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## Public Sector Reforms in Nigeria: Issues, Challenges and Prospects

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### ABSTRACT

The pride of any government is to ensure effective and efficient utilization of available resources as well as provide and deliver the needed social, welfare and productive facilities across the nook and cranny of the societies. And public sector is one of the basic institutions of government saddled with this responsibility. As society continues to expand through transformation, so also is the responsibilities of government. To successfully meet up with this unavoidable transformation, the public sector needs periodic and relevant innovative reforms. In Nigeria, series of public sector reforms have been initiated and implemented by successive governments to enhance the capacity and performance of public sector. Despite these reforms, public service delivery has remained poor and unimpressive as essential services and productive facilities continue to elude Nigerians. Based on the foregoing, the study examined public sector reforms implementation in Nigeria and its various challenges. The study employed the use of secondary method to elicit the needed data for the study. The finding shows that corruption, implementation and design problems, environmental challenges, human resistance etc. were responsible for the failure of public sector reforms in Nigeria. The study recommends relevant training, monitoring and evaluation, transparency and accountability as panacea for public sector reforms failure in Nigeria.

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**Keywords:** Government, Policy, Public Sector, Public Service, Reforms

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### Introduction

Public sector plays a vital role in the transformation of any society. It is a principal organ of government employed to achieve the economic, political and social goals of the state. These goals are usually influenced by the objectives of the existing government. For instance, in Nigeria, such objectives range from achievement or maintenance of national unity, acceleration of economic development, for the purpose of achieving self-reliance, improvement in the living standard of the people, nurturing of the country for a speedy entrance into scientific

and technological age to playing increasing role in the comity of nations (Monye-Emina, 2012).

Arising from the foregoing, the public sector is unarguably expected to promote national unity, rapid socio-economic and technological development, formulate and implement policies in a consistently changing and dynamic environment. To this end, public sector is to aid the growth and development of private initiatives, manage government data, operate an open, humane and sensitive civil service as well as an

administrative system, which is development conscious, and with efficient and effective performance orientation. According to Dada (2005), public sector is expected to operate a personnel management system, which will allow for professionalism, specialization, excellent motivation, high moral and a satisfying career for public servants. It can be inferred from the analysis that public sector is saddled with enormous responsibilities. To successfully and continuously perform these functions, public sector needs reforms. Reform is very essential as it will restructure the public sector for better and reliable performance.

Over the years, public sector performance has been worrisome in Nigeria as public service delivery continues to be poor and deficient (Maduabum, 2017). Social and welfare services needed by the citizens are conspicuously inadequate and bias. As a result, citizens have perceived public institutions as welfare laggard. In an attempt to address this perennial problem, government had initiated and implemented series of reforms ranging from Harragin Commission, Gorsuch Commission, Mbanefo Commission, Newns Commission, Adebo Commission, Udoji Commission, Williams Panel, Philips Panel, 1988 Civil Service Reforms, 1997 Civil Service Reforms to National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) and public Sector Governance Reform (PSGR) on public sector.

However, these reforms had failed to serve as corrective and or innovative measures to the challenges of public institutions as public sector performance remains inefficient, ineffective and unattractive. Arising from this ugly scenario, the study is set to investigate the challenges of public sector and examine the failure of litany of reforms put in place by successive governments to enhance public sector performance and efficient service delivery. The study is divided into six sections. Section one is the introduction serving as background to the study. And section two handles literature review, while section three discusses the theoretical framework and methodology. Section four looks at the historical analysis of public sector reforms in Nigeria, and section five analyses the challenges of public sector

reforms in Nigeria, while section six concludes and makes viable recommendations.

## Literature Review

This section concentrates on the review of existing literature on public sector reform generally with a view to having in-depth understanding of the position held by scholars, authors and practitioners about the subject under discussion.

