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Public Service Accountability and Contemporary Issues in Nigerian Education System: Matters Arising

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Abstract

The ambition of the paper was to assess public service accountability and contemporary issues in Nigerian Education System and matters arising therefrom. Accountability as a crucial ethic in the public service has been neglected over the years. This, the paper observed, gave rise to corruption which has pervaded the Nigerian public service and dealt a blow on our educational system. The paper called on government to do all it could to put a stop to corruption in the public service as well as increase budgetary allocation to the education sector and put necessary machinery in place to ensure that funds allocated are properly utilized.

One of the most threatening vices that has bedeviled the Nigerian social formation over the years is the issue of lack of accountability. It has eaten deep into the foundation of the Nigerian State and destroyed its immune system thus living the nation frail, shaky and undeveloped. Lack of accountability in the Nigerian public service breeds corruption and this has to a large extent affected the Nigerian education system as budgetary allocations to the sector are misappropriated and cornered for personal use.

As rightly pointed out by Adesote and Abimbola (2012), corruption is the major cause of poverty around the world. The perception of corruption especially in public places is very alarming. This is because corruption undermines every aspect of national development ranging from economic, social and political development. Corruption in Nigeria pervades all facets of the society. It manifests in many ways including taking of bribes, forgery, falsification of account figures or election malpractice and smuggling of contraband goods into the country, in-fact the list is inexhaustible.

According to Aluko (2008), the essence of financial corruption is bribery and illegal and greedy acquisition of public funds into private pockets which otherwise would have been invested for the public good. In a situation where the Nigerian government allocates only between 7 to 13 percent annually to the education sector as against the recommended 26% by the United Nations and at the same time those entrusted with the power and duty of using this funds to develop the education sector embezzle same for their selfish interest spell doom for the education sector in Nigeria.

This paper attempted to look at public service accountability and the extent to which it has affected the Nigerian education sector as well as discuss matters that arise there-from.

Conceptual Issues in Public Accountability

Extant and copious literature in political science and public administration since the time of Thomas Hobbes have debated on whether the State as a sovereign should be accountable to anyone since it was the sole guarantor of social peace or whether the State should be treated as a moral or responsible agent. A careful look at the constitutions of most countries shows the existence of elements of both perspectives, however, the dominating view is that while the State must be self-accounting on the basis of the provision of the constitution the individuals who exercise state authority can be held accountable for actions of the State they represent, (Onyebuchi, 2012).

The whole logic underpinning public service accountability is that public servants occupy their positions and exercise their powers on trust. The people reserve the right to measure how they perform these functions and exercise their powers and to demand explanation when the need arises. As rightly observed by Oyibo and Ekuigbo (2005), the people judge their leaders on the extent to which the leaders fulfill their responsibilities to the people.

Accountability is at the heart of good governance and it holds government responsible for their actions. Accountability in the public service is designed to fulfill the following functions:

- a. Control of abuse, corruption and misuse of administrative power or public office.
- b. Ensure judicious utilization of public resources to achieve its stated objectives.
- c. Ensure efficiency of programmes effected by the government in the interest of the public.

Accountability is synonymous with answerability for ones actions or behaviour. It involves the development of objective standards of evaluation to assist the owners of an organization to evaluate the performance of duties by individuals and units within the organization. Accountability has a theoretical components namely: a clear definition of responsibility, reporting mechanisms and a system of review, rewards and sanctions. Accountability flows in different directions. It flows upwards, downwards, between subordinates and superiors, and laterally among professional peers (Olowu, 2002). Accountability is required for any organization to function effectively, especially governmental organizations in a democratic setting.

Public accountability underscores the superiority of the public will over private interests for those engaged in the provision and delivery of services. Accountability ensures that the citizens reap the dividends of democracy since democracy entails the supremacy of the citizens in the democratic process. Where there is no accountability, as observed by Olowu (2002), the public administrative system runs amok. Accountability enhances good governance resulting in all round development of the nation. If accountability prevails in the Nigerian public service, funds meant for executing educational projects would not be diverted to private pockets and educational projects would be executed conscientiously without compromising standards since education is the bedrock of national development.

Accountability and Nigeria's Public Service

Despite the positive effects of accountability and as an important factor in national development, Nigeria has witnessed near-absence of accountability on the part of public office-holders and this has greatly contributed to lack of development of the Nigerian State. There has been high level of corruption by public officials. Corruption

is born and bred by lack of accountability. As rightly stated by Eleanya (2009), corruption takes different forms and is perpetrated at all levels and facets of the society especially the public sector. Most of the inefficiencies and vices associated with the public service emanate from the deliberate work attitude of civil servants like; come today, come tomorrow, hiding of files and red-tapism which force people to resort to bribery and tips in order to get quick and desired results or transact their business in the Ministries and Parastatals successfully. Eleanya (2009) went further to state that public servants engage in nefarious acts like inflation of contracts, ten percent cuts, favouritism, kickbacks, misapplication and outright embezzlement of public funds.

