



Court Records Management, Administration of Justice and Good Governance in Nigeria

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Abstract: This study examines the effects of court records management on the effective administration of justice; identifies the challenges inhibiting effective court records management; and analyzes the connections between court records management, the administration of justice, and good governance in Nigeria. The research relies on both primary and secondary data. Primary data involves conducting interviews with selected respondents responsible for records, who provided insights on the effects of court records management on the effective administration of justice. Information about the challenges hindering effective court records management and the connections among court records management, administration of justice, and good governance in Nigeria were acquired from secondary sources, including academic journals, textbooks, government documents, and online resources. The collected data underwent content analysis. The findings indicate that judicial records include case files, casebooks, record books, and court registers; that courts maintain different types of documents, including historical, rhetorical, and phonological records; and that the management of these records significantly impacts the adjudication of judicial cases. Identified challenges include inadequate record-keeping practices, non-standardized record-keeping procedures, insufficient training for records keepers, lack of adequate record storage facilities, brain drain challenges, inefficient technology, and insecurity. Regarding the relationships among court records management, administration of justice, and

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good governance, the study demonstrates that proper record keeping fosters effective administration of justice, fair hearings, and timely resolution of cases; conversely, timely administration of justice enhances good governance. The study concludes that court records management, administration of justice, and good governance are symbiotically related, as effective records management facilitates the administration of justice, which in turn promotes good governance.

Keywords: records management; administration of justice; good governance; democracy; judiciary and court

1. Introduction

Effective record management is a key requirement for measuring administrative proficiency. Record-keeping plays a vital role in human endeavors and activities; it enhances decision-making and improves efficiency (Otobo & Alegbeleye, 2021). An accurate record typically encompasses essential information about the daily activities of individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, and governments. Records management involves overseeing and managing records, regardless of their format. It includes activities such as creating, receiving, maintaining, using, and disposing of records in various forms—such as video and audio formats, memos, paper files, electronic files, reports, emails, instant message logs, and databases (Kirvan, n.d.).

Effective records management practices involve creating, classifying, prioritizing, storing, securing, archiving, preserving, retrieving, tracking, and disposing of unnecessary files (Blake, 2014). Records management is crucial for safeguarding organizations' critical documentation, and it is considered a fundamental requirement for achieving organizational goals. This process enables institutions to manage their information, preserve institutional memory, and promote accountability and good governance. Essentially, records management is a systematic approach to storing and retrieving important documents that contain information about organizational activities. Consequently, it allows essential information about the organization to be easily accessed when needed.

The judiciary is one of the three branches of government responsible for adjudicating disputes between individuals, corporate entities, various levels of government, and others. It is tasked with providing legal services to citizens, maintaining impartiality in the administration of justice, and upholding the rule of law in a democratic system (Otobo, 2021). The judiciary in Nigeria, like in other parts of the world, oversees the court system. Courts in Nigeria include the Supreme Court, Court of Appeal, Federal High Court, State High Courts, Customary Courts, and Magistrates' Courts. These

courts are responsible for handling evidence, much of which is in document form. In this context, they maintain essential documents for various cases and proceedings, including evidence and court decisions. All of these records must be documented and stored for future consultation as needed. The records maintained by the courts range from archives to statistics and can be stored in both paper and digital formats.

From the above, it is evident that records and their management have become indispensable to courts for the proper administration of justice. The emergence of computers and the expansion of Internet connectivity have transformed record-keeping methods and enhanced court tasks and workflows. As a result, preserving legal records and information has become significantly easier with these tools, continuing to uphold the integrity of the judicial system. To this end, maintaining accurate court records requires the expertise of skilled and experienced administrative personnel, particularly in the court record registry section. Staff with knowledge of computers and competencies that align with global technological trends are expected to oversee the record-keeping section.

Given that effective records management is crucial to the smooth operation of Nigeria's legal system, this study examines the impact of court records management on the effective administration and dispensation of justice; identifies the challenges that hinder effective court records management; and analyzes the relationship between court records management, the administration of justice, and good governance in Nigeria.

2. Court Records Management and the Effective Administration of Justice

This section addresses the influence of court records management on the effective administration of justice in Nigerian courts. Effective records management practices are essential for any organization because they help in managing everyday activities, ensuring that daily operations are well documented and accounted for. Different courts in Nigeria generate various records depending on their activities. These records are primarily in paper format and do not adhere to the critical elements of the records life cycle model, which adversely affects the effective administration of justice in the country (Abioye, 2014, p. 27). Therefore, the formulation of a comprehensive records management policy for court records and its proper implementation is necessary. It must be an integrated records management programme, a systematic approach to managing and administering both paper-based

and electronic records that facilitates data protection, quick retrieval, and compliance with legal requirements. This will significantly enhance the efficient administration and dispensation of justice in Nigeria (Abioye, 2014).

While supporting the above, one respondent highlights the importance of records management in the effective administration of justice within Nigerian courts. According to him¹,

“the adjudication of judicial cases largely depends on how records are managed. The information in judicial records comprises case files, case books, record books, and court registers. All information from these documents is crucial. Essentially, the accomplishment of the judiciary’s tasks and activities largely depends on the use of documented information.”

