



## **Ethics and Accountability in Governance: Panacea for Effective and Efficient Public Service Delivery in Nigeria**

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**Abstract:** Government all over the world exists to provide essential services to the citizens because that is the only way the citizens can feel the positive impact of governance. This paper examined the effects of ethics and accountability in governance on effective and efficient public service delivery. There cannot be effective and efficient public service delivery if there is the absence of ethics and accountability in governance in the public sector. Those who carry out the task of governance are given the power by the citizens and as such expected to ensure that the power given is used to deliver efficient and effective public services. This paper is qualitative in nature because data for the paper were gathered through secondary means and analyzed through the historical and descriptive methods. The paper adopted the social contract theory as theoretical framework. The paper found out that the low level of public service delivery in Nigeria which has manifested in high level of unemployment, poverty and insecurity is as a result of lack of strict adherence to ethics and accountability by those saddled with the responsibility of delivering public services in Nigeria. The paper recommended amongst other things that the citizens must be alive to their responsibility of ensuring they hold government and its officials to account for their actions and inactions and be ready to throw away inefficient government through elections and other legitimate means.

**Keywords:** public service; elections; government; poverty and insecurity

### **Introduction**

The place of ethics and accountability in governance in the public sector cannot be overemphasized. The public sector has to do with the sector where governmental activities take place. The essence of government is to provide essential services to the citizens through the public servants. It will be difficult if not impossible for public servants to provide quality services if they are not guided by ethics and

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accountability. Adherence to ethics and accountability by public servants is sine-qua-non to effective and efficient service delivery. According to Olowu (2005, pp. 140-141), “accountability is essential for the efficient functioning of all organizations and especially of governmental organizations in a democratically governed state”.

In a truly democratic state power belongs to the people, those who are in government positions to discharge the responsibility of governance were one way or the other recruited by the people in order to provide essential services to them. It is expected therefore that those who hold public trust account for the use of that trust to citizens. Those who govern without adherence to ethical principles and accountability cannot be in a position to provide services effectively and efficiently to the citizens, when this is the order of the day, it is the responsibility of the citizens to vote them out during elections.

If the citizens are alive to their responsibility of taking active part in the political as well as governance process, they will ensure that they constantly engage government officials and hold them accountable, this situation will encourage those in government positions to discharge their responsibilities to the benefit of the citizens. This is in line with what Olowu (2005, p. 146) referred to as voice mechanisms. According to him, “voice mechanisms provide opportunities for citizens to voice their concerns about maltreatment or misuse of position or public resources by officials. Elections and other special forms of citizens’ involvement in the policy process such as recalls, initiatives, and referenda constitute some of the most visible and dramatic forms of giving voice to citizen’s preferences”. It means that the citizens have serious and great responsibility to ensure that they are better served. This explains why Abraham Lincoln defined democracy as the government of the people, by the people and for the people. Democracy is people’s government and not necessarily only government of those who occupy government positions.

For the citizens to be able to play their role effectively and efficiently in the political and governance process, they need to imbibe the participant political culture which entails members of society taking active role in the political process in order for the government to serve them better. According to Sharma et al (2013:960) “direct involvement of the people in the administrative process constitutes one of the major efforts to enforce administrative accountability”. To him, public participation consists of (a) consultation throughout the planning process, (b) public representation on decision-making boards, and (c) community control over funds and expenditure. The high level of corruption in Nigeria presently shows that there

is low level of adherence to ethics and accountability. The bastardization of the system also aid corrupt practices and discourages citizens' involvement in the political and governance process, all these manifest in bad governance and general level of underdevelopment of the country.

According to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index 2019, Nigeria is the 2<sup>nd</sup> most corrupt country in West Africa, and 34<sup>th</sup> most corrupt country in the world. According to Punch Newspaper Editorial of (Oct 1, 2020, p. 32), "corruption is an untamable monster. The Human Right Environment Development Agency said Nigeria lost \$600billion to sleaze between 1960 and 2019. Efforts by succeeding regimes to combat graft have failed woefully". This situation has made Nigeria to be the poorest country in the world. According to European Union Parliament Resolution of January 2020 cited in Babalola in Vanguard Newspaper of October 1, 2020, over 50 percent of Nigerians live in extreme poverty, while over 7million Nigerians are in urgent need of life-saving assistance. No wonder Nigeria has become the poverty capital of the world according to the World Poverty Clock. The Punch Editorial of (October 1, 2020, p. 32) opined that "about 80million of Nigerian citizens are living below the threshold of \$1.90 per day. The World Poverty Clock says that the number has ballooned to 105 million as of mid-2020. The situation Nigeria has found herself today is traceable to non-adherence to ethics and accountability.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this paper is the Social Contract Theory. The choice of this theoretical framework is predicated on its relevance and appropriateness to the subject matter of the paper. The proponents of the social contract theory include Thomas Hobbes, J.J. Rousseau and John Lock. Despite their divergences on the nature of the contract there is the agreement that the state was created by the people for it to serve them.

