

THE WAR AGAINST CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF PUBLIC OFFICERS

PROFESSOR BASIL CHUKWUEMEKA NWANKWO (PhD)

Professor of Public Administration and Local Government

Department of Public Administration

Faculty of Management Sciences

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Anambra State, Nigeria.

Mobile:- +234(0)803-321-6765, +234(0)812-207-4846

Email: bc.nwankwo@unizik.edu.ng

bc.nwankwong@gmail.com

&

DAVID C. NWOGBO (PhD)

Department of Public Administration,

National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja

Mobile: - +234(0)8033204889

Email: dnwogbo@noun.edu.ng

&

AMOS ABU ATULUKU (PhD)

Metallurgical Training Institute,

Ajaokuta Steel Company,

Ajaokuta, Kogi State, Nigeria

Mobile:- +234(0)8079767329, +234(0)8133499157

Email; amosabuatuluku@gmail.com

&

MBAMALU KINGSLEY UCHENNA

Department of Public Administration

Faculty of Management Sciences

Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka,

Anambra State Nigeria

Mobile: +234(0)8034035978, +234(0)7058155028

Email:- ku.mbamalu@unizik.edu.ng

&

BARNABAS ROSEMARY NNEOMA (PhD)

Department of Public Administration

Faculty of Management Sciences

Kogi State University, Anyigba, Kogi State, Nigeria

Mobile: +234(0)8064466843, +234(0)8053203425

Email: rosemarybarnabas22@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study critically examined the role of public officers in promoting the war against corruption in Nigeria. The main objective of the study is to interrogate the efforts and supports of the public officers who manage public sector organizations in Nigeria towards winning the war against corruption in the country. The study made use of secondary data from in-depth desk review of books, journals, magazines, government documents, internet publications, newspapers etc. The data collected is qualitative in nature therefore content analysis was adopted as the method for data analysis. Also, the good governance theory developed by the International Federation of Accountants (IFAC) in 2013 was adopted as the theoretical framework of analysis for the study. The major findings of the study identified poverty as the driving forces for corruption by the public officers in Nigeria, social or societal pressures and political instability. Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended as an imperative and desideratum for the war against corruption to be won in Nigeria; public officers should always act in the public interest at all times. This entails strong commitment to integrity, ethical values, and the rule of law; as well as openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement.

Keywords: Corruption, Public officers, Good governance, Public interest, Integrity.

Introduction

The poor consistent transparency perception reports of Nigeria shows that the rate of corruption in the country's public sector is high (Transparency, International Corruption Index, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020). The corruption status was recorded in spite of the government's effort to eradicate the sleaze (Okpala, 2012; Okpala and Enwefa, 2017). In Nigeria, the level of corruption in all tiers of government has assumed an ugly dimension especially with e-corruption. This has made the fight an uphill task even with the establishment of anti-graft agencies (Okpala, 2012, Nwosuji, 2015, Okpala and Enwefa, 2017). The effective functioning of a nation is based on three processes: legitimate public power (election); quantifying the demographic coverage of the country (census); and estimation and distribution of the common wealth (public accounts including revenues and appropriations). These official statistics have been compromised which have adversely influenced planning and common wealth distribution in Nigeria (Odinkalu, 2010, Okpala and Enwefa, 2017). Corruption has become a global virus even in the advance democratic nations where a system of checks and balances were established to prevent unethical practices (Ade, Babatunde, and Awoniyi, 2011, Abisoye and Adesiyani, 2014, Okpala and Enwefa, 2017). In response to this growing social disorder all over the world, various local and international organizations demanded for the establishment of institutional agencies to fight corruption. This crusade led to the establishment of the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) and Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) established in 2000 and 2003 respectively in Nigeria (Oyadiran and Success, 2015, Enworeonye, Christopher, Egbeh, and Ibe, 2017).

Globally, various corruption indications were uncovered within the period of 2001 to 2016. In Nigeria, accused persons were arraigned but most times, these cases were either suspended without any date of determination in sight.

In some situations, prosecutions were selective while in others, government lacks the legal will power to conclude them. War against corruption in Nigeria has continued without tangible outcome which has generated debates on the effectiveness of the establish agencies involved and the investment made. Corruption has impact on governance, market composition, electoral dynamics and political competition, society structure, economic development and standard of living (Akinyemi, 2010, Akinwale and Ademiro, 2012, Adediji, 2013, Bello and Ahmadu 2017, Okpala and Enwefa, 2017).

