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Reforming the Nigerian Public Sector for Effective Governance and Sustainable National Development

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Abstract: The public sector plays a central role in promoting national development through policy formulation, public service delivery, infrastructure provision, and the maintenance of law and order. In Nigeria, however, the sector has continued to face numerous challenges, including corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, weak accountability, political interference, inadequate capacity development, poor financial management, and ineffective policy implementation. These challenges have limited the ability of public institutions to deliver quality services and achieve national development objectives. This paper examines strategies for reforming the Nigerian public sector to enhance governance and sustainable development. Specifically, it discusses merit-based recruitment and promotion, strengthening accountability and anti-corruption mechanisms, expanding digital governance, investing in capacity building, introducing performance management systems, depoliticizing the public service, improving public financial management, strengthening policy implementation, monitoring and evaluation, enhancing citizen participation, and improving employee motivation and welfare. The paper adopts a qualitative approach based on an extensive review of relevant scholarly literature, government publications, and policy documents. The review shows that successful public sector reform requires strong political commitment, institutional independence, transparency, professionalism, technological innovation, and effective leadership. The paper concludes that comprehensive implementation of these reform strategies will improve public sector efficiency, strengthen public confidence in government institutions, promote accountability, and accelerate sustainable national development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Public sector reform, governance, accountability, public administration, digital governance, Nigeria.

Introduction

The public sector is the machinery through which government formulates policies, delivers public services, regulates economic and social activities, protects national interests, and promotes socio-economic development. An efficient public sector is indispensable for achieving sustainable development because it provides education, healthcare, security, infrastructure, environmental protection, and social welfare services that improve citizens' quality of life. Consequently, the effectiveness of government institutions largely determines the pace of national development.

Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has implemented several public sector reforms aimed at improving administrative efficiency, accountability, transparency, and service delivery. These reforms include the Udoji Public Service Reform of 1974, the Dotun Phillips Civil Service Reform of 1988, the Ayida Panel Reform of 1995, the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), the Treasury Single Account (TSA), the Government Integrated Financial Management Information System (GIFMIS), and the adoption of the Integrated Personnel and Payroll Information System and other digital governance initiatives [1]. While these reforms have recorded some achievements, many structural and institutional challenges continue to hinder effective public administration.

The Nigerian public sector continues to experience corruption, political interference, weak institutional capacity, poor implementation of government policies, bureaucratic delays, inadequate monitoring and evaluation, ineffective financial management, and insufficient staff motivation. These problems have resulted in poor service delivery, abandoned projects, declining public confidence in government institutions, and slow socio-economic development. Local media and international development partners have repeatedly emphasized the need for comprehensive reforms that will strengthen governance, improve transparency, and enhance institutional effectiveness.

Scholars such as Adamolekun, Oyedeji, Nwosu, and Sukare and Usman have argued that sustainable public sector reform should focus on meritocracy, accountability, digital transformation, capacity building, performance management, fiscal discipline, citizen participation, and institutional autonomy [2]. These strategies are expected to improve organizational performance, reduce corruption, strengthen policy implementation, and promote effective governance. Against this background, this paper examines key strategies for reforming the Nigerian public sector to improve efficiency, accountability, transparency, and service delivery. It argues that a professional, accountable, technology-driven, and citizen-oriented public service is essential for achieving sustainable national development and strengthening democratic governance in Nigeria [3].

Methodology

Conceptual Terms

1. Concept of Public Sector Reform

Public sector reform refers to deliberate changes introduced into the structure, management, policies, institutions, and operational procedures of government organizations to improve efficiency, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, and service delivery. It is aimed at modernizing public administration, strengthening institutional capacity, improving financial management, enhancing human resource management, and ensuring that government institutions effectively meet the needs of citizens. Public sector reforms often include civil service reforms, digital governance, anti-corruption initiatives, performance management, decentralization, and public financial management reforms. According to the United Nations Development Programme, public sector reform focuses on building inclusive, accountable, and effective public administrations that can respond to increasingly complex development challenges while placing citizens at the centre of governance. Similarly, the World Bank explains that public administration reform seeks to strengthen government institutions by improving policy coordination, organizational structures, leadership, human resource management, and workforce motivation to achieve better public service delivery and sustainable development. In Nigeria, public sector reforms have included the Udoji Reform of 1974, the Dotun Phillips Reform of 1988, the Ayida Panel Reform of 1995, the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), the Treasury Single Account (TSA), the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), the Government Integrated Financial Management Information System (GIFMIS), and various digital governance initiatives. These reforms were introduced to reduce corruption, improve financial accountability, eliminate ghost workers, strengthen institutional performance, and enhance service delivery. Despite these efforts, challenges such as political interference, corruption, bureaucratic bottlenecks, and weak implementation continue to limit the effectiveness of the Nigerian public sector.

