Chapter 8

Improving the Efficiency of the Public Sector in Nigeria through Social Accountability

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Introduction

Over the years governments in Nigeria have been devising various strategies in order to ensure efficient resource allocation and service delivery. In an effort to actualise the reform agenda they embarked on various reform measures such as decentralisation, good governance, observance of the rule of law and due process. However, these measures have often been constrained by three major threats, namely corruption, clientelism, and abuse of position and privileges. Systematic corruption and low level of transparency characterise the landscape of the Nigerian economy. The civil service in any country is supposed to be the instrument for the implementation of government policies and programmes. It is therefore assumed to be professionally competent to play a key role in implementing reforms in the country. However, the ability of the civil service to do this largely depends on the government of the day. The civil service in Nigeria is unnecessarily hierarchical, less result oriented, conflict ridden, sectarian and highly inefficient. It is a civil service

attuned to various forms of corruption, fraudlent practices, misappropriation and diversion of funds, bribery and false declaration, (Gboyega, 2003). All these have been the major constraints to the pursuit of efficient service delivery in Nigeria.

Since the government has become remiss in all ramifications, it is believed that the only way to guarantee public interest is by exerting accountability on the government. It is on this note that this paper argues that Social Accountability (SA) is a measure that could be used to increase the efficiency of public service delivery in Nigeria. To achieve this objective the paper is divided into six sections including this introduction, section two reviews popular approaches to public service reform, section three reviews the concept of Social Accountability, section four discusses the practice of SA, section five highlights the situation of public service and SA in Nigeria, while section six concludes the paper and offers some suggestions.

Popular Approaches to Public Service Reform

Previously, countries have tried a number of measures to improve efficiency in the delivery of public service; however, not very much success has been achieved in this direction. It is the failure of these approaches that necessitated the introduction of a number of alternative approaches and hence the emergence of terms such as decentralisation and good governance in the realms of public administration and development studies. This section reviews those traditional approaches which were used by countries at different times and in varying degrees.

Weberian Reform Mechanism

This approach has its root in the work of Max Weber (1921). It views bureaucracy as the institutionalisation of rationality in which each public servant has a specific task to carry out

and is fully accountable for his actions to his immediate superior. This creates a vertically integrated structure with power concentrated at the top in which good governance is guaranteed through careful supervision and rational organisation of the tasks of government.

A solid, rationally organised government is seen as the first line of attack against corruption, clientelism, and capture. Unfortunately, in the contemporary world of flexible government the strengthening of the command-and-control functions of government has fallen out of favour with many. Nevertheless, such old public management strategies like civil service reform and the improvement of internal auditing, evaluation, and surveillance are absolutely central elements of any pro-accountability package. If the central administrative apparatus does not have sufficient strength and legitimacy to control its own employees, pro-accountability reform package will surely fail.

Marketisation Reform Mechanism

The World Bank report (2004) shows that marketisation has been used as pro-accountability reform method, in many countries, particularly, transition economies. This approach emphasizes the privatisation of public services and the imitation of private sector management techniques by the government. These two strategies are both theoretically and empirically distinct. It is a different thing for the government to sell its monopolies, and another to run itself like a business. The marketisation strategy sees society as an aggregation of consumers who can punish or reward service providers depending on their effectiveness. The functioning of the market here serves as an incredibly powerful pro-accountability mechanism.

Marketisation is grounded in the discourse of consumer choice; it seeks to send sections of the state off the society. It is usually tagged New Public Management (NPM). According to

Peters (2001), NPM is a catchall term that actually holds within it the four different models of government (Market, Participative, Flexible, and Deregulated Government). While citizens are replaced with consumers, there are potentials for inequality. In the end, the participative model of NPM will be more effective accountability tool than market, flexible, or deregulation model.

Independent Agencies Mechanism

Independent Pro-accountability Agencies (IPAs) are autonomous public institutions that are responsible for holding government accountable in a specific issue area. Examples include autonomous corruption control bodies, independent electoral institutions, auditing agencies, etc. The performance of IPAs varies widely across countries. In fact, it will be safe to say that there are as many cases of IPAs that serve to help government avoid accountability, as there are IPAs that successfully strengthen government accountability, (Barbone et al, 2005).

In many countries there is a long tradition of creating independent bureaucracies in response to problems in order to make government appear as if it were committed to resolving the issue at hand. A clear example is the Nigeria's Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). The transparency and openness to participation also varies widely between IPAs. However, the strength of a government accounting agency depends on its connection with the civil society at large. This is why IPAs become ineffective measure for accountability.