We have briefly tried to establish and articulate the seriousness of corruption in the Nigerian polity and state. In fact as noted by Seteolu (2004) and Folarin, (2017), corruption has been identified as a major challenge to national development in Nigeria. For the past fifty years or so, corruption has manifested in bribery, graft, treasury looting, subsidy and pension theft, money laundering, advance fee fraud, general indiscipline, favoritism and nepotism. The deep-seated nature of corruption and its drawbacks have earned Nigeria all manner of rankings by the eagle-eyed and whistle-blowing global corruption monitoring agency, Transparency International (TI), which once placed Nigeria as the fifth most corrupt nations among over 100 countries of the world sampled (TI, 2005). The corruption culture has become so entrenched in the social life of the Nigeria people that certain catchphrases have entered the social lexicon of the country. These includes “Sorting” (2005-date), “Kleptocracy” (1990s-date), “Settlementocracy” (1980s to 1990s) and Contractocracy” (1960s to 1980s) (Folarin, 2017) The embarrassing rate of corruption has continually brought Nigeria into global spotlight and made it feature in the news for the wrong reasons. This explains why this study undertaken to examine the role of public officers on the war against corruption in Nigeria especially as it concerns the way forward to ensure effective and efficient services delivery through good governance is very important for sustainable growth and development in the country. However, before we discuss the various expected roles of the public officers on the war against corruption in Nigeria, let us contextualize what we mean by the concept “corruption” in this work for easy understanding and comprehension.

Conceptualization of the Term Corruption

Broadly speaking corruption is a term used to describe acts that are considered immoral, such as fraud, graft, bribery, stealing, perjury, lying, dishonesty, indiscipline and debased act like sexual immorality or perversion. Corrupt acts also include economic and financial crimes, nepotism, favoritism or discrimination and partiality in decision-making or allocation of values. Corruption thus represents degeneration from the normal that is an anti-social behavior (Okojie and Momoh, 2005; Folarin, 2017). By inference therefore, corruption goes beyond the narrow definition of the World Bank as the use of public office for private gain which is popularly referred to as “prebendalism” (Hulter and Shah, 2000; Folarin, 2017).

However, for this work our contextual and operational definition of corruption would rely heavily and specifically on the United Nations guideline in its manual on Anti-corruption

policy iii; which distinguishes two important corruption typologies namely, grand and petty corruption. Grand corruption represents such anti-state acts as looting, 419 scan, money laundering and operation of illegal foreign bank vaults by public officers and private individuals. Such other acts as immorality, dishonesty, perjury, though related to grand corruption, will be considered as petty corruption. Grand corruption is thus another term for public corruption, while petty corruption may refer to private corruption. However, both are not mutually exclusive as aspects of one can be gleaned from the other (Folarin, 2017).

In their study, Okojie and Momoh (2005; Folarin, 2017), define grand corruption as an act which is widespread and systematic in nature and damaging to the local economy. To commit grand corruption is to commit economic crime and those who commit it are being regarded as “economic criminals”.

However, there is also the phenomenon of political corruption that further explicated the term, grand corruption. Political or grand corruption has brought much social decadence upon the Nigeria state, carrying along with it, and such rotten baggage as godfatherism, influence-peddling, rigging of elections, manipulation of and buying of votes, manipulative political financing, embezzlement in office, and fraud. Aiyede (2006) and Folarin (2017), define political corruption as the abuse of public or governmental power for illegitimate private advantage. For Lipset and Lenz (2000) political corruption is an effort to secure wealth or power through illegal means for private benefit.

The Nigerian anti-corruption law has identified as corrupt practices, the use of pecuniary, advantage, insincerity in advice with a view to gaining advantages, less than a full day's work for a full day's pay, tardiness and laziness towards public office or tasks, failure to report cases of inducement to the anti-corruption bodies, among others (Akanbi, 2004; Ayiede, 2006, Folarin, 2017).

Manifestations of Corruption

Private Corruption

By private corruption, we mean people outside government, private individuals engaging in unethical acts. These could be individuals outside institutions who commit acts of immorality (perversion, show of dementia, and acts of fraud or scamming). The other group of people is persons in the organized private sector who may loot or carry out other acts of fraud in the companies or who colludes with those in government to perpetrate sharp financial practices (Folarin, 2017) private corruption has manifested in Nigeria as everyday bribery to obtain a desired objective, breaking of traffic laws, piracy, plagiarism, alteration of school grades, illegal inflation of petroleum pump prices by dealers, robbery, sexual gratification for higher grades or promotion etc. (Folarin, 2017).