2. Concept of Effective Governance

Effective governance refers to the process through which public institutions formulate and implement policies efficiently, transparently, responsibly, and in accordance with the rule of law while ensuring that citizens actively participate in decision-making. It emphasizes accountability, transparency, responsiveness, inclusiveness, equity, efficiency, and effectiveness in the management of public affairs. Effective governance ensures that government institutions utilize public resources prudently, uphold democratic principles, protect citizens' rights, and provide quality public services. According to the United Nations Development Programme, governance is the system of values, policies, and institutions through which society manages its economic, political, and social affairs. Effective governance is built on participation, inclusion, equality, accountability, non-discrimination, and the rule of law. These principles enable governments to formulate and implement policies that are responsive to citizens' needs while strengthening institutional performance. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development also argues that effective governance strengthens policy coordination, integrity, stakeholder engagement, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation, and regulatory quality. Such governance systems enable governments to respond to emerging challenges, improve public trust, and accelerate the implementation of national development priorities and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In Nigeria, effective governance is reflected in transparent elections, accountable public institutions, prudent management of public finances, effective implementation of development policies, efficient public service delivery, and citizen participation in governance. Where governance is effective, corruption declines, public confidence increases, investment improves, and socio-economic development accelerates.

3. Concept of Sustainable National Development

Sustainable national development refers to a continuous process of economic growth, social progress, environmental protection, and institutional development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It promotes balanced development through efficient resource utilization, environmental conservation, social inclusion, poverty reduction, quality education, healthcare, infrastructure development, and effective governance. The United Nations Development Programme emphasizes that sustainable development depends on effective governance institutions that provide quality public services, promote accountability, strengthen the rule of law, and create an enabling environment for inclusive economic growth and social justice. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development notes that achieving sustainable development requires governments to coordinate policies across sectors, strengthen public institutions, improve budgeting systems, encourage stakeholder participation, and establish robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Effective governance serves as a catalyst for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by ensuring coherent public policies and efficient allocation of public resources. In Nigeria, sustainable national development involves promoting economic diversification, quality education, affordable healthcare, environmental sustainability, food security, infrastructure development, employment creation, technological innovation, and good governance. Strong public institutions, transparent leadership, prudent financial management, and effective public sector reforms remain essential for achieving long-term national development and improving the welfare of citizens.

Result and Discussion

New Public Management (NPM) Theory

The New Public Management (NPM) Theory is the most suitable theoretical framework for the study "Reforming the Nigerian Public Sector for Effective Governance and Sustainable National

Development." The theory explains how governments can improve public sector performance by adopting private-sector management principles such as efficiency, accountability, performance measurement, competition, decentralization, customer orientation, and results-based management.
The New Public Management (NPM) theory was developed by Christopher Hood in **1991** through his influential article *A Public Management for All Seasons?* Although earlier reform ideas emerged during the 1980s in countries such as the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia, Hood is widely recognized as the scholar who conceptualized and popularized the theory [4].

Discussion of the Theory

New Public Management emerged as a response to the weaknesses of traditional public administration, which was criticized for excessive bureaucracy, slow decision-making, poor accountability, inefficiency, and waste of public resources. Hood argued that governments should borrow successful management practices from the private sector to improve the quality of public services. The theory advocates a shift from rigid bureaucratic procedures to a more flexible, performance-oriented, and citizen-focused system of public administration.

The theory emphasizes that government institutions should focus on measurable results rather than merely following administrative procedures [5]. Public managers should be given greater managerial autonomy while being held accountable for achieving clearly defined performance targets. Competition, innovation, transparency, and customer satisfaction are considered essential elements for improving government performance. NPM also encourages the use of digital technologies, outsourcing where appropriate, prudent financial management, and continuous evaluation of public programmes to ensure value for money.