During the regime of Olusegun Obasanjo (1999 to 2007), the government deducted and diverted to the Police Equipment Fund the sum of ten Million Naira each from source, the quarterly allocation of local government. The deduction of over seven billion naira from all local governments quarterly allocation and diversion of same as donation to either Presidential Committee on Police Equipment or a non-governmental organization clearly shows a high level of criminal extortion and a violation of the laid down regulations for fiscal allocation to the three tiers of government as clearly spelt out in the Nigerian constitution.

In view of the aggravated level of corruption in Nigeria, the government of Obasanjo adopted various measures to stem the tide. The most prominent of this was the setting up of the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). The government and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) at the initial stage actually made a few attempts at tackling corruption. Some of the cases in this regard include those of Tafawa Balogun, the then Inspector General of Police, Adolphus Wabara, a former Senate President, Fabian Osuji, a former Minister of Education, Mrs. Osomo, a former Minister of Housing and Dieprieve Alamiyeseigha, a former governor of Bayelsa State. But the fact remains that the numerous cases of corruption by public officials, some of which were widely reported were discountenanced by the EFCC. The argument is that the noise and propaganda by the government notwithstanding, the anti-corruption was only aimed at opponents and critics of the Obasanjo government (Obo and Williams, 2008).

The list of corruption in the Nigerian state is endless. In 2003, the audit report of Federal Ministries and parastatals was published by Vincent Azie, the then Acting Auditor General of the Federation. The audit report revealed that more than N23 billion was lost in ten major ministries in just one year, 2001. The amount represented financial frauds ranging from embezzlement, payment for jobs not done, over-invoicing, double-debiting, inflation of contract figures to release of money without the consent of the approving authority (Atojoko, 2003). The government did nothing to the

heads of the indicted ministries and parastatals; rather, the Auditor-General was rewarded with retirement.

It is worth noting that for more than seven years, the Ministry of Petroleum Resources was directly under the headship of President Obasanjo and during this period, many cases of corruption were reported in the Ministry. As Ndibe (2007) was at pains to point out, far from combating corruption, the president had presided over a political culture that thrived in graft. Under his supervision of the petroleum ministry, the sector was far from a paragon of transparency. Close associates of his were awarded lucrative oil blocks. The illegal lifting of Nigeria's crude continued, and a ship engaged in this illicit activity disappeared while under arrest. It could be argued as observed by ASUU (2005) that the electoral processes that midwived and sustain the administration was an organized fraud in the name of election. The 2003 electoral fraud was one major reason the government during the period under review lacked the courage, strength and credibility needed to deal decisively with corruption.

Corruption has eaten deep into the fabric of the Nigerian public service, and seems to be glorified and elevated, else how would somebody stole billions of naira pension fund and was told by a competent court of law to pay a fine of seven hundred and fifty thousand naira and go free.

Accountability and the Nigerian Education System

As Akpan, Udoh and Wilson (2012) were at pains to point out, every society or nation recognizes education as a potent instrument of political, social, economic, cultural, scientific and technological advancement and as a means of empowering the individual to perform his role effectively. Education is not only the instrument for human socialization and development, but also a means of self-actualization. Education bridges the lacuna of inequality in society through distribution of income which is made possible through increase in the talent pool available to society by engineering equality. Education eradicates illiteracy and ignorance and is a powerful tool for acquisition of knowledge and skills for social development and civilization.

Despite the importance of education to the overall development of the nation, the Nigerian government has for decades been paying lip service to the development of this crucial sector. As pointed out by Akpan, Udoh and Akpan (2013), Nigerian leaders have not shown appreciable commitment to education as annual budget allocations to this sector over the years clearly show. Between 2000 and 2008, an average of 9.5% of Nigeria's annual budget for nine years was allocated to education as against UNESCO's recommendation of 26%. A breakdown of the allocation to the education sector during the period in question indicates that the education sector was allocated only 8.6% of 2000 annual budget and in 2001 it decreased slightly to 7%. While there

was an increase from 7% in 2001 to 8% in 2002, it decreased again to 7% in 2003. In 2004, the allocation to the education sector shot up to 12% but still less than half of the UNESCO recommendation. 2005 and 2006 received 11% allocation respectively. In 2007, the allocation to the education sector was reduced to an infinitesimal 8%, but in 2008, it shot up to 13%. Although President Yar'Adua's 13% allocation to the education sector in 2008 was the highest in ten years, it was just half of the UNESCO 26% recommendation, (Edeke, 2009).

The inability of the Nigerian government to live up to expectation in allocating resources to the education sector is a symptom of lack of accountability by government. Instead of allocating the required percentage of the budget to education, the government has always channeled same to areas of personal interest where it can be easily misappropriated or out-rightly embezzled by government functionaries for their selfish interest.

The aftermath of these is that education system in Nigeria continues to limp through inadequate facilities and infrastructure, lack of good and functional laboratories for experiments and ipso-facto, unmotivated teachers who find such teaching environment very boring.