Public Corruption

This is the familiar corruption that takes place in government or by government officials and their accomplices in the private sector. Another name for public corruption is official, grand or institutional corruption. This is the kind of corruption involving public office holders. In this case, persons in position of authority exploit the position to take from the common wealth

or our common parsimony (Folarin, 2017). Let us briefly examine the different manifestations of public corruption, thus:

Political corruption: this is the kind of corruption that obtains in the three arms of government in a democratic rule, namely, executive, legislature and judiciary. Corruption at this level is the highest because it involves state fund. The issues of personal and primordial attachments in appointment, award of contracts, as well as inflation of contract monies, embezzlement of funds and misappropriation of fund are critical examples of public corruption in the executive. The legislature in Nigeria has in recent past and even now been in the news for high profile bribery scandals. To mention but a few is the Hembe-Oteh bribe scandal and the Farouk Lawan-Femi Otedola bribery allegations etc. In which the chairman of the House of Representatives probe panels were indicted by the persons they were probing for demanding and collecting bribes from the suspects (Folarin, 2017). The Judiciary becomes vulnerable when it looks away from an obvious case of crimes, tries to downplay the veracity of a crime, and commits travesty of justices for a particular political interest. For example, the federal court of Appeal in the recent past was in a state of crisis which led to the suspension of its president on alleged complicity in election cases involving some western states which the president was said to have served the interest of a political party (ketefe, 2012, Folarin, 2017).

Bureaucratic corruption: corruption here is still at the level of government. It involves the technocrats and civil as well as public servants who implements government policies. These include the leadership and personnel in ministries, departments and agencies (MDAS). The corruption at this level is the worst as the allocation, release and use of money is executed by these government offices. The staff are the ones that propose and submit financial needs of the units or projects and they are the ones that transfer and effect payment. Corruption becomes rife at this point. We have had cases of heads of ministries and parastatals busted and arraigned before competent courts and tribunals on charges of high profile stealing and fraud. Bureaucratic corruption also manifests in favouritism and nepotism in appointment, promotion and reward systems in public offices. Some persons get rapid promotion and rewards on the basis of family, friendship, ethnic or religious affiliations to the boss; while some never get promotion because of such frivolous consideration (Folarim, 2017).

Other forms of Institutional corruption: The other forms of institutional corruption include that in the media and entertainment industries and even in the labour movement. The media is particularly known for the graft or “brown envelope” syndrome in which news reports are only publishable when certain individuals or groups in the story pay their way; or when an image polishing is done for those who can pay the reporter for it; or negative stories are stepped down when money has been paid to destroy such story. In the entertainment industry, persons for musical or movie auditions may have to “sort” or “settle” with money or sexual gratification to be given roles in films even when they are good or very bad. Labour groups are sometimes compromised by government not to embark on industrial action or to betray the cause of the movement by “sorting” labour leaders through the fattening of their accounts (Folarim, 2017).

Theoretical Framework of Analysis for the Study

The theoretical framework of analysis for this study is anchored on the key principles of good governance in the public sector as developed in 2013 by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy under the auspices of the International Federation of Accountants (IFAC). According to this theory of Good Governance (IFAC, 2013), the function of good governance in the public sector by the public office holders is to ensure that entities (Public ministries, departments, agencies and parastatals) acts in the public interest at all times. Acting in the public interest according to this theory requires public office holders strong commitment to integrity, ethical values and the rule of law and openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement. In addition to the requirements for acting in the public interest, achieving good governance through the war against corruption, the role to be played by the public office holders in the public sector also requires: Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social and environmental benefits; determining the interventions necessary to optimize the achievements of intended outcomes, developing the capacity of the entity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it, managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management and implementing good practices in transparency and reporting to deliver effective accountability.

To demonstrate that they are acting in public interest at all times and to maintain public interest and confidence, public sector entities should be as open as possible about all their decisions, actions, plan, resource use, forecasts, out puts and outcomes.

Ideally, this commitment should be documented through a formal policy on openness of information. Therefore, for public officers to play significant role on the war against corruption in Nigeria it is an imperative and desideratum that they should act in public interest at all times by demonstrating strong commitment to integrity, ethical values and respect for the rule of law, as well as openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement.

Methodology

The study was based on data generated from secondary source which includes books, journals, magazines, newspapers etc. The qualitative data generated from the indepth-desk review of the secondary sources were analyzed using the content analysis method.

