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Service Compact with All Nigerians (Servicom) and Service Delivery in the Nigerian Public Service: An Appraisal

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, poor service delivery has been identified as one major deficit noted with the Nigerian public service. This has elicited much of intellectual debates and scholarly interventions which have been devoted to underscore the negative perception of poor service delivery in the Nigerian public service. Efforts to change the service delivery orientation of the Nigerian public sector through introducing a new service delivery philosophy have also received some attentions. The SERVICOM Charter, as introduced in March, 2004 becomes the binding document that mandates all government institutions on effective and efficient delivery of services to the Nigerian public. This paper adopted a literature-based approach to underpin the context while, interrogating the need for improved service delivery in the Nigerian public service. Findings from this study argued that, the SERVICOM Charter is challenged by its operational environment as a working document for the reorientation of the Nigerian public service and the citizenry towards effective and efficient service delivery. The paper concluded that, for SERVICOM Charter to achieve the objectives of the changing narratives of poor service delivery in the Nigerian public service, measures are also required for the appropriate compliance of its laudable objectives in the Nigerian public service at large.

INTRODUCTION

The primary purpose of government and by implication, the public service is to improve quality of life of citizens through effective and efficient services provided by the institutions established by the state for this purpose. For the citizens, there is also a notion that public institutions have a social obligation to render service and therefore have a legitimate expectation to be provided with quality services. Imperatively, one of the major challenges of government and perhaps, the legitimate expectations of the citizens of a developing country as Nigeria could be rightly located in the ability of the public service to adequately meet up with the task of improving the quality of lives of the citizens. Consequently, public service delivery in the Nigerian public sector has been severally described as lacking the right orientation and attitude for effectiveness and efficiency.

The introduction of Service Compact with all Nigerians (SERVICOM) in March 2004, as a charter aimed at driving Service Delivery Initiative (SDI), and instilling a new service orientation in the Nigerian public service sector came against the backdrop of the general decadence, inefficiency and poor service delivery which have characterized the Nigerian public service delivery system. As a policy measure, SERVICOM was conceived to monitor the service delivery in Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs), in conformity to the citizen's expectations, and also serves as a facilitating paradigm for social accountability framework of public service delivery in Nigeria.

SERVICOM as conceived stands to promote the attitudinal change in the citizenry, particularly with regard to their rights to demand quality services from the MDAs.

It is a social contract between the government and the people which also empowers the citizenry to demand for good services when they require such. Accordingly, the SERVICOM charter requires all MDAs to make public, the description of their services, mission, and vision statements; details about customers; service delivery that customers may expect; and grievance redress mechanism. In addition, the Charter must equally contain statement of service requires from staff, management, and customers, or even government, in order to guarantee the delivery of service. This is referred to as "the other half of the contract" (SERVICOM Document, 2006).

With the avowal commitment of the government in the pursuance of the SERVICOM charter and particularly, on a declaration made by the then President Olusegun Obasanjo led administration with a solemn Service Compact with all Nigerians in "providing the basic services to which each citizen is entitled in a timely, fair, honest, effective and transparent manner." (Adeyinka and Ema, 2015). It is appropriate to assert that, government is quite aware of the appalling state of service delivery and hence, the need to reverse the trend with commitment to ensure that public institutions live up to their expected mandates in term of service delivery as a further assurance of enhancing confidence and accountability in the public sector in general.

Meanwhile, President Obasanjo had made an equal declaration in June, 2003 asserting the fact of poor quality of service delivery in the public sector by stating that "Nigerians have for too long, been feeling short changed by the quality of public service delivery. Also, our public offices have over the years, being showcased for the combined evils of inefficiency and corruption

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with impediments of ineffective implementation of government policies. Nigerians deserve better, we will ensure that they get what is better.” (Adeyinka and Ema, 2015).

The level of decadence in the public sector has also been identified as a major factor which had impacted negatively on the quality of service delivery given the environmental and structural constraints inhibiting the performances of public sector personnel. With plethora of reform policies put in place by the government, there is obviously, a determined effort to change the perception of the public service delivery system in Nigeria by building a culture of accountability and openness expected in the conduct of government businesses. The evidences of the decadence in public service are abound, as could be reflected in most of the publicly-owned institutions charged with the provision of essential services to the members of Nigerian public. The Nigerian citizens hardly get the real value for their civic commitment particularly, in the areas of taxes and levies, and even in the obligations of payment for services being rendered by the public service organizations in Nigeria.

There is no doubting the fact that, the Nigerian public sector has been plagued by series of institutional challenges part of which have also been identified in the absence of efficient service delivery. The pervasive poor social services orientation has in many instances, retarded the desired national growth and development and consequently, promoted other social vices as sharp practices and corrupt tendencies in the public sector.