A Review of the Concept of Social Accountability

The emergence of good governance and the rule of law in the developing countries has most often been constrained by

corruption, clientelism, and capture. All these phenomena relate to the use of public office for private gains and their impact goes beyond the simple diversion of funds. It is however believed that the only way to guarantee public interest of the state is by strengthening government accountability. But, what does accountability mean?

In its literal meaning, accountability means responsibility. However, when applied to the public service, it is used to refer to the ability or possibility that someone or something can be accounted for or counted-up. But such a definition is insufficient as it only encompasses book-keeping and minimal exposures, which are not enough powerful levers for achieving good governance and the rule of law. An acceptable definition will be one that captures the basic elements of accountability, which include transparency, punishment, performance, anticorruption, external surveillance, the public interest, power, and principal-agent relationships (Barbone, *et al*, 2005).

In view of the above, Behn (2001) argued that accountability simply means punishment. Schedler (1999) also incorporated this element in his definition including both answerability (public officers' obligation to inform about and to explain what they are doing), and enforcement (the capacity of accounting agencies to punish public officers who violate the rules). For Mulagan (2000), accountability has three central elements; first, it is external since an outsider is given the account to vet. Secondly, it involves social interaction and exchange, since one side is seeking answers and rectification, and the other side responds and accepts sanctions. Thirdly, it implies right of authority as those calling for account are asserting rights of superior authority over those who are accountable.

Barbone *et al* (2005) introduced a temporal dimension as another element of accountability. According to them it is possible to find accountability from within a social formation without any external body to enforce it. It is also possible in a horizontal relationship, where people of equal

position or status operate. For Manin *et al* (1999), distinction between accountability and responsiveness is crucial. They argued that a government is responsive if it adopts policies that are preferred by its citizens, and also if its citizens can discern representative from unrepresentative government. Responsiveness here refers to motivation for an action or decision. They are however, inextricably linked since a government that opens up to scrutiny and sanction before, during, and after it acts, will usually take the interests and demands of its citizens very seriously.

Finally, accountability could be seen as a proactive process by which public officials inform about and justify their plans of action, their behaviour, and results, and are sanctioned accordingly. This definition is more acceptable because it includes proactive behaviours like information and justification, the evaluation of performance, rule following, the call to account before, during, and after decisions are made, and of course, the application of sanctions.

The SA on the other hand, could be seen as an approach toward building accountability that relies on civic engagement, that is, where ordinary citizens and/or civil society organisations participate directly or indirectly in exerting accountability from government.   The mechanisms of SA include many actions and tools that citizens, NGOs, and media can use to hold public authority accountable. Such mechanisms are normally initiated and supported by the state, citizens, NGOs, or both, but very often they are demand-driven and operate from the bottom (Crook and Manor 1998). It is therefore, built on the implicit compact between citizens and their delegated representatives. Generally, SA is based in the language of citizens' right and empowerment. It tries to avoid the inequality-producing effects of the market-based service delivery and favours inclusiveness and social justice more directly.

The SA approach considers society as a powerful force for strengthening government accountability. Yet, this force

does not come alive automatically or always in the most productive form. This is because there is no single silver-bullet or special recipe for creating successful SA initiative; the best strategy will always depend on the social and political contexts. However, we must quickly note that, although society is omnipresent it is often quite dormant and apathetic. Civil society, on the other hand, is not always as active as it is often made out to be. Any power that is given to society risks being co-opted by criminal organisations and powerful interest groups who only look for personal and group benefits.

The Practice of Social Accountability

This section presents the practice of SA initiative in selected countries across the world. Effort has been made here to review different ways in which different countries have applied SA in order to bring about good governance. In the whole cases reviewed, we discover that, most of the times people rise up to fight for accountability and rule following after experiencing one form of hardship or another, as a result of malfunctioning of a government or its agency, as we shall see below.

The Bangalore (India) citizen report card is a system of evaluating public sector performance, which allows the citizens to evaluate the performance of a particular service or institution across the country. The motivation for the citizen report card in Bangalore was the deficient provision of public services in the city. This problem was wide spread, for most public services, especially in the poorest areas of the city. The rationale behind the report card was that government agencies were not enmeshed in an incentive structure, as the agencies were not exposed to the discipline of the market. The report card was, therefore, developed in order to expose government and its agencies to the consumer feedback they

were lacking. Through this method, government agencies can now see how their performance changes over time.

The report card in Bangalore has played crucial role in re-energizing public services. Specifically, nudged forward by the results of report card, various agencies have initiated training programmes to improve customer services skills of their staff. For example, the Bangalore Municipal Corporation has established a new, more transparent, and less corrupt property tax system, (Ravindra, 2003).

