

AGENTIFICATION OF PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY: A RISING PHENOMENON IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

In order to achieve optimal service delivery, it has become increasingly important for government to partner with the private sector. This paper focused on a current and emerging pattern in the public service in Nigeria. It discussed the extent to which public service delivery, which hitherto had been purely the business of government, has gradually metamorphosed to being that of executive agencies (Agentification) in Nigeria. The study highlighted the implications of this phenomenon, the challenges inherent in it and suggestions of the way forward. Methodologically, this paper is based on documentary analysis of relevant records and concluded that Agentification, which is characterised by reduced bureaucracy, financial incentives, and professionalism could lead to increased efficiency. However, underutilizing the public service despite the huge amounts invested into the various ministries, the quality of service delivery and the susceptibility to corruption are all risks factors that must be fully mitigated if the benefits of agentification are to be realized.

Keywords: Agentification, Efficiency, Public Service, Privatisation, Public service delivery

Introduction

Service delivery is a primary element of good governance. Efficient and effective service delivery is the "sine qua non" of government. In this context, government services are the supply of water, electricity, provision of health, housing, security, infrastructures, management of waste and the regulation of business concerns. It is also a major part of government responsibility to ensure that these services reach the people for social and economic purposes (Redi & Marliana 2024; Felix, 2011). One major exposition of some of the public service reforms in Nigeria is the introduction of the New Public Management; this concept is premised on the knowledge that the private sector can more efficiently produce outcomes desirable to the populace (Ali, Bhutta, Ahmad, Ansari, Ahmed & Qadir 2024). The theory advocates for fewer public resources, more technological reliance, fewer government expenditures and more private involvement, all leading to performance targets that can better serve those utilising the services (Ali et al., 2024; Agboola, 2016). The New Public Management also brought about increase in Departments and Agencies. In a nation such as Nigeria, where the socialist system of government is in operation, major infrastructures are expected to be provided by the government which has been an herculean task to achieve in Nigeria. It is obvious that the Nigerian government is not capable of providing all the basic social amenities for the citizens (Ebiala, Ugbe, & Agi, 2024).

Economies with inadequate or underdeveloped infrastructure are bound to experience slow economic growth, and in some cases, social unrest with the attendant human and material casualty. When an economy is faced with the challenge of infrastructural deficiency, it is generally unattractive to capital, domestic or foreign investments (Mawajje, 2024; Ugwu, 2012). However, these infrastructures are highly capital-intensive in nature especially for developing nations who tend to crumble under the weight of these responsibilities because of the strain it exert on the meagre resources available. Therefore, in order to achieve optimal service delivery, public sector authorities in developing countries are constantly seeking alternative

sources of funds, and one of such is investment by the private sector through public private partnership (PPP); another name for it is agentification, our focal point of discussion in this study. The public service in Nigeria has witnessed several reforms, which in turn had culminated into increase in awareness of the existence and importance of autonomous and quasi-autonomous organisations.

The role of these organisations first came to academic prominence during the 1970s when the term “quango” was introduced into the lexicon of political science and public administration (Geert & Guy, 2004). These forms of organisation have come to be used more commonly in a wide variety of countries around the world, other industrialized democracies and many developing nations have inculcated these formats for their own governments with an even wider range of terminologies. More recently, governments have created, or attempted to create agencies or other forms of less autonomous organisations to implement programs; in most instances these organisations remain responsible to the minister in charge but yet have substantial autonomy from the ministries. Thus, this chapter intends to conceptualize agentification as it relates to the Nigerian context, the reasons for agentification, the impact it has made in service delivery, the challenges inherent and the proffered way forward.

Conceptualizing Agentification

Globally, especially in the developing nations of the world, the new public management (NPM) concept has exerted a widespread influence on the public sector for over three decades (Adebayo, 2004). One core element of NPM is “agentification” which involves the breaking down of traditional bureaucracies into separate autonomous agencies in order to increase efficiency and effectiveness in the public sector (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000).

Agentification can be regarded as a colloquial terminology also known as "state sponsored bodies", "semi-state bodies" and "Quango" in some climes; an abbreviation of the phrase ‘quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation’. In the field of Public Administration, agentification denote three things; disaggregation, that is, the structural separation of service providing units from their parent organisation; this can be described as a process whereby an organisation is formally delineated from its "parent" body and clearly delimited as a separate entity. This structural separation does not indicate complete demarcation from the authorities that informed the establishment of the agencies; rather it is more about varying degrees of autonomisation, which is the increased operational and sometimes strategic autonomy of these units. The majority of these units are limited liability companies, based on private law. This structural separation is usually accompanied by a parallel increase in autonomy. The third aspect is contractualisation, which focuses on the introduction of contracts, quasi-contracts or contract-like relations between these agencies and their "parent" organisation, primarily on ethical conduct, performance, transparency and accountability (Fatmawati, Suharto, Amrozi, Suhma, Yudiawan, Ilyasin, & Suhma, 2024).