Since the 1990s, many countries, including Nigeria, have introduced reforms influenced by New Public Management principles. Examples include the Treasury Single Account (TSA), the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), the Government Integrated Financial Management Information System (GIFMIS), performance management initiatives, and e-government programmes designed to improve transparency, efficiency, and accountability [6].

Features of the New Public Management Theory

1) Performance-oriented management: Public institutions should establish measurable performance targets and evaluate employees based on results rather than seniority.
2) Accountability and transparency: Public officials should be accountable for their decisions and the use of public resources through effective monitoring, auditing, and reporting systems.
3) Merit-based recruitment and promotion: Employment and promotion should be based on competence, qualifications, and performance instead of political patronage or nepotism.
4) Customer or citizen orientation: Citizens should be regarded as customers whose satisfaction should guide public service delivery.
5) Managerial autonomy: Managers should have sufficient authority to make operational decisions while remaining accountable for organizational performance [7].
6) Efficiency and cost-effectiveness: Government resources should be utilized prudently to achieve maximum value for money and reduce waste.
7) Competition and innovation: Public organizations should encourage innovation, benchmarking, and healthy competition to improve service quality.
8) Decentralization: Decision-making authority should be delegated to lower levels of government or public agencies to enhance responsiveness and efficiency.
9) Digital governance: Information and communication technologies should be adopted to improve transparency, reduce bureaucracy, and enhance service delivery [8].
10) Monitoring and evaluation: Government programmes should be regularly monitored and evaluated to ensure that policy objectives are achieved.

Relevance of the Theory to the Study

The New Public Management Theory is highly relevant to this study because it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how public sector reforms can improve governance and promote sustainable national development in Nigeria.

First, the theory supports merit-based recruitment and promotion, which aligns with the study's recommendation that public service appointments should be based on competence and professionalism [9].
Second, it emphasizes accountability, transparency, and anti-corruption, which are among the major reform strategies discussed in the study for improving governance and restoring public confidence.
Third, the theory advocates performance management and results-based evaluation**,** supporting the study's recommendation that ministries, departments, and agencies should establish measurable performance indicators to improve service delivery.
Fourth, NPM encourages digital governance and innovation, which is consistent with the study's recommendation for expanding e-government systems, digital financial management, and electronic public services [10].
Fifth, the theory promotes efficient public financial management, prudent use of public resources, and continuous monitoring and evaluation, all of which contribute to improved governance and sustainable national development.
The theory's focus on citizen-centred service delivery, institutional efficiency, and organizational effectiveness directly supports the study's objective of identifying strategies for reforming the Nigerian public sector to achieve effective governance and long-term national development.

Strategies to Reform the Public Sector in Nigeria

Reforming the Nigerian public sector is fundamental to improving governance, strengthening accountability, enhancing transparency, and delivering quality public services. Over the years, scholars and policy experts have emphasized that the effectiveness of government institutions depends largely on comprehensive reforms capable of addressing persistent challenges such as corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, weak institutional capacity, political interference, and poor service delivery [11]. The following strategies have been widely recommended for transforming the Nigerian public sector.

Institutionalize Merit-Based Recruitment and Promotion

A fundamental strategy for reforming Nigeria's public sector is to institutionalize merit-based recruitment and promotion. This means that employment, promotion, and appointment into public offices should be based on competence, qualifications, experience, and performance rather than political patronage, nepotism, ethnic considerations, or personal connections. Adamolekun argued that professionalism is the foundation of an effective public service and can only be achieved when merit becomes the primary criterion for recruitment and career advancement. Merit-based recruitment improves the quality of the workforce, enhances staff morale, and increases public confidence in government institutions. For example, recruitment exercises conducted through transparent competitive examinations and interviews by agencies such as the Federal Civil Service Commission can help attract qualified professionals into the public service. Similarly, promotions based on annual performance evaluations rather than favoritism encourage employees to work harder and improve productivity. Also, Ogunode, Ayoko, and Ezema submitted that one of the most important reforms recommended by scholars is the adoption of merit-based recruitment, promotion, and career progression. Ogunode, and Agyo, recommended that the government priories professionalism and competence and use them to replace patronage and political influence in public service appointments [12]. Similarly, Oyedeji asked the government to institutionalize merit-based recruitment anchored on competence, transparency, and equal opportunity as a foundation for an effective public service. A merit-driven system attracts qualified personnel, enhances productivity, promotes fairness, and reduces corruption and favoritism in public institutions.