The Rationing Kruti Samiti (RKS) or Action Committee for Rationing is used in Mumbai, India, to ensure prompt and effective delivery of essential commodities provided by the government. Already, most communities in India have local participatory institutions that are supposedly responsible for monitoring the performance of the government programmes, usually called Vigilance Committees and Village Assemblies. The ineffectiveness of the vigilance committee informed the formation of RKS. The RKS only advocated for policy reform from the outside, but later it decided to get involved directly in monitoring the operations of Public Distribution System (PDS).

The PDS is responsible for channelling basic food items and other fundamental household goods like kerosene, to the poorest household. However, because of widespread corruption, the goods are mostly sold by the owners of ration shops, for personal profit, at prices higher than officially agreed. With the formation of RKS, five local women were assigned to each ration shop to monitor and evaluate the quality and prices of the goods being sold. This activity was facilitated by the RKS citywide campaign to oblige shop owners to publicly display prices as well as the sample of the goods on sale. Although RKS recorded remarkable success, it was undermined by politics. State politicians were infuriated that their control over the PDS had been undermined by CBOs (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001).

The Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) in Mexico was the product of 1996 electoral reform which was stimulated by the wide spread social unrest and demand for democracy that arose out of the economic downturn of 1994 – 1995 (Fox and Aranda, 1996). But the most influential was the activism of the non-profit electoral watchdog, where twelve thousand observers and four hundred international observers carried out its parallel quick counts of the electoral results and published its report. This organised civic activity motivated the 1996 electoral reform in Mexico and gave birth to the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) (Ackerman, 2004).

The IFE is responsible for distributing public fund to political parties, monitoring the use of the fund, ensuring non-biased media coverage among all political parties, running public education, and cleaning up official electoral roll. Societal actors are involved in all IFE activities at five different levels. First, a nine member independent general council runs IFE. Secondly, the meeting of the council is always widely publicized. Thirdly, one representative each from the existing political parties sits on the council. Fourthly, all units responsible for organizing and supervising federal and state elections are also citizen-run, and fifthly, IFE employs a huge army of citizen volunteers during federal elections. Also, during elections, all political parties send their agents to each polling station.

On the whole, IFE has been remarkably successful. The lack of post-election protests and mobilisation in the year 2000 election was a testimony to that. Another testimony is that, since it has been promulgated, the 1996 electoral act has not been amended. Its aggressive investigation of current Mexican president (Vincent Fox), for irregular financing of his campaign and the historic 100million dollar fine on the Institutional Revolution Party, clearly demonstrate its ability to stand the test of time.

The combination of social mobilisation, legal action, and media exposure can effectively guarantee the judicial system

to operate impartially, even when the perpetrators are well connected or even part of government itself. Smulovitz and Peruzzoti (2003) reported two important cases in Argentina. One was the political killing of a high school student, and the second was the killing of three youths by police patrol team. In the former case, evidence was hidden and tampered with, while in the latter case the government agencies fabricated a claim of armed confrontation.

The affected community organised mass mobilisations, marches and protests, which attracted widespread media attention. This media attention, combined with the pursuit of legal action by the affected parties, helped push other government agencies and social organisations to get involved in the case. In the case of the schoolboy, the legislature eventually got directly involved through the creation of a special investigative commission, while in the case of the three youths, the protests led to the creation of series of new national organisations for the prevention and punishment of police brutality. In the end, the culprits were found guilty in both cases and justice prevailed. This of course, indicates that citizens' rights can be defended from the corrupt working of the judicial system, through long-term mobilisation of the civil society.

The Fujimori government in Peru was brought down in September 2000 as a result of high corruption scandals and heavy-handed style of rule. The Peruvian society was, therefore, thirsty for both accountability and expanded democracy. It was thus, natural for the in-coming government to emphasise accountability and citizen participation in their attempt to reconstruct government legitimacy. One of the most important initiatives taken during the transition period in 2001 was the creation of Round Table for Attacking Poverty, (MCLCP), which brought together government officials with the representatives of civil society to design social policies to combat poverty. The objective of this arrangement was to institutionalise the participation of civil society in the design,

decision-making, and control of poverty related programmes. While half of the MCLCP executive came from the civil society organisations, these organisations were also actively involved in the planning and monitoring of local development programmes. The government also launched a participatory budget experiment, which led to wide ranging public discussions about the priorities for public investment (Felicio and Abraham, 2004).

These bottom-up initiatives have been joined with other equally important top-down initiatives to form an emerging system of SA in Peru. All information relating to various activities of government were opened-up to the public for their feedback. The World Bank remarked that this data would help beneficiaries, NGOs, Civil Society, and others to exercise social control over social programmes, by allowing them to verify whether programmes are actually spending resources in those areas where they claim to be, whether targeting is appropriate, and whether there is no politically-motivated use of social expenditure (World Bank, 2004).