This became necessary considering the nature of life people lived in the state of nature where there was no state or government. According to Ndoh (2003, p. 75), "under the social contract theory of the state, it is assumed that the state came into being as a result of an agreement entered into by men who originally had no governmental organization. To the advocates of this theory, there existed a stateless society and the period when the state was created". The stateless society is regarded as the state of nature. People were exercising their personal right to govern

themselves, there was no government and as such no law to regulate people's behaviour. Therefore, people were behaving the way they liked to the extent that the strong started devouring the weak and it was survival of the fittest. Life was meaningless in the state of nature because life was constantly cut short by the strongmen amongst people. This explains why Thomas Hobbes described life in the state of nature as solitary, nasty, brutish, poor and short.

It was in order to guide against this scenario that the people decided to create the state and empowered the state to protect their lives and property and as well provide them with other basic necessities of life. Some aspects of this theory as well as the proponents posited that the people reserve the right to remove those officials of the state that go against the terms and conditions of the agreement. This view was corroborated by Manegold cited in Appadorai (1982, p. 20) when he asserted that "no man can make himself emperor or king, a people sets a man over it to the end that he may rule justly, giving to every man his own, aiding good men and coercing bad: in short, that he may give justice to all men. If then he violates the agreement according to which he was chosen, disturbing and confounding the very things which he was meant to put in order, reason dictates that he absolves the people from their obedience; especially when he has himself first broken the faith which bound him and the people together".

Lack of ethics and accountability in governance can adversely affect public service delivery and in this condition the citizens would be at the receiving end. This explains why it is very imperative for the citizens to be active by getting involved in the political and governance process to ensure they vote in credible candidates into office and also vote out non-performing public officers and as well hold the public officers accountable. The greater involvement of the people in the political and governance process would make the public officers to sit up and satisfy the wishes and aspirations of the people. But reverse would be the case when people are passive and non-challant on issues of politics and governance. It is apt to state that the more the people participate one way or the other in governance the more they are likely to get good governance that would manifest in efficient and effective service delivery. But bad governance would be the order of the day in a country where the citizens are politically apathetic and the end result of this would be poor service delivery that would manifest in high level corruption, poverty, unemployment and high level of insecurity. The above scenario is the situation in Nigeria.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

It is very germane and imperative to at this juncture clarify major concepts in this paper. This becomes very necessary because the lucid clarification of the concepts would aid the understanding of the subject matter of the paper. The concepts to be so explained and examined include: Ethics, Accountability, Governance, Public Service and Public Service Delivery.

What is Ethics? It can be defined as the accepted norms, principles and values that guide the actions of men in any given organized setting. It enables man to know what is right and wrong and as such expected to act in accordance with what is right. When people act in accordance with ethics, right and expected outcome are to be guaranteed. Ethics as a term is derived from Greek word 'ethos' which means custom, habit, character or disposition. According to Wule (2012), "the term 'ethics' in its simple sense means the science or discipline of right action. It is a rational code of appropriate action or of good conduct". Paulins and Hillery (2014, p. 4) opined that "ethics involved doing the right thing. How we determine what is right versus what is wrong depends on our culture, our morals and our values. Culture includes elements of our environments such as family, religion, ethnicity, geographical origin, and the times in which we live. Our morals develop as we learn certain beliefs, as we place various levels of importance on our beliefs and on virtues we deem important, our values are formed".

Having examined the concept of ethics, at this juncture let us examine and attempt a clarification of accountability. What does accountability mean? The importance of accountability in governance and development studies has made it to attract the attention of scholars across the world. Accountability means being liable to be called upon to give account of stewardship. It means that public servants are not expected to act anyhow they like because they can be questioned on their role in office to the extent that if they are found wanting they will face sanctions. This view was corroborated by Hunt when he asserted that accountability is "the readiness or preparedness to give an explanation or justification to relevant stakeholders for one's judgement, intentions, acts and omissions when appropriately called upon to do so". It entails a position of responsibility and the readiness to have one's actions judged by others and where appropriate accept responsibility for errors, misjudgement and negligence as well as recognition for competence, conscientiousness, excellence and wisdom. Olowu (2005, p. 141) relates accountability to "answerability for one's behaviour, which involves the development of objective standards of evaluation.

Accountability serves as a quality control evidence for public officers. Public accountability is the requirement that those who hold public trust to account for the use of that trust to citizens or their representatives. This is related to the enjoyment of democratic life which is at the root of democratic governance. It is one of the norms of good governance”. Stanley is of the view that:

Accountability means being held to account, scrutinized, and being required to give an account or explanation. Civil servants are accountable upwards through audit and parliamentary scrutiny, and outwards through transparency and openness to stakeholders and to the public at large.