The Good Governance theory developed in 2013 by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy under the auspices of the International Federation of Accountants (IFAC) was adopted as the theoretical framework of analysis which guided the study. The theory emphasizes the fact that for the war against corruption in Nigeria to be won through the role to be played by the public officers, in public sector management, it is an imperative and desideratum for such officers to always act in the public interest at all times.

The content analysis and findings of the study amongst other things reveals that poverty is identified as the most driving force for corruption among the public officers in Nigeria especially the fear of or quest to quit poverty. Also, social or societal pressures on public officers impose a burden that could compel acts of corruption. Similarly, political instability

engenders political corruption, especially the fear of frequent changes of power which threaten security of office and by extension source of income.

The Expected Roles of Public Officers in the War against Corruption in Nigeria

The public officers in Nigeria are at the theatre of corruption because they hold public offices where huge sums of public funds are voted and approved through the budget for public expenditure for the provision of quality services delivery to the citizens of Nigeria. For the public officers in Nigeria, to be good agents and ambassadors of fight against corruption in the country, they must individually and collectively in the public sector entities (ie. Ministries, departments, Agencies and parastatals) where they manage and oversee the activities for the effective and efficient provision of the “common Goods” or public Goods and services, must at all times promote and abide by the following bench marks for good governance which is anti-corruption. These are as follows:

1. **Principle of Accountability:** those who exercise public power in society should be answerable for the exercise of that power, on that simple proposition rest the issue of accountability (Stewart, 1992). Public accountability is linked to the notion of stewardship in the public domain. Public servants (ie public officers who are political and career officers) exercise substantive powers which do not belong to them. They belong to the citizens on whose behalf those powers are exercised. The public servants or officials are therefore stewards. The powers exercised by the stewards are only justified if those who exercise them are answerable for them. Accountability can be seen as involving giving an account of actions taken and being held to account for those actions. Both aspects are necessary to accountability. To hold to account needs an account of actions taken so that there is basis for judgment. To give an account would by itself be inadequate unless there was a means of holding to account. The two complement each other.

Public accountability is the complete and satisfactory account of the stewardship of a public officer in respect of the acquisition and application of the resources entrusted to him/her in the process of executing public policy and accomplishing planned objectives in accordance with extant rules and regulations. Put succinctly, public accountability has to do with holding public officers accountable for resources entrusted to them and ensuring they give up-to-date account of what they have done with public resources. Public accountability, as general concept, can be broken into four component parts, viz:

- Financial resources
- Faithfully compliance or adherence to the legal requirements and administrative policies (fiscal accountability)
- Efficiency and economy of operations (management accountability)
- Results of government programmes and activities as indicated by achievements, benefits and effectiveness (programme results accountability). It is clear from the above that accountability exists at the level of the organizational (institutional accountability) and each public office holder (individual accountability).

2. **Principle of Transparency:** A related concept to accountability is Transparency. It refers to the conclusion of clarity and absence of doubt in the conduct and account of assigned

activities. It is the status of being practically evident, the reality of the faithful discharges of duties as required and accounted for. Transparency is not so much as a matter of “substance” but “appearance”. Transparency is more of personal attributes than skill and it inheres in such features and qualities as leadership by example, congruence between words and deeds, trustworthiness, presentation of accounts, style, integrity, financial rectitude and generally, being above board.

Accountability and Transparency are inseparable. They are mutually reinforcing. Transparency is worthless if it does not match appropriate accountability for use of discretion and accountability is meaningless if it does not spring from a transparent medium.

Conclusion and Recommendations

For the war against corruption to be won in Nigeria especially public and Bureaucratic corruptions, the public officers must observe and maintain a high level of accountability and transparency. By the nature of accountability, all those who have any role to play at any point in the organizational process (messengers, clerks, supervisors, accountant, managers, Directors, director-general, Accountant General, Auditor-General, Programme officers, monitory officers, field officers etc) carry the responsibility to account (answer) for actions undertaken. Furthermore accountability is enhanced by the extent to which the duty to answer is discharged.

Oral representation or verbal account of actions represents the minimum and weakest form in the discharge of responsibility. Where such account is documented in writing, it becomes strengthened and is even stronger if backed by supporting documents to evidence claims in the account. An attestation by someone qualified and a professionally recognized expert and veracity of assertions in the account and supporting documentation provides the highest quality of assurance with respect to accountability.

The form content of accountability is further enhanced by procedural and incremental influences such as timeliness of report, authentication and communication as well as the process (details of form and content).

Finally, within the formal organizational structure, accountability is progressive and incremental. As it is obtained at one level, it becomes an input and enhances the accountability at the lower rung. However it is difficult to obtain accountability and transparency at the top.

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