Matters Arising in the Nigerian Education System

Several matters have arisen in the Nigerian education system which call for caution and a rethink if this country must brave up to the challenge of the millennium and rise beyond where it is now as a developing nation. The underdevelopment of the education sector is the underdevelopment of the Nigerian State as no country can develop beyond the level of education of its human resources which could only be made possible through proper investment in the education sector.

It is sad but very true that most children from primary and Secondary Schools in Nigeria these days cannot write their names talk-less of ability to communicate in simple English. Most graduates from Nigerian Universities and other tertiary institutions cannot write application for employment or make a simple correct sentence. This contributes to their inability to secure employment as most of them are not employable. Shockingly enough, most of our school certificate holders have fantastic results ranging from nine alphas including Mathematics and English to nine credits all in one sitting but cannot spell their names or give correct answer to a simple arithmetic like 2×2 . This accounts for rich Nigerians sending their children to study abroad at the expense of public funds which they have corruptly acquired. This is a very important matter that should be considered and dealt with by the Nigerian government.

Establishment of private schools in the country has also not helped matters but rather worsen the situation. A greater number of private schools in Nigeria starting from the kindergarten to the tertiary levels are owned by Nigerians, some of whom are holding positions in government, either as political appointees or public servants. This caliber of people do everything possible to ensure the growth of their private schools to the detriment of public schools.

The attitude or actions of these proprietors of private schools cum politicians and public servants may not be deliberate but naturally come to play as an inherent element of capitalism which Nigeria adopts as its economic system. The quest for massive profit and monopolization of the means of production is a characteristic of capitalism. As stated by Ake (1981), the capitalist mode of production polarizes into a very small group of people who monopolize the available means of production.

The National Assembly of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and State Assemblies parade a greater number of members who own private schools and are there to make policies for both private and public schools. One wonders whose interest would they serve since private interest often-times masquerades as public interest.

Motivation of teachers is not only in cash or increment in salaries. The type of academic environment that teachers find themselves is a motivator. Some schools including higher institutions in Nigeria are dilapidated. In some institutions of learning, teachers do not have something to sit on, talk-less of tables for writing. In-fact, some lecturers in some tertiary institutions use their car as offices. In some institutions of learning across the country, there are no libraries and where they have improvised buildings called libraries, there are no books in the shelves. How would one expect a student under this condition to perform well academically. There are no miracles in educational institutions but in churches and prayer-houses. The Nigerian education system needs proper funding and effective supervision if miracles must be recorded.

Conclusion

The paper looked at public service accountability and contemporary issues in Nigerian education system and matters arising there-from. Public accountability is an indispensable ethic aimed at ensuring that public office-holders perform their official responsibilities in a manner that would guarantee the highest benefits to tax payers. Unfortunately public accountability, due to the pervasive influence of corruption in Nigeria has been neglected and abused. Lack of accountability in the Nigerian public service has over the years been a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the fabric of the Nigerian state. It has brought woes to the Nigerian nation and indeed the education sector.

The education sector has been worst hit by the inglorious act of corruption perpetrated by our public officers as could be seen in the current state of the education system. The measure of effectiveness of governance is in its ability to deliver public goods to the people. Public officials charged with executive responsibilities stand to be questioned on how they utilized their administrative powers in favour of the public interest.

The education sector should not be toyed with as its alone holds the key to national development. Budgetary allocations to this sector should be raised to meet up the 26% recommended by the UNESCO. While funds meant for the sector should be properly utilized in those areas of need and monitored for results to be achieved. The recommendations of this paper if adhered to could be a stepping stone to stemming the tide of corruption in Nigeria and repositioning the education sector for greater achievements.

Recommendations

Based on our discoveries from the study, we proffer the following recommendations:

1. Employment into the public service should be on merit devoid of nepotism and favouritism. Most public servants who exhibit non-challant attitude to work are those who feel that they have god-fathers to protect them no matter their degree of involvement in misconduct while in the service.
2. The government should be ready at all time to punish public servants who embezzle public funds or are found to be corrupt in any way. They should be openly punished to serve as a deterrent to others in the service.
3. Public servants who exhibit high level of integrity and honesty should be appreciated by government and handsomely rewarded. This will motivate them to keep up with their good works as well as encourage others to be upright in the performance of their official responsibilities.
4. Government should provide infrastructures in schools, colleges, and universities as well as equip libraries with modern textbooks to encourage students to read. Science laboratories should equally be equipped to enhance competency on the practical side of science-based subjects and courses.
5. Educational policies should not be permitted to begin and end at the level of formulation. The necessary machinery should be put in place to monitor and ensure that government policies affecting the education sector are implemented to the latest.

6. Government should de-emphasize acquisition of academic certificates as a yardstick for measuring intelligence. Government should rather place more emphasis on vocational training which could make people to be independent to cater for themselves after school.
7. Primary and secondary school teachers should be effectively supervised and monitored to ensure that they do their work well as most teachers are more interested in searching for extra income during official hours and abandoning the pupils and students to themselves. This has greatly contributed to the current degeneration as regards the caliber of students our school system produces.

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