Public sector has been perceived as structures made up of government departments in charge of making available goods and services that each and every citizen values (Ayee, 2010). In Similar vein, Amoke (2008) view the public sector as an encompassing organization which provides service to the public that are publicly funded owned and operated (Amoke, 2008). According to Olowu (2010), Public sector is a fundamental instrument for implementing laws enacted by legislature and providing services to the public. He identifies key four responsibilities of public sector as:

- Giving advice to the government
- Implementing policies of government
- Delivering a valued service
- Enforcing the laws and regulations of nation.

Onyinye (2013) offers a better and broader definition of the public sector. He sees public sector as institution comprising upstream core ministries and agencies, downstream bodies including sector ministries and non-executive state institutions. Upstream bodies include core ministries and agencies at the centre of government, such as the Ministry of finance and the offices that support the head of government, which have functions that cut across sectors. Downstream bodies include both sector ministries and agencies, including education and health providers which deliver fund services under the policy direction of government. They also include a diverse group of more autonomous bodies such as regulators and state owned enterprises and corporate bodies, which, in many countries, still provide the majority of services despite extensive privatization. According to Roll (2014) public sector is mainly of government departments and agencies that is staffed by public servants. The position of Roll is not

different from Onyinye's position, the two are complementary. Roll believes that the division of public sector into organizational units is a fundamental basis for performances. According to him, each went with a particular specialization and related set of responsibilities and authorities. Broadly, there are two major types of organizational units: central agencies and line departments usually referred to as ministries, departments and agencies. This analysis is all embracing as it captures all the institutions in the three arms of government i.e. executive, legislature and judiciary that are saddled with the responsibility of providing services.

**R**eform, according to Ayee (2010) involves activities seeking to improve the public service of the state, its roles and functions as well as the effectiveness and efficiency of its core public service institutions in a systematic and sustainable manner towards providing efficient services to the public. It could also be viewed as a deliberate plan to change public bureaucracies towards effective functioning of the Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAS). It is synonymous with innovations, through provision of modern ideas, tools and people in a new combination of tasks and relationships into the policy and administrative process.

**O**laopa (2011) in his study views reform as improvement, re-organization, restructuring, modification, transformation, amendment, overhauling, restoration, change and adjustment. According to him, to reform is to improve on the organization in question by removing errors that have crept into the modus operandi and structures. Reform thus entails recognizing that a thing has a fault, identifying the best means through which the faults can be rectified and taking necessary steps to ensure that the reform is actually carried out. This sense of reform, according to Olaopa, implies readjusting a thing in order to meet its original conception after it had gone through some period of decay.

**B**ean and Radford (2005) capture reform from another perspective different from Olaopa's position. In their analysis, reform rectifying the errors in an organization in order to make it conform to an original conception could also be

employed to mean repositioning an organization order to better situate it for the institutional demands of the future. According to them, this type of reform is necessary when an organization emerges, its vision / mission and needs to implement some innovative ideas designed to reduce excesses. For instance, there could be an enlargement of public service's scope of the restructuring of some of its ministries, departments and agencies. Reforms under this classification are undertaken in order to accommodate certain new scopes of business which were not part of the original remit for which the organization was founded. From the foregoing explanations, one thing clearly derived. It is the fact that reform recognizes the inevitability of change in human society. The idea of reform enables humans to accommodate new changes by adjusting or changing old ideas or processes in line with new challenges or visions. To respond to change, reforming requires that an organization changes its method of doing thing as prevailing situation demands. Also, noted from the explanations is the fact that reforms are mostly needed in developing countries particularly in Africa region, where much emphasis have not been placed on effective service delivery by the successive governments in the past years.

**W**orld Bank (2012) describes public sector reform as the art and science of making the public sector machinery work. The Bank claimed that the size and economic significance of the public sector make it a major contributor to growth and social welfare. Nwasike (2016) analyses the key guiding principles of public sector reform as recommended by the commonwealth group for public administration as follows; a new pragmatic and result-oriented frame-work; clarification of objectives and administrative structures; intelligent political strategies and engagement; goal-oriented competencies and skills development; experimentation and innovation; professionalization and improved morale; a code of conduct for public sector ethics; effective and pragmatic anti-corruption strategies and effective public financial management. According to Nwasike, these principles are to ensure high quality and more responsive public services that will enhance better service delivery and value for money.

