of the 2023 presidential election further eroded public trust in the ability of the independent electoral commission to organize competitive elections unfettered by the authoritarian influences of the ruling class. This challenge is an indicator of the systemic failure of Nigeria's governance system. Continuing the current system will only accelerate the erosion of public trust and democratic institutions. In contrast with the current system in which votes are attained through empty promises, bribery, voter intimidation, and violence, Nigeria needs a governance system that will enhance the education of its voters and the capability of its leaders, and this can only be possible through good governance and accountability.

When political officeholders are made to account for their actions and inactions, those found wanting are removed from their positions or punished to deter anyone who would want to do the same, which is good governance. After the 2023 general elections, Nigerians called for the resignation of the INEC chairman, Professor Mahmood Yakubu, for not adhering to the amended provisions of the Electoral Act 2022. Many analysts described the failure of INEC to transmit election results electronically, as provided by the laws, as changing the game's rules in the middle of the match.

In 2022, the chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission made a public statement through the Director of Information that the commission was ready with all the preparations to transmit all the election results electronically. Nigerians were shocked when the commission refused to keep its promise of transmitting the results in real-time. Instead, INEC reverted to a manual collation of election results across the country. The commission shamefully announced the election's final result deep in the night when Nigerians were fast asleep, pointing to bad governance. The failure of political officials to provide good governance, transparency, and accountability has labeled this government as one of the most corrupt in Nigeria's history. The suspension of Dr. Beta Edu, the former minister of Disaster Management and Humanitarian Affairs, and the refusal of President

Tinubu's government through anti-corruption agencies to prosecute her is another failure of a government that is not accountable.

The issues of underdevelopment that bedeviled the country persist today because good governance and accountability are absent in the country's public administration. Nigeria is still grappling with accountability issues in governance, with government officials working for themselves instead of the people. The effects are corruption, embezzlement, abuse of office, diversion of public funds meant for projects, and many unethical vices that are inimical to our development. This bad governance and non-accountability have continued to put the country in abject poverty, lack of infrastructure, an absolutely poor healthcare delivery system, corruption in government, and general bad governance that have removed the public from government business.

Transparency and accountability are the outcomes of good governance, where the state functions in the service of the public good for the greater majority. If good governance is conceptualized in this way, where the people are aware of how the resources controlled by government officials are utilized, the question of legitimacy will not arise. Suppose public funds are accounted for transparently, and unused funds are returned to the state treasury for further budgeting. In that case, citizens will learn to trust the government, attributing it to good governance. It is undemocratic, and an abuse of public administrative rules when policies initiated are abandoned, and funds released for projects are diverted to individual accounts. It is also true that Nigeria's development depends on the government's openness to managing natural resources. There is a consensus among scholars that only good governance can ensure accountability, transparency, and development of any society. When there is an institutional allowance for the rule of law to be operational, the country is on the path toward good governance and development.

Conclusion and the Way Forward

Bad governance and lack of accountability in Nigeria's public administration have brought the country to its current situation, where corruption is the order of the day and poverty among Nigerians is now a way of life. Since the discovery of oil in commercial quantities, the political leadership in Nigeria has hardly thought of ways of managing the nation's resources for the welfare of Nigerians and the development of the country. On the other hand, government appointees are living in affluence, spending dollars on birthdays and weddings for their family and friends using government budgets without giving accountability to anyone. It is a state for the winner, and anyone who captures power uses the state's commonwealth for personal gain while leaving the country underdeveloped. No country can develop without good governance, and its elected and appointed officials are accountable for their actions and inactions in office. Some ways to correct these anomalies and ensure good governance and accountability are elucidated below.

Nigerians must wake up and demand accountability from those occupying public offices and ensure their selection and appointment process is carefully checked before they are allowed in those offices. The process of choosing political leadership in Nigeria must be reexamined and reconsidered. First, the background of an individual must be checked, his educational qualifications must be considered, his working experiences must also be put into consideration, and then his current ideas about governance must be publicly scrutinized through debates, public engagements, and other public checks before he can be trusted to lead in any capacity.

There should be a new approach to managing our natural resources through legislation to ensure adherence to strict set rules and regulations. The national and state assemblies should make laws that will determine how and who controls the resources of the country. If the federal government is going to control the oil reserve, those in charge should be made accountable. The current reality in the Niger Delta communities today is a situation whereby oil is explored in commercial quantities yet not accounted for and, at the same time, does not reflect in the development of the area; a situation where the number of barrels of crude oil explored a day in Nigeria is unknown to the officials of the NNPC, and this is unacceptable and detrimental to development. If multinational corporations are allowed to manage our natural resources at a free fall without accounting for it, it suggests wastage and criminal conspiracy to defraud the country of resources that would have been used for the development of the country's deficit infrastructure. Thus, if our leaders cannot manage our deposits because of the Nigerian syndrome, compromise, negligence, or total abuse of their official duties, they should be removed from office and made to face the laws of the land.

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