Strengthen Accountability and Anti-Corruption Mechanisms

Strengthening accountability and anti-corruption mechanisms is another critical strategy for public sector reform in Nigeria. Government institutions should enforce strict financial regulations, conduct regular audits, strengthen internal control systems, and ensure that public officials are held accountable for misconduct. Anti-corruption agencies such as the EFCC, ICPC, Code of Conduct Bureau, and Office of the Auditor-General should be adequately funded and allowed to operate independently without political interference. According to Sukare and Usman, transparent financial management and effective accountability systems reduce corruption and improve public trust. For example, the implementation of the Treasury Single Account (TSA), Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), and Government Integrated Financial Management Information System (GIFMIS) has reduced payroll fraud, eliminated ghost workers, and improved accountability in public finance management. Improving accountability and intensifying the fight against corruption remain indispensable components of public sector reform in Nigeria [13]. Effective oversight institutions such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), the Office of the Auditor-General, and Public Accounts Committees should be empowered to discharge their statutory responsibilities independently and efficiently

Expand Digital Governance and E-Government Systems

The integration of digital technology into public administration has become an important strategy for modernizing government operations and improving service delivery. The expansion of e-government platforms simplifies administrative procedures, reduces bureaucracy, improves transparency, and minimizes opportunities for corrupt practices. The adoption of digital governance and e-government technologies is essential for improving efficiency and transparency in Nigeria's public sector. Digital platforms reduce excessive paperwork, minimize delays, enhance record keeping, and limit opportunities for corruption. Nwosu (2026) emphasized that digital transformation enables government institutions to provide faster and more citizen-centered services. For example, online recruitment portals, electronic procurement systems, digital tax payment platforms, electronic filing of government documents, and online passport application systems have significantly improved service delivery in several government agencies. Expanding digital governance also promotes transparency because citizens can monitor government activities, access public information, and receive services without unnecessary physical contact with public officials.

Invest in Capacity Building and Continuous Professional Development

An efficient public service depends on a knowledgeable, skilled, and professionally competent workforce. Continuous capacity development enables public servants to acquire modern administrative skills, leadership competencies, digital knowledge, and ethical values necessary for effective policy implementation. Continuous training and professional development are essential for building an effective and productive public service. Government should regularly organize workshops, seminars, conferences, leadership training, and digital skills programmes for public servants to improve their knowledge and competencies. Adamolekun maintained that a well-trained workforce is better equipped to implement government policies effectively and respond to emerging administrative challenges. Oyedeji also stressed that continuous capacity building enhances innovation, ethical conduct, and institutional performance. For example, civil servants should receive regular training on information technology, project management, procurement procedures, public financial management, customer relations, and policy implementation. Such investments improve employee confidence, service quality, and organizational effectiveness [14].

Introduce Performance Management and Results-Based Evaluation

Introducing an effective performance management system is another important strategy for reforming the Nigerian public sector [15]. Government institutions should develop measurable performance indicators that assess both employee productivity and institutional effectiveness. The principles of New Public Management emphasize efficiency, accountability, performance measurement, and results-oriented administration. Public sector organizations should establish comprehensive performance management systems that evaluate employees and institutions based on measurable targets and outcomes. Performance indicators should be linked to service delivery objectives, while rewards should be given to outstanding performers and corrective measures applied where performance is poor [16]. According to Alamu, Makinde, and Shiyanbade, performance management promotes efficiency, accountability, and improved organizational productivity. For example, ministries, departments, and agencies can develop annual performance contracts that specify expected outputs, timelines, and measurable indicators. Regular monitoring and evaluation help identify implementation challenges early and ensure that public resources are utilized effectively to achieve government objectives.

Depoliticize the Public Service and Strengthen Institutional Autonomy

Political interference has continued to undermine professionalism, continuity, and administrative efficiency within the Nigerian public service. Consequently, public institutions should be granted sufficient operational autonomy to perform their statutory responsibilities without undue political influence [17], [18]. Reducing political interference in the administration of public institutions is essential for sustainable public sector reform. Public servants should be allowed to perform their professional responsibilities according to established laws, regulations, and ethical standards without undue political pressure. Sukare and Usman argued that institutional autonomy enhances professionalism, policy continuity, and effective governance. For example, appointments of permanent secretaries, heads of regulatory agencies, and chief executives of government institutions should follow transparent procedures based on competence rather than political loyalty. Strengthening institutional independence also enables anti-corruption agencies, electoral bodies, and oversight institutions to carry out their statutory responsibilities objectively, thereby improving public confidence in government and enhancing national development [19].