The nature of service delivery in the Nigerian public sector as earlier noted, has been largely described as “chaotic”, “epileptic”, “unsatisfactory”, “shoddy”, “deplorable”, “insensitive”, “inflexible”, “non-cost effective” (Oyedele, 2015). The level of insensitivity towards the public has on the other instances too, reflected in the public perception of the Nigerian public service with the such negative and endemic attributes as lateness, absenteeism, needless delay and bureaucratic redtapism, palpable negligence, inexcusable incompetence, unbridled corruption, favouritism, lackluster, performance and general lackadaisical attitude to work (Okon, 2008).

The focus of this paper therefore, is to assess the impacts of SERVICOM charter, and in this regard, serve as a veritable yardstick for measuring the impacts of SERVICOM with regard to service delivery in the Nigerian public service sector.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are quite plethora of literature which have remarked and diagnosed the Nigerian public service sector particularly, in relations to the receding level of service delivery and poor professionalism which have also characterized its operations over the years.

Nwekaku and Obiorah (2019) inferred that, the Nigerian public service has witnessed some reform policy agenda, including SERVICOM as a possible way of providing new directions towards improved service delivery in the

Nigerian public service sector. However, in spite of the spirited efforts of such policy reforms, quality of service delivery in the Nigerian public service remains a major concern in view of the public perception. The aftermaths of such have equally received the reactions of both the government and the civil society groups on the necessity of scaling up the levels of advocacy and the citizens’ awareness on the most appropriate ways to inject a new lease of life into the Nigerian public service for quality service delivery.

In the opinion of Ochala and Ruslan (2017), successive efforts of government at repositioning and improving service delivery in the Nigerian public sector have not yielded any positive results. These have been traceable to the absence of political will on the part of the policy elites to provide the requisite environments for the Nigerian public service in fulfilling its mandates to the Nigerian public. The SERVICOM charter which represents the new philosophical orientation for service delivery in Nigeria therefore, requires a wider dose of public education and enlightenment on its importance as part of the measures to improving the quality of service and professionalism in the Nigerian public service sector. For Okafor and Onuigbo (2015) the unprofessional conducts common with the Nigerian public service have largely led to unethical behaviours which also remain part of the major factors that have promoted the compromised values of the nation’s public service over the year. The aggregation of socio-political influences coupled with low level of public administration education and training could also be attributed to the down play of professionalism which invariably, leads to inefficiency and poor service delivery orientation in the Nigerian public service sector.

With reference to public service in Nigeria, poor service delivery as characterized by inefficiency and other negative vices can be linked to several other factors. Observers and scholars alike have ascribed the introduction of the federal character principle and the application of quota system in recruitment of public servants as the major precipitating factor which have also promoted the low level of service delivery in the public service (Kirfi, Balarabe and Shantali, 2013). The policy as entrenched in the nation’s constitution has been largely attributed in many ways, to the continuous injection of low quality workforce resulting in the decadence being witnessed in the quality of service delivery of the public sector of the nation’s economy. This eventually led to institutionalization of mediocrity, subjectivity, corruption and inefficiency (Kirfi, Balarabe and Shintali, 2013). The age-long military interregnum also had a more far reaching implication for the nation’s public service particularly, with the distortion of the public service ethics as a result of the overwhelming control and the repressive nature of the military government. The massive purge of the 1976 under the Murtala/ Obasanjo military regime was a very good case of such distortions.

Other factors which have been raised could be noted

for instance, in the inconsistency of government policy reforms and the lack of political will to adequately implement such policy reforms, have also been linked to the seeming decadence and the poor state of service delivery in the public service. One of such is the contradiction of the 1988 civil service reforms which to many observers, became a reference point in the erosion of professionalism in the Nigerian public service by the elevation of political expediency above rationality.

The public service became vulnerable, as senior positions in the service became highly political without any serious consideration for the erstwhile professionalism which served as the point of attraction to many career officers (Hamalai, 1999; Enogholas, 2006). This development, according to observers created a serious lacuna that eventually led to low morale among public servants with the attendant lack luster attitudes to work by public servants within the Nigerian public service. Added to that, was the incursion of the military into the Nigerian political scene which was also seen to be another major factor that impeded the level of service delivery of the public service due to some of the reasons earlier suggested.

Ogunrin and Erhijakpor (2009) share the view that, overtime, inefficiency and corruption became rife in the Nigerian public service, and the onset of these ills could be linked to some reform agenda which equally had some political expediencies behind their intention. For instance, the 1988 public service reform had some major impacts in the service delivery due to the political expediencies that threatened careers of top civil servants, most especially, the change of the career status of Permanent Secretaries to Directors-General that made their appointments purely political. The 1988 reform was also believed to be a major disservice to the entire public service and thereby, provided the impetus for the high level of inefficiency among the public servants.

