

**CORRUPTION IN THE NIGERIAN PUBLIC SERVICE: THE PUBLIC  
CHOICE PERSPECTIVE**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The high incidence of corruption in Nigeria in spite of the establishment of many anti-corruption agencies poses a great challenge to good governance and has therefore, become an issue of public concern. This study examined the causes of corruption in the Nigerian public service and identified strategies of fighting the vice from the perspective of the public choice theory. The research design was largely qualitative and descriptive using data from Transparency International and information from existing literature. The study established that corruption in the Nigerian public service is induced by public sector incentives and institutional weaknesses. Public sector incentives include government monopolies, regulations and subsidies in the economic sector. Institutional weaknesses include weak accountability frameworks such as problems of corruption reporting, timely prosecution and non-deterrent punishment for corruption offences. The study recommends for reduction of corruption transaction by reducing government participation in the economy, reduction in the size of the public service, increase in public sector wages and creation of alternative job opportunities. Others include strengthening of anti-corruption laws to facilitate corruption reporting, prosecution and enforcement of severe punishments on offenders as well as societal value re-orientation.*

**KEYWORDS:** Corruption, public servants, corruption incentives, corruption transactions, self interest, rent-seeking.

## INTRODUCTION

Corruption is a global phenomenon which has not been known to spare any country of the world. However, the increasing incidence of the vice over the years in Nigeria in general and the Nigeria public service in particular poses a great challenge to the quest for good governance and has therefore become an issue of public concern. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 in chapter II, pertaining to the Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy in section 15(5) provides that "the state shall abolish all corrupt practices and abuse of power" (Federal Republic of Nigeria, (FRN) 1999). Similarly, the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), has as one of its core objectives, the promotion of accountability and fight against corruption (National Planning Commission (NPC) 2004; 13-16).

Pursuant to these, the Federal Government of Nigeria enacted enabling laws and established institutions aimed at fighting corruption in the country. These include the Independent Corruption Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) established vide the ICPC Act, 2000 and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) established through the EFCC Act, 2004. Others include the Fiscal Responsibility Commission established by the Fiscal Responsibility Act, 2007, the Bureau for Public Procurement created by the Public Procurement Act, 2007 and the Nigeria Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (NEITI) Act, 2007. In spite of these efforts, Transparency International a globally acclaimed anti-corruption watch-dog in its Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) indicates a high incidence of corruption in the Nigerian Public Service. Nigeria's CPIs staggers between 1.0 in 2000 and 2001 to the highest of 2.7 in 2008 only to ship down to 2.5 in 2009 and further to 2.4 in 2010 and the CPI 2011. The CPI was also 2.7 in 2012 (Transparency International 2000, 2001, 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012). Why is the rate of corruption still high in the Nigeria Public Service in spite of the efforts made by successive administrations in the country? This is the core issue the paper seeks to unravel.

The objectives of this study are to identify the causes of corruption in the Nigeria Public Service and strategies for reducing the vice using the perspective of the public choice theory. It is the assumption of this study that corruption in the Nigeria Public Service is induced by public sector incentives and institutional weaknesses.

The study spans from 1999-2012. This choice of this time frame can be justified on the ground of being a period of return of democratic governance in Nigeria commencing on 29th May, 1999 after a prolonged period of military dictatorship characterized by accountability deficits. A democratic regime is expected to be more transparent and accountable than a military dictatorship. The study is also national rather than local, state or regional in scope for better utility. It is also limited to corruption in the public sector without the occurrence of the vice in the private sector. The study also acknowledges the collusion of the two sectors in corruption. The choice of public sector corruption can be justified on the ground of being of greater concern to governmental studies and also give more focus to the study. The major limitation of the study is that it is descriptive rather than empirical.

This is however not enough to involved the findings of the study as qualitative research has a strong preference in public administration research (Staut, 2013; 21). The research design for this study is content analyses of secondary data and existing literature. The data will be presented in tables and analysed using averages and percentages for analyses.