In similar veins, Ayee (2010) identifies five aims of the public sector reform as; efficiency, manageability and robustness, effectiveness, responsiveness and honesty and equity. In his analytical position, he attempted to justify for the five aims identified. According to him, efficiency will ensure the efficient use of both time and resources needed to produce a given public sector outcome, while effectiveness will make sure the public sector has the desired impact i.e. ensuring the appropriateness of efforts and outcomes. He said responsiveness will make government capable of being responsive to the needs of the citizens and encouraging their participation in the design and delivery of public goods, while honesty and equity will stimulate transparency and accountability.

The literature has identified three phases in public sector reforms in Africa. The first phase is called the quantitative or first generation reforms or structurally oriented public service reforms, which started in the 1980s and ended in the early 1990s. The reforms emerged from the macroeconomic and fiscal reforms that were embedded in Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPS) sponsored by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). They sought to make government affordable and lean through cost reduction and containment measures especially by way of rationalizing the machinery of government, divesting non-core operations, retrenching redundant staff, removing ghost workers from the payroll, freezing employment and adopting measures to control the wage bill and other personnel based expenditures (Nunberg, 1997; Lienert, 1998). Ayee (2010) in his argument has faulted this reform. He said the results of the reform were mixed and varied among countries for three reasons. According to him, lack of ownership of the reform and commitment to its implementation by those involved and little public support for the programme. Also, political understanding and support for structural public sector reform programmes remained narrow and difficult to sustain. And as services continued to deteriorate or stagnate under the structural public sector reform programmes, there was political and public pressure to focus on improving these

services. This actually provided the drive for launching the next new wave or facet of public sector reform programmes, which is called the second phase in this study. The second phase is called qualitative second generation reforms. The focus was on capacity building which began in 1990s to early 2000. The key interventions included enhancing staff skills, improvement of management systems and structures, restoring incentives and improving pay and improving work environment. Ayee noted that there was conspicuous absence of effective pay and incentives reform, which remain a critical to sustainable capacity building even in those African countries where major downsizing of the service had taken place, there was limited progress in pay reform. In view of this, service delivery continued to deteriorate in most countries throughout the 1990s, which facilitated another phase called the third-generation reform, otherwise known as Washington consensus, whose focus is on service delivery improvement and started from the late 1990s to date. The reform is anchored by the following factors (i) the need to demonstrate early results; (ii) public demands for transparency and accountability; the shift to market economics and private sector led economic growth; (iii) influence of new public management and pursue of an integrated systems approach (McCourt, 2013; Ayee, 2008).

Studies have shown that capacity development is one of the major challenges facing public sector reforms in African countries (Morgan, et al, 2010; De Lange, 2011) from the foregoing it can be deduced that public sector reform is one of the numerous subsets of activities that comprise the essential elements of public sector transformation. To achieve effective reform in Africa and particularly in Nigeria, individuals, communities, enterprises, local and national governments must play discrete, complimentary and sometimes overlapping roles.

## Theoretical Framework

The importance of the theoretical framework in a study lies in the fact that social science research is theory based and its operations are guided by relevant principles



of human behaviour. This study seeks to understand issues and challenges surrounding public sector reforms in Nigeria. It is essentially a study of institutional governance. Based on this, the study will be situated within the ambit of New Public Management (NPM) Theory.

NPM as a theory is concerned primarily with how to deliver public goods efficiently and equitably. It is result focused rather than the process of result. New Public Management theory came up with concepts for performance and the principles to achieve it (Hood, 1991). Hood identified the principles as follows; accountability and efficiency; reduction of public sector expenditure; improvement in resources use through labour discipline; flexibility in decision making; competition in the public sector through decentralization and emphasis on result and not procedure.

According to Pollit and Boukaert (2000) New Public Management is fundamentally focused on models that assist in the enhancement of public sector performance and service delivery. These models are into four categories as explained by Pollit and Boukaert, they include efficiency model, downsizing and decentralization model, management of change model and public service orientation to change model. Essentially, NPM theory centres on accountability, innovations, transparency, democratization, citizens' participation, efficiency and effective delivery.