Adamolekun and Kithija (2005) offered that the military rule which lasted between 1966 and 1979 destroyed the fabrics of the nation's public service largely, out of lack of requisite skills necessary for managing the affairs of the state and its political direction. The incursion of the military in the Nigerian political space specifically, from the first phase in 1966 to 1979, through its second interregnum of 1983 and 1999, served as a major inhibiting factor to the growth of the Nigerian public service sector and consequently too, on the quality of service outputs and delivery of the Nigerian public service.

Adegoroye (2005:1), while making reference to some of the ills of the Nigerian public service as rightly identified by the Ayida panel, opines that politicization, absence of accountability and probity, indiscipline, virtual institutionalization of corruption at all levels of public service and total disregard for basic service ethics and regulations became the extant norms which further affected the quality of service delivery in the Nigerian public service. The endemic bureaucratization which also encourages slow response to action and discharge

of duties among the workforce, insensitivity to value of time, low morale, poor working condition, and stagnation in career among others were equally identified as the bane of the Nigerian public service with its attendant low regard for quality service delivery.

In view of the critical importance of public service delivery to the citizens of any country, service delivery should be accessible, of high quality, effectively and efficiently delivered. Government is therefore, faced with the challenge of providing basic public services to which citizens are entitled in a timely, fair, honest, effective and transparent manner. It is argued further that, over the years, public service failure or ineffective delivery of such services has always been the norm in the developing countries like Nigeria (Oyedeke, 2015).

Olowu (2005), opined that in order to effectively change the tide of poor delivery of service in the Nigerian public service, it is equally expedient for government to adopt strategies that will ensure active engagement of the citizens at some levels of decision making particularly, as regards production and delivery of public services. Olowu (2005) further argued that, with the decline in the available resource at the disposal of the government, it is rather compelling for the active citizens' engagement as a panacea for enhancing quality of service delivery in the Nigerian public service.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Philosophical Underpinnings of the Servicom Charter

Arguably, a result-oriented service delivery is predicated on clearly defined organizational goals and well motivated workforce (Oyadiran, 2010). It is also revealed that these factors are pertinent to assessing the impacts of SERVICOM particularly, in the Nigerian public service. Imperatively, the SERVICOM charter is anchored on the following:

1. Affirmation: That is, on the commitment to the service of the Nigerian state.
2. Conviction: This is also predicated on the fact that Nigeria can only realize its full potentials, if citizens receive prompt and efficient services from the state.
3. Consideration: This attests to the needs and rights of all Nigerians to enjoy social and economic advancement.
4. Dedication: To provide quality services to which all citizens are entitled in a timely, fair, honest, effective and transparent manner.

Further to these, and in the affirmation of government's commitment to enhancing the quality of service delivery in the public sector as a possible way of reversing the negative trend of service deficit to the Nigerian public, MDAs were appropriately mandated to make provision for the SERVICOM charter and publish same in line with their organizational mandates. These provisions must include:

- > That quality service must be designed around customers' requirements;
- > Set out citizens' entitlements in the best way they

could easily understand;

- > List of fees payable and prohibition of illegal demands;

- > Commitment to provision of services within realistic time frame;

- > Specify officials to whom complaints may be addressed; and

- > Publish these details in conspicuous places accessible to the public.

- > Expectedly, and sequel to the presidential directives, MDAs were further mandated to establish the SERVICOM units by replicating the model as domesticated within the presidency (Abdulganiyu, 2010).

Servicom Unit and Its Functions in the Nigerian Public Service

The SERVICOM office, as domesticated under the presidency, has the supervisory and regulatory mandates of superintending and ensuring the strict compliance of the SERVICOM charter in the MDAs, in line with the mandates set out by the presidency. The SERVICOM unit in the Nigerian MDAs however, performs the following functions:

- > Formulation and coordination of the SERVICOM unit and its operation in the MDAs;

- > Monitoring and reporting of the activities in line with the SERVICOM performance obligations; and

- > Carrying out survey of services and customers' satisfaction in all the departments and formations of Agency, among other functions.

The above highlighted functions are carried out under a nodal officer who is of a Deputy Director rank and supported by other officers as; chapter desk officer who is also saddled with the formulation, implementation and review of the chapter's SERVICOM mandates, the customers' care or complaint desk officers whose duties are to ensure prompt attention of customers needs, grievances and redress mechanism while the service improvement officers are saddled with the general service improvement in the MDAs. The unit has other compliments of staff that assist in other administrative duties for the smooth running of operation in the SERVICOM unit.