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK THE CONCEPT OF CORRUPTION

Corruption as a concept is difficult to define with precision. Scholars and organisations alike therefore, advanced different definitions based on their orientation. However, most of the exiting literature focused on bribes and the dominant state-centric nature of public sector corruption to the neglect of the private sector which equally affects state society relations (Mustapha, 2010, 166). For instance, the World Bank (1999); Ladipo (2000); Aduda (2007); Svensson (2005, 20); Tanzi (1998, 564) and Transparency International (TI 2003 and 2009) define corruption as the abuse or misuse of public office or power for private gain or benefit. Public office is abused when officials accept, solicit, or extort a bribe and when private agents offer bribes to circumvent public policies and processes for competitive advantage and profits. Ocheje (2001, 179) from a legal perspective observes that official corruption refers to deviation from the duties or rules of public service. He adds that is easier to identify what corruption is not, as opposed to what corruption is because of the forms in which corruption manifests itself. But as Tarkowski quoted in Johnston (1993, 43) cited by Doig and Mclover (1999, 659) public administration academics and political scientists seek social-cultural formal-legal standards to study corruption as a broad process within a political context, to suggest that corruption is any activity motivated by self interest, violating the binding rules of distribution, the application of which is within one's responsibility. These rules of distribution refer not only to the letter of the law, but also to norms recognised as binding by society and or to the official norms and operational codes. Although this perspective may be felt to be too general, it fits well with the perceptions of public choice theorists, who perceive politics and bureaucracies as self interested by competing for resources and benefits for themselves and their organisations. The definitions advanced by Svensson (2005, 20), Tanzi (1998, 564) and TI, define corruption as it relates to the public sector alone as if it does not occur in the private sector. This however, fits our study. But, it is worthy to note that corruption is not only undertaken for personal or self gain, as it can also be undertaken for the benefit of a third party or both.

Ocheje's (2001, 179) assertion that it is easier to identify what corruption is not rather than what it is runs counter to the views of Akinyemi (2010) and Oloapa (2013). Akinyemi (2010, 2 9) argues that corruption can be better understood by identifying its constituent elements. These elements are bribery, trading in influence, graft and patronage. Others are nepotism and cronyism, electoral and vote fraud, embezzlement, kickbacks and involvement in organised crimes. It also include unholy alliance and what he called "quiet corruption" meaning citizens not receiving services for which public officials have been paid to deliver. Oloapa (2013)

asserts that corruption is manifested in the form of bribery, embezzlement, fraud, extortion and abuse of power and conflict of interest. Others are insider trading, favouritism and nepotism. These operational definitions better explain corruption than the conceptual definitions earlier advanced.

**THE CAUSES OF CORRUPTION**

The causes of corruption are many and varied. Svensson (2005, 24-28) in an empirical study of the most corrupt countries in the world including Nigeria using TI 2003 CPI established that a strong relationship exist between income and corruption. Tanzi (1998, 565-576) in a similar study identified the causes of corruption in public sector to include excessive government regulation of the market and authorisations. It also includes spending decisions such as provision of goods below market price like the subsidies on petroleum products and extra budgetary accounts like the excess crude account in Nigeria. Others are political party financing, level of public sector wages and penalty system. Dike (2005, 6-7) identifies some of the causes of corruption in Nigeria. These are political office as the primary means of gaining access to wealth, great inequality in distribution of wealth, and conflict between changing moral codes. Others are the weakness of social and governmental enforcement mechanisms and the absence of a strong sense of patriotism. However, the non-inclusion of public monopolies regulation of the economy and subsidy regimes weakens Dike's assertion.

The African Development Bank (ADB) Group (2006, 1-2) asserts that corrupt practices become the exception rather than the norm if the likelihood of being caught is high, if the consequences once caught is predictable and severe, and if it is generally condemned by the society. The bank summarises the dynamics of public sector corruption with a simple model thus;

$$C = M + D - A \quad (1)$$

where Corruption = Monopoly + Discretion - Accountability. Under this model, a public official is assumed to have monopoly power over a good or service which generates economic rent such as the petroleum sector in Nigeria. It is also assumed that the public official has the discretion to decide who will acquire it and is not accountable for his action. Thus, corruption thrives where there is government monopoly, regulation of the economy, and where public accountability is lacking.

Similarly Huther and Shah (2000, 2-4) argue that corrupt practices become attractive when the expected gains exceed the expected costs of undertaking the act. Therefore, a self interested individual will seek out or accept corruption if the expected gains outweigh the costs. That is Where E is the expected gains operator

$$E[B] = n \times E[G] - \text{Prob}(P) \times P > 0 \quad (2)$$

n is the number of corrupt transactions

G is the gain from the corrupt transaction

Prob (P) is the probability of paying a penalty

P is the penalty for the corrupt activity.