This theory is relevant to this study because the theory was an effort to improve government service delivery to citizenry as a result of the expectation of the people. The onus of service delivery solely rests on a public sector performance, it is therefore expected that new ideals and changes that could herald good performance be introduced and implemented in the public sector for effective and efficient service delivery, which also informed this study. In many developing countries, including Nigeria, NPM becomes an avenue through which democratic governance will transform into better governance that will lead to public policies that are technically efficient and effective and responsive to the needs of large

section of the citizenry. The main current of the NPM literature is concerned not with what to do but how to do it better. It argues for an incentive environment in which leaders are given flexibility in the use of resources but held accountable for results.

It is to be noted that the new public management theory is not without its own weakness, as a theory that encourages government to concentrate on the efficient production of quality services to the citizenry, it neglects the political aspect of public administration. According to Armstrong (1998), public service and administration is characterized by political, ethical, constitutional and social dimension as differentiated from other sectors. NPM did not explain role and influence of socio-political factors in the formation and implementation of policies in the public sector. In spite of this weakness, NPM offers new ways and methods of acquiring greater transparency, efficiency, effective service delivery and innovative good results, which unarguably makes the theory needful and appropriate for use in this study. To this end, the failure and challenges of public sector reforms in Nigeria can be viewed and understood as a carryover effect of clear deviation from the principles of New Public Management (NPM). It can further be argued that the various reforms designed to enhance the performance of the public sector did not consider the option of new public management as alternative to excessiveness and recklessness, therefore, reforms were very good on paper, but implementation and workability remain a tall dream.

## Method and Materials

The scope of the study covered public sector reforms in Nigeria, with wrap attention on federal ministries, parastatal, and agencies. The study examined the various reforms employed by the federal government to improve and enhance public sector capacity from the period of pre-independence to the present time. The study employed the use of secondary method to source data from available materials, such as the annual ministry and intergovernmental agency's reports, texts, journals, country evaluations reports, academic papers, donor documents, consultancy reports, NGOs'

reports, websites and online resource centres. The data were analyzed using content analysis approach.

### **Public Sector Reforms in Nigeria: Analysis of the Situation**

Public sector reforms are not limited to Nigeria. As a matter of emphasis, it is a global phenomenon that moves across continents and regions of the world. As captured by Ayee (2001), public sector reforms were largely driven by economic reform, democratization and the search for administrative efficiency to improve the quality of goods and services delivered to the public. According to him, the notable examples include the "big bang" comprehensive state reforms in New Zealand from the mid-1980s through the early 1990s, the radical transformation of administrative culture in the United Kingdom (1979 – 1998), the government Performance and Results Act (1993) in the United States, the total quality management movements in several South Eastern Asian countries and the decentralized management initiative in several Latin American Countries. He was of the opinion that these reforms actually reduced the role of the state, and emphasized the effectiveness of public sector institutions in providing value for money services and seemingly market-oriented organizational mechanisms such as decentralization, privatization, commercialization, deregulation, performance management, downsizing and pay reform to ensure and improve effective and efficient public service delivery.

Olaopa, (2011) in a similar position with Ayee emphasized the need for public sector reform in Africa, when he mentioned that public sector is pivotal both to the day to day operation of the state and to its ability to effectively managed development processes and provide universal public goods and services. According to him, public administrators or servants are critical in the roles as gatekeepers, policy makers, implementers and distributors. As intermediaries between politicians and the wider population, they are essential to ensuring the penetration of the state at local level to the allocation and distribution of resources and to the enforcement of rules.

Inferred from this is the fact that the role of public sector cannot be underestimated in Africa. But, in Africa, particularly Nigeria, the public sector is generally perceived as an obstacle to development because it is plagued by poverty, corruption, inefficiency, poor management, low morale, neo-patrimonialism and political instability (Olowu, 2010; Owusu and Ohemeng, 2012). To address these, various commissions, committees and policies have been instituted and implemented by successive governments in Nigeria.