According to Stanley, we are accountable for three things:

1. Our stewardship of public funds including a regularity which means the requirements for all expenditure and receipts to be dealt with in accordance with the legislation authorizing them, any delegated authority and the rules of government accounting.

- Propriety which is a further requirement that expenditure and receipts should be dealt with in accordance with parliament’s intentions and the use of principles of parliamentary control, and in accordance with the values and behaviour appropriate to the public sector.

- Value for money, and

- Effective management systems.

2. Compliance

- With the law

- With government policies and initiatives, and

- With public expectations of proper conduct

3. Our performance, including

- Against objectives and targets, and

- In delivering acceptable levels of service to the public.

To Sharma et al (2012, p. 954), accountability means that the administration has to be accountable for the exercise of authority which it possesses.

The next concept to be examined is governance. The term ‘governance’ is very important in the life of man in the modern state. This is because governance goes a long way in determining the well-being of man. This explains the attraction of the concept to scholars across the globe including world governance institutions like the

World Bank and the United Nations. According to Egugbo (2015:155), “the concept of governance had been in existence from time immemorial. As the society progresses, more and more emphasis is being laid on governance to ensure the upliftment of the society and the people. This becomes inevitable because the progress in the society brings with it more and more complexities in the relationship that exists among people. These complexities if not properly managed, would bring about monumental disaster and crisis”.

The World Bank (1992) defined governance as “the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country’s economic and social resources for development”. It is important we note that there are two broad dimensions of governance and they are good and bad governance. According to Diamond (2004, p. 222), there are several dimensions to good governance and they include:

- The capacity of the state to function in the service of the public good;
- Transparency, the openness of state business and conduct to the scrutiny of other state actors and of the public;
- Rule of law;
- Mechanism of participation and dialogue that enable the public to provide input to the policy process, to correct mistakes in policy design and implementation, and to promote social inclusion.
- It also breeds social capital, in the form of networks and associations that draw people together in relations of trust, reciprocity, and voluntary cooperation for common ends.

Having examined good governance, what then does bad governance entail? Bad governance exists when there is failure of government officials to appropriately and effectively harness and manage both human and material resources for common good. It also connotes a governance system without recourse to the adherence to ethical principles and accountability the end result of which is corruption and underdevelopment. While good governance can lead to efficient an effective public service delivery with its positive effect on the citizen’s well-being and overall development of the society, bad governance produces poor public service delivery that would negatively affect the citizens and the state.

Let us at this juncture examine public service after which we look at public service delivery. According to Obikeze (2011, p. 70), public service “implies all that are

provided by individuals who operate in government agencies, institutions, organizations and establishments”. Adamolekun cited in Nwizu and Nwapi (2011:20) defines the public service as “the totality of services that are organized under government authority”. Public service can be viewed in two perspectives. First, it can be said to be the institutions or agencies of the state that deliver services. Second, it can also be seen as the services delivered by the public sector or the state through its agencies or institutions. What is public service delivery? This has to do with the provision of services by the public services or agencies of the state to the citizens. This is because government all over the world exists to provide essential services to the citizens. The services could be social in nature as well as infrastructural.

According to Olowu (2005, p. 123), “service delivery is the *raison d’être* of the public service. The primary responsibility of any public administration system is to deliver services that the private sector may not deliver at all or to deliver services to those who cannot afford the market price of the product”. To Ahmed (2005, pp. 76-77), “service delivery has been an old concept which draws attention of organizations to their responsibility to render service to their customers, in the most satisfactory manner”. The citizens are expected to be provided essential services by the government and can only be achieved and realized if there is the adherence to ethical principles and accountability.

### **Assessment of the Role of Ethics and Accountability in Governance**

Ethics and accountability are the two major factors that determine the contour and trajectory of governance. Governance from the perspective of the public sector is meant to ensure the welfare of the citizens because that is the major reason for the existence of government. For this to be achieved, the principle of ethics and accountability must have to be adhered to. This is because ethics has to do with the science or discipline of right actions; it is a rational code of appropriate action or of good conduct. It means that those with the responsibility of governance must know the right thing to do. Knowing the right to do means that those to govern should have the right code of conduct. The right code of conduct will ensure that those to govern are to be guided and directed to do the right thing. It is only when those entrusted with governance imbibe the right code of conduct that they can be in a position to do the wishes and aspirations of the people. This view was corroborated by Sharma et al (2013, p. 965) when he asserted that “public service is generally viewed as a high