This equation indicates that corruption becomes pervasive when the expected gains are greater than zero because, the government is involved in many transactions and regulations from which corrupt public officials gain. In addition, the

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probability of being caught is narrow because of weak institutions and even when caught the penalty is not severe to serve as a deterrent. A typical example of this scenario is the case of Bode George and the Thirty one state governors in the period of 1999-2007 who were alleged to be corrupt (Buhari, 2007) but only the former Bayelsa State Governor (DSP Alarmiesiegha) was convicted. Another classical example in the recent time is the case of one Yakubu a public servant who embezzled about 32 billion naira pension fund meant for the people, he was given a light sentence of 750,000 naira with the option of 6 months imprisonment. From the literature reviewed, the causes of public sector corruption include government monopolies and subsidy payments, excessive regulation of the economy, extra budgetary accounts, poor public sector wages and secrecy in government business. Others are weak institutional controls and weak and mild penalty system to deter corruption.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework for this study is public choice theory. Duncan Black (1948) is often referred to as the founder of the Modern Public Choice Theory. Others include Kenneth Arrow (1951) Antony Downs (1957), Williams Niskanen (1971) George Stigler (1971) and Manour Olson (1971). However James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock (1962) are the leading figures on Public Choice Theory (Buttler, 2012, 32-38).

Public choice theory is the use of the methods and tools of economics to the theory and practice of politics and government (Buttler, 2012: 21). It is the application of the rational choice model to non-market decision making. The theory makes no distinction between the motives of an individual operating in the market place and one in the political arena. It uses an individual as the basis of analysis (Hill, 1999: 1-2). In a narrow sense, public choice analysis is concerned with state failure, manned by self interested actors on a political market. The state is often incapable of correcting market failures, or at least of correcting them at a lower price than the cost of original market failures themselves (Lemieux, 2004, 22).

Public choice theory is of the view that individuals when acting as voters, politicians, or bureaucrats, continue to be self interested and try to maximise their utility. For instance, political parties formulate policies in order to win elections rather than win elections to formulate policies. The bureaucrat in order to maximise his utility maximises the size of his bureau's budget because, they can thereby increase their real remuneration in terms of perks (large offices, better expense account), lower risk of missing their objectives, recognition etc. Thus, the bureaucrats produce more than the politicians and citizens want, or at a higher cost. The bureaucrat also exerts his power as an agenda setter which can often lead the system towards the result he prefers by deciding which alternative and which order will be voted upon by politicians or citizens. Interest group will engage in rent seeking in the search for redistributive benefits at the expense of others. And the larger the state and more benefits it can confer, the more rent seeking will occur (Lemieux, 2004, 22-24).

The public choice challenged the thinking of welfare economists who assume that policy decisions would be made logically and rationally by enlightened

and impartial officials, pursuing the public interest. This according to the welfare economists would make the decisions far superior to market choices driven by self interest and private profit. The public choice has shattered this assumption. It accepted that collective decisions are needed for some tasks that inevitably require communal action. Public choice asserts that the process of making those decisions fall short of the welfare economist ideal. It established that those who make public decisions are in fact just as self interested as anyone else as individuals do not suddenly become angels when they get job in government. After all as Buchanan and Tullock observed, government is also a means of by which rational, self interested individuals combine to promote their personal interests through collective action (Buttler, 2012, 24-41).

In essence, as Buchanan (2003, 11) observes, insights from public choice theory enable us understand why, once established, bureaucracies tend to grow apparently without limit and without connection to initially established structures and pork-barrel politics dominates the attention of legislators (constituency projects and high pay in Nigeria). Public choice also seeks to explain the existence of a direct relationship between the overall size of government and the investment in efforts to secure special concessions from government as is the rent seeking associated with full subsidies in Nigeria. Not only that the theory also seeks to explain why balanced budgets are so hard to secure and strategically placed industries secure tariff protection.

In relation to this study, the increasing size of the state characterised by the existence of monopolies and subsidies, budget deficits and large bureaucracies represents incentives for opportunistic behaviour on the part of politician, bureaucrats and interest groups to engage in corruption in the Nigeria public service. Public choice theory is not without criticisms. Olaopa (2008, 47) faults the theory for using the language and tools of economics to explain purely political and bureaucratic processes and activities. Hill (1999:5) also observes that the theory is not ideologically neutral as it is capitalist oriented. Its use of methodological individualism as the bases of analyses can be faulty as the behaviour of an individual can differ in a collective setting. In addition, to say that government is intrinsically a matter of many civil servants, politicians, interest groups and others pursuing economic incentives is to weaken the prospects for government in the service of the public good (Hill, 1999: 5). In spite of these shortcomings, the public choice theory will help explain the high incidence of corruption in the Nigerian public service as briefly narrated in section 3.0.