According to Adebayo (2001), the first reform of the public service was carried out by the Harraign Commission of 1946. The commission divided the service into junior and senior services. The service was further restructured into the sub-clerical, clerical administrative, professional and sub-clerical, clerical, administrative, professional and super-scale staff by Gorsuch commission of 1954. Another Commission, known as Mbanefo commission was put in place in 1959 to handle the issue of salaries and wages review in the civil service. The Newns Commission was designed in 1959 to integrate the existing departments under directors into ministries and such to be headed by permanent secretaries. This was a significant development in the restructuring of civil service.

The seventh reform was the Adebo Commission which was instituted in 1970 to further address the issue of salaries and wages, including allowances for the workers. To further enhance the performance of public institutions, Udoji Commission was put in place in 1972. The reforms introduced a unified salary grading system, new management techniques and open reporting system. However, Udoji commission was characterized by complaints which led to the introduction of Williams's panel in 1975 to address the various complaint that accompanied grading and salary structure designed by the Udoji Commission. The activities of Williams's panel brought about the national purge of public servants by the Murtala / Obasanjo regime, where thousands of civil-servants were unceremoniously disengaged. Another panel came up in 1985 as a result of the failure of the previous panels and commissions to promote efficiency and make public service result

oriented. This new panel was led by Philips Dotun, and the recommendations of the panel were largely considered by the Koshoni panel (Amoke, 2008).

Another reform, 1988 civil service reform, a popular reform that abolished the post of Head of civil service, made Ministers / Commissioners accounting officers of their respective Ministries, replace Permanent Secretary with Director-General and politicized it. The adverse effect of the 1988 reforms on civil service brought in Ayida panel of 1997. There were other reforms designed to improve salary and wages of the public servants, for instance the salary increment, under Abdulsalam Abubakar in 1999, payment of new minimum wage under President Obasanjo.

In 2004, a new reform tagged Nigerian Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS) was introduced as a poverty reduction strategy. It was a medium term strategy designed to achieve its goals between 2003 and 2007. NEEDS rests on four key objectives; reforming the way government works and its institutions; growing the private sector, implementing a social charter for the people and re-orientation of the people with an enduring African value system. The reform was strategically aimed at providing greater transparency and accountability of public institutions and government operations through; right-sizing the sector and eliminate ghost workers; re-professionalize the public services; rationalize, re-structure and strengthen institutions; privatization and liberalization programmes; tackling corruption and improving transparency in government accounts and reduce waste and improve the efficiency of government expenditure (NEEDS Document, 2004).

In order to improve good governance and effective financial management in the public sector, the federal government adopted a reform sponsored by the World Bank, though, coordinated by the Federal Ministry of Finance through the credit facility received from the International Donor Agencies (The International Development Association (IDA) and the World Bank, 2007). The reform, Public Sector Governance Reforms and Development

Project (PSGRDP) was adopted to be implemented between 2012 and 2017 across the six geopolitical zones of country (Ajobe, 2017). The reform was basically meant to improve transparency, accountability and service quality in public finance and human resource management systems with a view to strengthening governance in Nigeria. The foregoing are litany of reforms adopted and implemented by the federal government aimed at strengthening the public sector performance. But in spite of all these reforms, public service has remained ineffective, inefficient and a welfare laggard. In this sense, will it be appropriate to say that these reforms were theoretically deficient and or are badly implemented? This puzzle will be resolved in the next section of this study.

### Challenges of Public Sector Reforms in Nigeria

Considering the series of reforms that had been initiated and implemented and the amount of resources expended on public sector by successive governments over the years, it is expected that the public sector should have been a cynosure of all eyes and a very strong pillar and effective pivotal stick for efficient service delivery. But sadly, not much has been achieved in this direction. Most of these reforms have failed to yield positive results, although there were modicum levels of achievements that can be traced to few numbers of these reforms, still, these performances fall short of people's expectation as evidences and available facts show poor outing of the public sector in the delivery of basic and needed services.