and noble calling”. It is a service in the cause of the nation and there can be no service higher than that of the sovereign state. People who join the public service do not anticipate becoming rich and famous. The majority of them feel a basic commitment to the values of public service. The view expressed by Sharma et al shows that public servants are meant to do everything within their power to satisfy the wishes and aspirations of the citizens rather than focusing on the pursuit and achievement of selfish interest. It is on this note Olowu (2005, p. 141) opined that “public accountability underscores the superiority of the public will over private interests for those engaged in the provision and delivery of services to the general public”. This underscores the importance of ethics and accountability to the public servants because it enables them to have the proper orientation and code of conduct that would equip them to be able to be in a position to provide services in a selfless manner to the citizens. If the public servants are not guided by ethics and accountability, they may not be able to understand how they are supposed to discharge their responsibilities to the citizens. That is why ethics is required to guide the activities of the political players and administrator because it enables them to know what is right in order for them to do the right thing which is ultimately to provide services that would be beneficial to the citizens.

Accountability on the other hand enables public servants to know that governance is not for the pursuit of selfish interest but for common good. Therefore public servant with the knowledge of accountability will want to direct his actions towards the achievement of common good because failure to do that will attract sanctions which will not be favourable to public servants who engage in the pursuit of selfish interest over and above the common good or public interest. This explains why Olowu (2005, p. 141) opines that “accountability is one of the five norms of good or better governance”. He went further to say that accountability is closely related to the enjoyment of the democratic life. Democratic governance implies the supremacy of citizens in the governing process. The requirement that ministers be responsible and public servants be accountable is at the very root of democracy. It means that when public servants are guided by the principles of ethics and accountability there is the tendency that they will provide services that would be of benefit to the citizens and the reverse would be the case when there is non-adherence to the principles of ethics and accountability.

**Effects of Ethics and Accountability in Governance on Public Service Delivery**

It has been noted that government all over the world exists to provide essential services to the citizens. Public services can only be provided efficiently and effectively if there is the adherence to ethics and accountability. From the perspective of the social contract theory, the state was created by the people in order for the state to in turn protect their lives and property. This is also in line with Section (14) (2) (b) of the Nigeria's 1999 Constitution (as amended) which states that "the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government". There is no gainsaying the fact that when government effectively and efficiently provide services to the people, the people on their own part would find it easy to support the government and by so doing there would be a conducive atmosphere for the government to carry out further responsibilities which invariably would lead to the country's development for the benefit of all and sundry. It is on this note Olowu (2005, p. 123) opined that "fundamentally the ability of a government to legitimately tax and govern people is premised on its capacity to deliver a range of services required by its population which no other player will provide".

There is a nexus between public service delivery and citizens support to government in the sense that the higher the level of public service delivery the higher the level of the citizens support to government and the reverse is the case in the event of low level of public service delivery. The situation in Nigeria presently shows that there is low level of public service delivery and this has manifested in epileptic power supply, poor educational system which has dwindled in quality and functionality, lack of employment opportunities, poverty, hunger, low life expectancy, etc.

This condition is as a result of lack of ethics and accountability in governance. Corruption of all its kinds has not only permeated virtually all sectors of national life but has eaten deep into the fabrics of the national life and this is because of the abandonment of ethics and accountability. Corruption not only affects adversely effective and efficient service delivery but it also causes poverty in the country. Guper et al cited in Johnson and Ikechukwu (2010, p. 146) identified several channels through which corruption worsens (relative and sometimes absolute poverty). These include the following:

- (1.) It lowers economic growth;
- (2.) It biases the tax system to favour the rich and well connected;
- (3.) It reduces the effectiveness of targeting of social programme;

- (4.) It biases government policies towards favouring inequality in asset ownership;
- (5.) It lowers social spending;
- (6.) It reduces access to education by the poor;
- (7.) It increases the risks of investment by the poor.

According to Johnson and Ikechukwu, through all these channels, corruption impoverishes the citizens, perpetuates their poverty and frustrates efforts at liberating them from their pathetic conditions.

Electoral malpractices in Nigeria which adversely affect governance and development is also as a result of non-adherence to ethics and accountability. People rig elections and get away with it, a situation that has worsen the governance crisis in Nigeria and as well deepen development crisis.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Ethics and accountability are pivotal in governance and by extensions public service delivery. Without ethics and accountability governance cannot be directed towards efficient and effective public service delivery. The high level of poverty, unemployment and security challenges in Nigeria today as well epileptic power supply and other problems are attributed to non-adherence to ethics and accountability by most public servants in Nigeria. This has given rise to the high level of corruption being witnessed in the country. The citizens have been at the receiving end because it has led to low standard of living among the populace. This situation should not make the citizens to lose hope; there should be greater participation in the political and governance process to the extent that they should be able to demand accountability from the elected and appointed government officials. They should also shun bribery during elections so that they can be in a position to elect candidates of their choice and as well vote out non-performing public elected officials.

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