As is the case with many countries in the world, Indonesians have also lots of distrust for judges, prosecutors, and the police, because these agencies hardly work for justice and public interest. The people, therefore, proposed a programme with multidimensional perspective on the situation of access to justice in Indonesia. The central purpose was to develop sub-national justice reform and dispute-resolution strategy to improve poor peoples' access to justice. The focus was on the social institutions that underlie a society of law, instead of focusing on the technical aspects of judicial system (World Bank, 2004c).

This initiative was, of course, an example of an effective decentralized approach to improving accountability that is grounded in community participation. The initiative is based on the conviction that top-down institutional reforms to the justice system are not enough. The demand side for justice also needs to be strengthened at the local level. Individual

communities and civil society at large need to be empowered to both use the judicial system to resolve disputes and to oversee the judicial system to ensure that it functions well. The initiative also looks beyond the formal judicial system to explore how informal justice institutions work. These other institutions are informal in so far as they are places where disputes are resolved outside of the framework of law (Barbone *et al*, 2005).

The Situation of Public Service in Nigeria

> Because of the patrimonial character of most African states and because of their weak and fragmented civil societies, the potentials for effective popular participation in institutional public bodies at all levels is not very high. Powerful elite groups frequently dominate and manipulate assemblies' decision-making procedures ensuring that the interests of the disadvantaged groups are effectively ignored. Public services are characterised by ineffectiveness, lack of accountability and widespread economic mismanagement (Schou, 2002).

Since the return of democracy in Nigeria several attempts have been made to bring sanity back to our civil service particularly on issues that border on corruption and redundancy in the public service. Even before then, institutions such as Public Complaint Commission, Code of Conduct Bureau and Tribunal have been in existence but not with much success to their credit. When the democratic government came on board it met a seriously destabilised public service where procedures were not respected and public funds were handled just like personal fund, it declared war against corruption and a general overhaul of civil service structure. We saw the emergence of Due Process, Servicom, the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). Although, to some extent, one can but accept that these innovations have made some impacts, they

have however, not brought the desired change that Nigerians wanted to see in the civil service. For instance, most of the cases treated by the anti-corruption agencies were argued to be politically motivated and contracts were still awarded to meet some political scores, while Due Process was actually on ground. The Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) has left many to believe that it was never independent as no trace of transparency was seen in the elections particularly the 2003 and 2007 presidential elections.

However, government could be forced to give people what they want and could be pushed to observe rules and regulation when the civil society become well organised and get involved directly or indirectly in the governance of their nation, this is what SA is all about. From the case studies we have reviewed, we can learn a great deal of experiences. Take the Mexico Electoral Institute for example; it has differed from Nigeria's INEC only in the involvement of civil society. What is missing in Nigeria is therefore, the involvement of civil society in the Independent Accounting Agencies (IPAs), such as INEC, ICPC, EFCC, Servicom etc. The Bangalore Citizen Report Card, Peru's Emerging System of Social Accountability and Justice for the Poor in Indonesia provide very good lessons for Nigeria.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Public sector reforms require focus on both rule-based and performance-based accountability; it is a key to maintaining a balance between negative and positive sanctions. Each side of the coin has its specific strengths and weaknesses and work best when put together in complementary fashion. In general, the two central problems with accountability initiatives in the area of public service tend to be lack of institutionalisation and inclusiveness. The major reason for this ugly trend is the issue of power. Central executive

agencies have accumulated a great deal of power, and they, therefore, see both widespread participation and institutionalisation of SA as a threat to their authority, and thus, prefer mechanisms that do not infringe on their authority. This coincidentally explains the ways and manners with which the Nigerian governments have been pursuing accountability mechanisms. One can recount some attempts made during the current civilian administration have some resemblance of SA initiatives, like the Fiscal Responsibility Bill, Community Policing, Access to Information Bill and a host of other initiatives. However, none of these attempts has satisfied the basic conditions of institutionalisation and inclusiveness.

The civil society is always willing and able to work with the government in constructive ways once they perceive that their participation can make a difference; Civic Society Organisations should therefore take up the challenge of mobilizing and sensitizing people on the importance of their participation in the design, implementation and evaluation of programmes that affect them, since the involvement of civil society remains the foundation for Social Accountability. However, government must play its role of providing legal and institutional framework for achieving the desired objectives. It is the belief of this paper that the entrenchment of SA is one of the few options for us to revive the public sector.

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