It is to be noted that this ceaseless failure of reforms and the subsequent incapacitation of public sector is not unconnected with these factors that are discussed below.

- (a) **Implementation problem:** This is one of the challenges faced by public Sector reforms in Nigeria. Most good reforms are not well implemented by the implementers due to certain reasons. Among these are: inadequate resources ranging from infrastructure, finance to human resources. According to Ingrams, et al (2020) reform requires huge amount of resources. And these resources may not be adequately available for effective implementation by

implementing bodies. This will affect effective execution and possibly reduce the intended results. Another factor that is directly linked to implementation problem is the design problem. Often times reform is designed to achieve its objectives within a specific period of time, which can otherwise be called life span of the reform. In most cases, the life span of the reform is short and not able to address the challenges faced by the public sector within that short period of implementation. Aside this timing constraint, some of these reforms is externally designed by foreigners not minding the peculiarities of the implementing countries. For instance, Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), Public Sector Governance Reform (PSGR) were designed by the World Bank with contents that are highly technical in nature and require special technical skills and expertise that are not readily available particularly in the developing nations. And this is why some scholars have criticized PSGR for its foreign based nature (Ajobe 2017; Ayee, 2010).

**(b) Corruption problem:** Corruption is one of the fundamental problems in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. Most policies and reforms are constrained by corrupt practices of the people in charge of implementation, Akinsanmi, et al (2022) lamented the spate of corruption in Nigeria government and all its agencies are dramatically corrupt as one agent need to bribe the other for attention and valuable services. According to them, it is not limited to government agencies alone as individuals are also involved in the dastardly act. Members of the public had to also bribe their ways to get favour from government ministries and parastatal. Fund meant for the execution of reform projects are often converted and diverted into private use (Business day, 2023). Thereby leading to abandonment of such enviable projects.

**(c) Weak Capacity of Implementing Agencies:** Weak capacity of implementing agencies is another peculiar challenge to public sector reforms (Olaopa, 2022; Damian, and Ijere, 2020). Most of the reforms models and frameworks are too technical in nature for non-professional public

servants to implement as some of them are not competent in the use of new computer packages required to execute the reforms. Additionally, most of the reform's contents are too economic in nature, neglecting the socio-political factors capable of affecting public sector performance.

**(d) Problem of Continuity:** Problem of continuity in government policies and programmes affects public sector reforms, particularly in Nigeria. There is no consistent continuation of policies by the successive governments. Every new government tends to initiate a new reform without recourse to the existing one, even when the existing reform is yet to achieve its targets.

**(e) Miscellaneous:** Other challenges capable of affecting public sector reforms in Nigeria are; lack of political will on the part of political leaders, especially when such reform does not emanate from them, human resistance also affect public sector reforms in that reform itself is about changes in structure, practice etc. When such changes do not favour or fail to protect the interest of the implementing personnel, resistance to such reform becomes imminent and unpreventable, thereby frustrating the objectives of the reform from being achieved. Last but not the least is the problem of environment. Every environment has its own peculiarities, what works in environment A may not work in environment B as a result of environmental differences. Therefore, most adopted reforms are bound to face difficulties in the hands of their adopters.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has demonstrated the need for public sectors reform in a more pragmatic direction in Nigeria. Essentially, the study has also revealed the challenges associated with whole government approaches and how public sector reforms at best are loosely linked to service delivery. Improved service delivery is what citizens most want and can make politicians and regime popular. Based on the results of the findings of this study, it is acknowledged that there are still opportunities available to governments, agencies to design and implement viable, efficient and effective reforms toward ensuring sustainable public sector



governance. In order to achieve this, the following suggestions need to be considered.

Long-term frames should be adopted in designing, implementing and evaluating public sector reforms. Reform should have a long life span; it can be divided into phases. This will enable it to accommodate, through necessary, unforeseen changes in the implementation process. In addition, continuity in government policies and programmes should be encouraged as this will ensure reform evaluation and impact assessment.

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