Another respondent asserts that²,

“courts in Nigeria maintain different types of documents that are vital for the effective administrative functions of the court and the timely and efficient disposition of cases. Some of these records are historical, others rhetorical, and some phenological; all are necessary for making judicial decisions.”

Another respondent, while stating the sources of court records and their importance, mentions that³,

“records for the courts are generated from various internal and external sources. Internal sources include records of various court hearings, trials, and other proceedings; documents filed with the court, such as complaints, petitions, and motions; Court Orders, and Court Minutes. External sources comprise police reports, arrest records, records from government agencies, records from private institutions—such as documents from hospitals, schools, and financial institutions—and reports or testimonies from expert witnesses, among others. These significant records can facilitate prompt and effective justice dispensation, and courts cannot function properly without these vital records.”

In essence, the respondents have emphasized the critical role of records management in the judicial process. Their focus is on the direct impact that record-keeping has on the efficiency, efficacy, and accuracy of judicial adjudication. They also discuss the types of records that courts maintain, the sources of these records, and how they

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influence the administrative tasks of the court and the dispensation of justice. Thus, the respondents have provided comprehensive information on the effectiveness of records management as a foundation for the judicial process, asserting that the quality of case outcomes largely relies on the efficient management of judicial documents. In other words, a well-managed record system is essential for ensuring transparency and consistency in judicial decisions and achieving effective justice administration.

3. The Challenges Inhibiting Record Management in Nigerian Courts

Several challenges inhibit record management in the courts of Nigeria. These challenges pose a significant issue, threatening the effective administration of justice. Accordingly, attempts are made to discuss some of these challenges affecting records management in the Nigerian courts. The challenges include:

Inadequate Record-Keeping Practices: This situation occurs when records are often improperly compiled, transmitted, or stored. Inadequate record-keeping practices may stem from poor or insufficient training of record-keeping personnel, as well as a heavy reliance on manual record-keeping systems. Consequently, this leads to errors, inconsistencies, and missing or lost records, making it difficult to recover or retrieve some information when needed.

Non-Standardized Record-Keeping Procedures: The absence of standardized processes for record-keeping is a challenge for records management in the courts of Nigeria. Although various methods of record management exist; and largely depend on the location and personnel handling such records, there should, therefore, be a set procedure for maintaining certain court records. This is essential to avoid inconsistencies, inefficiencies, and, most importantly, compromised records. To achieve a standardized record-keeping system, clear guiding principles must be established on record-keeping, and these principles must be communicated to the personnel responsible for record management. Such communication could be facilitated through regular training sessions, especially on the subject matter.

Inadequate Training for Record Keepers: Insufficient and irregular training and development for record management personnel hinder effective record management in the courts of Nigeria. The lack of training for personnel responsible for court records can be attributed to limited budget allocations or inadequate funding for training. Sometimes, when resources are available, court management does not prioritize training, leading to insufficient investment in the development of record

management staff. Without well-trained staff, the outcomes can include the loss or damage of records, inaccurate or incomplete record-keeping, and generally poor or inefficient record management, which could compromise the integrity of the courts.

Inadequate Record Storage Facilities: This is another challenge that hinders the effective management of records in the Nigerian courts. Access to necessary infrastructure is limited in some courts across Nigeria. Facilities for record-keeping, such as computers, software, and other storage options, are inadequate. Contributing factors include limited storage space, environmental conditions like poor lighting, ventilation, and temperature control; outdated or obsolete record-keeping equipment; and insufficient furniture and shelving for proper organization of various records. All of these lead to damage or loss of records and impede efficient record management.

The Challenge of Brain Drain: The lack of skilled and experienced personnel due to brain drain is a serious challenge to records management in the Nigerian courts. Many experts in record-keeping are leaving the country because of limited career opportunities and advancement, along with poor working conditions in Nigeria. These experts are poorly compensated and remunerated, and combined with a negative working environment, this discouragement prompts many to leave their positions within the courts. The departure of experienced record management personnel results in a loss of institutional knowledge and expertise, reduced productivity and efficiency in record management, and importantly, leads to inaccuracies, incompleteness, and unreliability of records, thus undermining the credibility of the courts.

Inefficient Technology: The Nigerian courts face challenges related to inefficient records-keeping technology. Many courts do not possess the necessary technology or infrastructure to support efficient records management. Limited budget allocations hinder the provision of new technological tools and the upgrading and maintenance of existing record-keeping equipment. Some courts still rely on outdated software and hardware for their records, making it challenging to transition from manual to digital record-keeping. Additionally, ineffective digital infrastructure, such as slow internet connectivity, hampers the effective use of technology for record management.

Security Issues: Another significant challenge to record-keeping in the courts of Nigeria involves security. Inadequate physical security, including poor locks, alarms, and surveillance systems; unauthorized access to records; insufficient access

control systems, such as weak passwords and authentication protocols; and poor disaster preparedness systems for issues like fires or flooding, can all lead to theft, tampering, or destruction of records. This could compromise the confidentiality and integrity of the court. And thereby, disrupting court proceedings, eroding the public trust in the court and its capacity to manage records effectively.