Servicom and Its Control Mechanism

As reiterated above, the SERVICOM office, as domesticated under the presidency, plays a major supervisory and regulatory mandate of the strict compliance of the SERVICOM charter in the MDAs and performs functions similar to those of the SERVICOM units in the MDAs, but purely in regulatory capacity as could be indicated as follows:

- Coordinating the formulation and operation of the SERVICOM charter in all MDAs.

- Monitoring and reporting of performances under the SERVICOM obligations.

- Carrying out survey of services and customer satisfaction.

As a necessary measure of effective control on the appropriate implementation of SERVICOM charter in all the MDAs, the SERVICOM regulatory unit under the presidency becomes a very imperative tool to effect compliance and ensure the realization of its objectives.

CONCLUSION

In the opinions of many observers, the impacts of SERVICOM are still far from being felt in the public service and across the three tiers of the Nigerian government. One of the major obstacles of SERVICOM has also been linked to the absence of a legal framework as it only came as a mere presidential directive and with such political expediency that could not stand any test of time. This has in many ways affected the wholesome acceptance of SERVICOM as a new initiative in government policy action towards enhancing quality service delivery in the public sector. The policy initiative, like many other previous initiatives, had suffered from the inability of the successive governments to show commitment towards sustaining and accepting it as a policy paradigm capable of charting a new path of re-directing the government and the public service as a whole, particularly as regards the fulfillment of the objectives of the government to the citizenry. Admittedly, public service delivery in Nigeria has witnessed a serious reversal from the policy intention of the SERVICOM initiative. Most public institutions are still found in the old order of poor service orientation without any form of stringent regulatory framework to curtail the unwholesome practices of poor service delivery as inimical to the interest of the Nigerian public. The initiative of SERVICOM has however, been lauded by a wide range of citizenry as a new policy direction towards instilling new attitudinal change particularly, in the public sector of the nation's economy. With the renewed emphasis on the national core values and similar other initiatives including ethical and value re-orientation of the Nigerian masses and the political institutions, the public service in Nigeria could be well positioned to actualize the laudable objectives of SERVICOM. Efforts such as in the capacity building of the public service workforce have equally been identified as one major channel through which the goals of SERVICOM could be realized. The capacity deficit noted in the Nigeria public service over the years has also been part of the major inhibiting factors and negative influences in the service delivery mandate of public institutions. Efficient public service delivery and administration are germane to national development. It is also well noted that, with low awareness and publicity of the SERVICOM initiative, many Nigerians have been short changed of their rights to be adequately informed and equipped on how to take up a redress in the event of service failure.

Observers have however, suggested that, aside from adequate capacity building measures for all categories of public servants, the issue of poor remuneration in the public service must be properly addressed as a way out of curbing the endemic corrupt practices which have also

impeded the quality of service delivery to the members of the public. The SERVICOM initiative must be well articulated and cascaded to every tier of the nation's public service at the federal, state and local government levels. The initiative must not be selective and exclusive while, allowing access to all categories of the citizenry particularly, at the grassroots level of the nation's polity, where incidences of low awareness and rights violations are very prominent. The SERVICOM as a laudable policy initiative has the capacity to inject a positive impact towards redirecting the government and the public service delivery system in Nigeria. It possesses the ability to also evolve the right attitudinal values in the public service and its workforce towards service delivery orientation, as well as, in instilling the value of consciousness for the demand of rights to appropriate services in the citizenry.

The obvious absence of the appropriate legal framework and legislation for the SERVICOM initiative had caused some setbacks in its proper implementation as could be observed in all the MDAs. However, the level of complacency on the part of policy-makers in Nigeria has been a serious challenge to the appropriate implementation of the SERVICOM initiative. The failure of the successive governments to vigorously acknowledge the necessity of sustaining the initiative as with other similar initiatives and policies can also be alluded to the low awareness of the SERVICOM initiative in the public service.

The SERVICOM initiative in its far-reaching objectives, has failed largely out of the non availability of effective monitoring and evaluation framework. The absence of effective framework for monitoring the initiative has not also been far from the prevailing norms in the public service, where rules and regulations are deliberately circumvented at will and without any recourse to sanctions. The deficiencies in the implementation of SERVICOM have therefore, posed a major challenge to the quest of enhancing quality service delivery in the Nigerian public service. Besides, the SERVICOM units in most MDAs have become largely ineffective, sometimes non-existing and even moribund.

The endemic corrupt practices associated with public service in Nigeria could be found to be another major pit fall noted with the effective implementation of the initiative. The prevailing poor working conditions and remunerations in the Nigerian public service could also be a major factor beneath such corrupt tendencies. This has also created the impetus for some unscrupulous practices in the public service for the circumvention of norms through sharp practices and other corrupt tendencies including the deliberate failure to deliver services when and where necessary to the members of the public.

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