#### **OVERVIEW OF CORRUPTION IN THE NIGERIAN PUBLIC SERVICE**

Although, incidences of corruption abound in the Nigerian public service, this section briefly cites some of the cases 1999-2012. These range from embezzlements, frauds, contract scams and rent-seeking involving politicians, bureaucrats and interest groups. Prior to the return to democratic governance in 1999, the United Nations Executive Director for Drugs, Narcotics and Money Laundering Costa (2008), estimates that corrupt leaders embezzled close to \$400 billion in the period of 1966-1999.

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With the return of democratic governance to Nigeria and the establishment of many anti-corruption agencies nothing seems to have changed. Shehu (2011:18) citing a research conducted by the Human Rights Watch in 2007 estimated that Nigeria lost between US\$4 billion U\$8 billion annually to corruption during the eight year period of Obasonjo administration (1999-2007). State Governors and other politicians allegedly embezzled US\$250 million hidden in Western Banks and other offshore financial centres between 2005 and 2007 alone (Shehu, 2011, 18). Others include the Siemens 1.3 billion Euro and Wilbrow International's 10 million Euro bribery scandal involving some public servants and the foreign firms between 2006 and 2007 (Akinjuromu, 2009 and Financial Standard, 2009).

Ogbeidi (2012, 16-18) citing Adekeye, 2003; Asaju, 2003; Haruna, 2009 and Shettima, 2009 narrates that over \$400 million was invested on the Turn Around Maintenance (TAM) and repairs of refineries. However, the refineries could not be turned around and the contractors were never brought to book (Adekeye, 2003, 30). The report by the Revenue Mobilisation Allocation and Fiscal Commission (RMAFC) indicated undeclared revenue shortfall of the sum of N302 billion between January and July 2002 from sale of 445,000 barrels of crude oil. Efforts made by the RMAFC for the presidency to compel the then Group Managing Director of the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC) to refund the missing amount to the Federation Account was unheeded. Curiously, the presidency directly oversees the petroleum ministry at that time (Adekeye, 2003; Shettima, 2009).

In addition, an audit report of Federal Ministries between 1999 and 2002 revealed that over N23 billion was stolen from ten ministries through embezzlement, payments for unexecuted contract, over invoicing and unauthorised releases of funds. However, it was the then acting Auditor-General that was hastily retired for alleged offences of procedures breaches while the minister was not brought to book. (Adekeye 2003 and Haruna 2009 as cited by Ogbeidi, 2012:17). There was also the \$214 million National Identify Card Project Scam involving some political office holders and bureaucrats with a French company, SAGEM S.A. in 2001 (Asaju, 2003 cited by Ogbeidi, 2012: 17-18). Section 88 and 89 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 empower the legislature to conduct investigations into the activities of government for the purpose of exposing corruption, waste and inefficiency. However, the House of Representative Committee on Capital Market was alleged to have requested for a bribe of N39 million from the Director-General of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) in 2012 (Suleimaan, 2012; 49-53).

The report of the House of Representatives Committee on the Management of Petroleum subsidy in Nigeria reveals how politicians, bureaucrats and interest groups in rent-seeking collaborated in defrauding the nation. The committee established that the actual subsidy paid out by the Federal Government from January-December 31st 2011 was N2.587 trillion which is 90% higher than the N304 billion appropriated for 2011. Over N230.184 billion was also paid to marketers on 3.262 billion litres of petrol which was not supplied. The Petroleum Products Pricing and Regulatory Agency (PPPRA) on its part paid itself N158 billion in 2009 and N157 billion in 2011 from subsidy payments. (Tell, 2012: 22-28). Thus, the policy of subsidy payments on petrol became avenue for rent seeking by the Nigerian National

Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), the Petroleum Products Pricing and Regulatory Agency (PPRA) and oil marketers in Nigeria.

Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) indicates that the level of corruption in the Nigeria Public Service still remains high in spite of government's efforts over the years. This view is presented in tabular form as shown below.