4. Court Records Management, Administration of Justice and Good Governance: The Connection

Good governance and democracy are undoubtedly two crucial concepts that are closely linked and interrelated. Democracy advocates for responsive and responsible governance, the rule of law, human rights, and peaceful transitions of power through electoral processes, among other things. Good governance emphasizes transparency, accountability, and effective institutions that serve the people's interests (Adegbami & Adepoju, 2017).

Good governance and democracy are not only desirable; but are essential conditions for development in every society (Adegbami et al., 2022). As such, the two concepts can merge into "democratic good government" due to their complementary nature. Thus, "democratic good governance" can be seen as a political regime grounded in "the model of a liberal-democratic polity, which protects human and civil rights, complemented by a competent, non-corrupt, and accountable public administration (Leftwich, 1993, p. 605).

Good governance involves the government's commitment to justice, peace, and the protection of human rights. It also encompasses conducting public affairs, managing public resources, and ensuring human rights while respecting the rule of law (United Nations, 2025). A democratic country is likely to struggle with development if it lacks a government committed to good governance, as good governance remains a vital attribute of democracy.

On the other hand, the fair and timely administration of justice and good governance are like conjoined or Siamese twins; the quality of justice provided by the judicial body can enhance good governance (Badamasiuy & Bello, 2013). This makes the judiciary imperative, as it plays a key role in administering and dispensing justice for good governance. The effective and efficient dispensation of justice depends significantly on maintaining records of all judicial actions. The primary rationale for keeping court records is to maintain a balanced, accurate, and complete record of all

judicial processes and proceedings for easy reference, future legal actions, appeals, and historical purposes (The Process Server, n.d.). This promotes accountability and integrity in the legal system and thus stimulates good governance.

Records are vital for achieving governance goals, especially in areas such as the rule of law, transparency, and accountability in managing the state's wealth and resources and delivering effective services to the people (International Records Management Trust, 1999, cited in Kemoni et al., 2007). In essence, records are essential instruments for government operations; the absence of such records leads to inadequacies in executing governmental responsibilities.

Thus, the evidence of a government effectively discharging its responsibilities is reflected in records and timely dispensation of justice. This underscores why Abioye (2014) succinctly condemned how records are maintained in Nigeria's courts. He noted that courts in Nigeria work with various types of documents, many of which are paper-based and not effectively managed by the personnel responsible for records. This has consistently and adversely affected the efficient administration of justice in the country and impacted good governance.

In essence, the management of court records, administration of justice, and good governance are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Record-keeping promotes the effective administration of justice, fair hearings, and timely justice dispensation; conversely, timely justice administration enhances good governance. Court records management involves ensuring up-to-date, accurate, and reliable records to enable effective management of court cases and timely justice dispensation.

Moreover, accurate court records facilitate objective and informed decisions by presiding judges and other judicial officers. They also provide all parties involved in court cases with access to relevant information, facilitating due process and fair trials. Detailed court records and proper documentation of court proceedings and decisions encourage accountability and transparency within the judiciary. Thus, good governance is achieved when the rule of law is upheld, when human rights are guaranteed and protected, and when the public trusts governmental institutions, particularly the judiciary, to administer fair, transparent, impartial, and effective justice.

Furthermore, the relationship between court records management, the administration of justice, and good governance is profound. Good governance, for instance, encompasses a well-developed and functioning judicial system, where court records are documented and managed accurately and transparently. A well-functioning

judiciary ultimately contributes to the development of democratic governance, in which individuals' rights are respected and preserved. Additionally, adequate and accurate court records remain a key foundation for the administration of justice. They enable efficient conduct of legal proceedings and facilitate fair decision-making. Thus, effective administration of justice, evidenced by the rule of law and the protection of human rights, are indicators of good governance. In essence, the relationship between court records management, the administration of justice, and good governance is undeniably symbiotic. Hence, well-managed court records are a catalyst for the efficient administration of justice, which is, in turn, a prerequisite for good governance. Put differently, undoubtedly, record-keeping enhances the effective dispensation of justice, which ultimately nurtures good governance.

However, despite the deep connections among court records management, the administration of justice, and good governance, the judicial process in Nigeria has continued to undermine these connections. The justice delivery system in Nigeria is appallingly slow, causing widespread public dissatisfaction and eroding confidence in the judiciary as the last hope of the common man. The consequence is lawlessness; undermining respect for the rule of law and due process. These paths lead toward arbitrariness and anarchy, which are antithetical to good governance.

5. Conclusion

Based on the above, court records management, the administration of justice, and good governance are symbiotically related, as effective records management enables the administration of justice, which invariably promotes good governance. The interconnectedness between court records management and the administration of justice is deeply rooted in transparency and accountability, which, in turn, promote good governance. Ultimately, the definitive connection between court records management and the administration of justice is to guarantee equity, equality, fairness, and justice, thereby promoting good governance.

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