Improve Public Financial Management and Fiscal Discipline

Improving public financial management is a critical strategy for reforming Nigeria's public sector. Government institutions should ensure that public funds are budgeted, allocated, spent, and accounted for in accordance with established financial regulations and international best practices. Sound financial management minimizes waste, prevents misappropriation of public resources, and enhances value for money in government projects. According to the World Bank, strengthening public financial management systems promotes transparency, accountability, and efficient service delivery. Similarly, the International Monetary Fund emphasized that prudent fiscal management and effective expenditure controls are essential for sustainable economic development [20]. For example, strict implementation of the Treasury Single Account (TSA), Government Integrated Financial Management Information System (GIFMIS), electronic procurement systems, and regular external audits can reduce financial leakages and improve budget implementation. Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) should also publish periodic financial reports to promote openness and public confidence in government.

Strengthen Policy Implementation, Monitoring, and Evaluation

Many government programmes in Nigeria fail not because of poor policy formulation but because of weak implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Public sector reform should therefore strengthen institutional mechanisms for monitoring project execution and evaluating policy outcomes. Effective monitoring enables government to identify implementation challenges early and make necessary adjustments. According to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, monitoring and evaluation improve accountability, learning, and evidence-based decision-making in public administration [21], [22]. For example, federal and state governments should establish performance monitoring units that regularly assess the implementation of infrastructure projects, education reforms, healthcare programmes, and social intervention initiatives. Annual performance reviews, field inspections, stakeholder consultations, and independent evaluations can ensure that government policies achieve their intended objectives while minimizing project abandonment and resource wastage.

Enhance Citizen Participation and Public Engagement

An effective public sector should actively involve citizens in governance and decision-making processes. Public participation promotes transparency, strengthens accountability, and ensures that government policies reflect the needs and aspirations of the people. According to the United Nations Development Programme, inclusive governance encourages sustainable development and strengthens democratic institutions. In Nigeria, citizens can participate through public hearings, budget consultations, town hall meetings, online feedback platforms, and community development committees. For example, before implementing major infrastructure or educational policies, governments should consult professional associations, civil society organizations, labour unions, traditional rulers, and community leaders. Such engagement improves policy acceptance, reduces conflicts, and enhances the quality of public service delivery.

Improve Public Service Motivation, Welfare, and Working Conditions

The motivation and welfare of public servants significantly influence their productivity, commitment, and ethical behaviour [23]. Government should improve salaries, provide regular promotions, reward outstanding performance, ensure prompt payment of pensions and gratuities, and create conducive working environments. Well-motivated employees are more likely to provide efficient and quality services to citizens. According to the International Labour Organization, decent working conditions and fair remuneration improve employee satisfaction and organizational performance. For example, providing modern office facilities, reliable internet connectivity, continuous professional development opportunities, health insurance, and staff welfare programmes can increase employee morale and reduce corruption, absenteeism, and labour turnover. Furthermore, introducing recognition awards for exceptional public servants can encourage professionalism and excellence throughout the Nigerian public service.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Nigerian public sector remains the principal instrument for implementing government policies and delivering essential services to citizens. Despite numerous reform efforts over the years, persistent challenges such as corruption, political interference, weak institutional capacity, poor financial management, inadequate accountability, and ineffective policy implementation continue to undermine its performance. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive and sustained reforms that strengthen institutions rather than focusing only on administrative changes. The strategies discussed in this paper including merit-based recruitment and promotion, stronger accountability mechanisms, digital governance, continuous capacity building, performance management, institutional autonomy, prudent financial management, effective monitoring and evaluation, active citizen participation, and improved staff welfare provide practical pathways for transforming the Nigerian public service into a professional, transparent, efficient, and results-oriented institution. When these reforms are effectively implemented, they will enhance service delivery, reduce corruption, increase public trust, improve policy implementation, and contribute significantly to sustainable national development. Therefore, governments at all levels should demonstrate strong political will and collaborate with relevant stakeholders to ensure that public sector reforms are consistently implemented for the benefit of present and future generations.

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