Table 1: Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (CPI) for Nigeria, 1999-2012

Year	CPI	Transparency (%)	Corruption (%)
1999	1.6	16	84
2000	1.2	12	88
2001	1.0	10	90
2002	1.6	16	84
2003	1.4	14	86
2004	1.6	16	84
2005	1.9	19	81
2006	2.2	22	78
2007	2.2	22	78
2008	2.7	27	73
2009	2.5	25	75
2010	2.4	24	76
2011	2.4	24	76
2012	2.7	27	73

Source: Transparency International's CPIs 1999-2012 Editions

The data in Table 1 presents Nigeria's CPI scores from 1999-2012 as obtained from the world's most reputable anti-corruption watch-dog, Transparency International. The organisation provides reliable quantitative data on the level of corruption both at global and national levels using its CPIs. The CPIs prior to 2012 range from zero (0) to ten (10). The closer a country's CPI is to 0, the more corrupt is the country. Conversely, the closer a country's CPI is to 10, the more transparent (clean) is the country. However, the CPIs were converted to percentage from 1999-2011 for ease of analysis. The CPIs for 2012 were however presented in percentages by Transparency International itself (Transparency International, 2012: 2-5).

Nigeria's CPIs range from the lowest of 1.0 (10% transparency and 90% corrupt) in 2001 to the highest of 2.7 (27% transparent (73% corrupt) in 2008. The 2008 score could neither be improved upon nor maintained as the country's CPI shipped back to 2.5 in 2009 and further to 2.4 (24% transparent and 76% corrupt) in 2010 and 2011. However, Nigeria's CPI again moved to its 2008 level of 2.7 (27% transparent and 73% corrupt) in 2012. Although, the country's CPIs have not gone below 2.4 since 2008, the rate of transparency in the Nigerian public service has been generally poor with 27% as the highest score from 1999-2012. On the other hand, the rate of corruption remains generally high ranging from 90% in 2001 to 73% in

2008 and 2012. The mean rate of transparency for the fourteen years was 19.57% as against 80.43% for corruption.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

From the literature reviewed as well as the data presented and analysed, the study established that there was a high level of corruption in the Nigeria public service from 1999-2012. Corrupt incidences in the service take the form of bribery, fraud, contract scam and rent-seeking by politicians, bureaucrats, as well as individual and groups from the private sector as the public choice theory analyses. The major causes of corruption in the Nigeria Public Service as the ADB (2006); Dike (2005); Huther and Shah; Svensson (2005) and Tanzi (1998) assert, are many and varied. These range from bribery, government excessive regulation of the market especially the petroleum sector, monopolies and subsidies that became avenues for rent-seeking (Svensson, 2005, Tanzi 1998).

The involvement of public servants in so many transactions and authorisations have increased the number of corrupt transactions and the resultant temptation while the probability of being caught in an opaque system is low as indicated by Transparency International's CPIs for Nigeria. These, coupled with weak penalties for corrupt offences and enforcement of punishments for offences have aggravated the rate of corruption in the Nigeria public service (Huther and Shah, 2000; Dike, 2005). While the ADB Group (2006) adds that corruption thrives where; government monopolies exist; public servants exercise wide discretion; and where accountability is thin as in the Nigeria public service. Others are notion of the public office as the primary means of gaining access to wealth as well as the waning societal codes (Dike, 2005).

In view of these, the study recommends for reduction in the level of government participation and regulation of the economy. This can be achieved through de-monopolisation, deregulation and removal of subsidies in order to reduce temptation for corruption. A reduction in the size of the public service will reduce the number of corruption transactions. Discipline and political will is however required in privatisation in order to avert corruption in the exercise. The removal of subsidies in the petroleum sector will go a long way in reducing rent-seeking by interest groups. Monies saved from payment of the subsidies can be used in other sectors like infrastructure, health and education. A reduction in the size of the public service should be followed by increase in public sector wages and creation of alternative job opportunities in the country.

The institutions of governance should be strengthened by enforcing public service ethos and anti-corruption legislations. The enforcement of anti-corruption laws will facilitate transparency, enhance corruption reporting and aid prosecution. Penalties for corrupt practices should be deterrent enough to discourage commitment of the vice. Societal value re-orientation is required in order for public servants to imbibe and appreciate the virtues of hard work, honesty and selflessness for a serious fight against corruption in the Nigeria Public Service.

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