Agentification in Nigeria is a product of the series of reforms in the public service; borne out of the need for professionalism and efficiency. As part of the reform programmes, the government created some agencies and departments to complement the various ministries. The scopes of the services they provide are usually sufficiently complex to warrant their establishment as separate bodies outside the normal operations of government departments. The laws setting them allow considerable flexibility as against the rigid demands of the Civil Service (Marshall & Aminu, 2015). These agencies are authorized with executive powers to perform designated duties. They are formed for reduction of red-tapism, ease fiscal constraints and for optimal performance. They typically adopt some of the management practices from the private sector. Similarly in some other countries in Africa, such as South Africa, Tanzania, Agentification is a response to the need for more efficient and effective government, it is regarded as a strategy to deal with the generally weak traditional large and monolithic civil service (Mmassy, 2024; Nwogi, 2018).

Agentification makes it possible for large public sector departments to be broken down into smaller, more efficient, specialized and manageable units. Each agency is able to focus on its specific goals and objectives in a more detailed manner, and results are more measureable than that of large departmentalization. In Nigeria for instance, under the federal ministry of education we have several agencies which include, National Universities Commission (NUC), Tertiary Education Trust fund (TETFund) and Joint Admission Matriculation Board (JAMB). All these agencies operate as autonomous entities.

Agentification implies significant delegation of management authority to Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) who are leading and managing the agencies (Nwogi, 2008). In Nigeria, the Minister has delegated executive power to make any declaration or appointment or to give any license, authorization, exemption, notice, direction, approval, permission or consent to the Directors of such agencies (Ministers' Statutory Powers and Duties Act, 1999).

The Ministers' Statutory Powers and Duties Acts clearly state the relationship of the agency with the supervisory ministry. In Nigeria, recruitment to these Agencies is done in accordance to the Federal Character commission as mandated by Paragraphs 8(1) (a) and (b) of section C, part 1, Third schedule of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to “work out an equitable formula, subject to the approval of the National Assembly, for distribution of all cadres of posts in the Public Service of the federation and of the States, the Armed Forces of the Federation, the Nigeria Police Force and other government security Agencies, government owned companies/parastatals of the states” and to “promote, monitor and enforce compliance with the principle of proportional sharing of all bureaucratic, economic, media and political posts at all levels of government”.

In terms of status, executive agencies are government organizations that are semi-autonomous and not independent; they are business-like in operation; customer-focused; and managerially self-sufficient, with flexibility, freedoms and authority over resources under their control.

Impact of Agentification on Service Delivery

It has been established that the main purpose of agentification is to achieve optimal service delivery. The creation of executive agencies represents one of the most radical and ground-breaking initiatives introduced by government in its efforts to improve the level of service offered by the public sector. Presently there are a over 90 executive agencies in Nigeria amongst which is Broadcasting Organisation of Nigeria (BON), Bureau Public Procurement, Consumer Protection Council and others.

In the opinion of Babajo, Liman & Bello (2024) several States in Nigeria have been utilizing agencies to focus on areas like tax payment, waste management and others. Lagos State, a megacity by all standards and one of the smallest states in Nigeria in terms of land mass (3,577 square kilometers) has an estimated population of 17 million. Overcoming the mega - city challenge has necessitated the establishment of several agencies to proffer solutions to the expected multifarious problems (Ezekiel, Folake, & Alli, 2024)

According to Ogundipe, Owolabi, Ogunbayo and Aigbavboa (2024) for decades, the city of Lagos has grappled with problems such as gross shortage of housing, insufficient road networks and decay of existing facilities to mention a few. At the onset of Governor Babatunde Fashola's administration in 2007, the Lagos State Government stated its determination to transform the state to meet its status as a model mega-city. The focal areas were waste management/ refuse collection transportation: buses, coaches, and infrastructure: roads and bridges construction, water supply (Omionu & Aniyie, 2024). In line with this vision, Lagos State has taken some definite strides such as, The Bus Rapid Transit Scheme: This initiative is geared towards easing heavy traffic congestion in the state. The scheme is regulated by the Lagos Metropolitan Area Transport Authority (LAMATA), Lagos State Traffic Management Authority (LASTMA) all these are agencies which have clearly achieved giant strides which the Ministry could not achieve as an entity.

Although there appears to be a sparse literature on agentification in Nigeria; the level of performance is clear for the public to see at every point in time. At the initial stage, many of the agencies commenced activities with high expectation of greatly improved performance but time has proven especially in Nigeria that lethargy and corruption crept into many of them as can be seen some other countries (Lossa & Martimort, 2016), such that they eventually became not exceptionally different from their "Parent body" with lack lustre performance. How well they have been able to achieve their goals and objectives is mostly a function of the competence and integrity of the leadership of the agencies. Literature has shown that leadership is very crucial to the performance of these agencies. It can be inferred that the productivity of an agency is as good as the quality of leadership. The impact these agencies have had thus far has been a rollercoaster ride. For instance the Joint Admission Matriculation Board which is an agency birthed by the Ministry of Education was purported to have remitted a paltry sum of about N50million to the Federal Government between 2010 and 2016 as against N5 Billion that was remitted in 2017 alone without an increase in charges of services offered to the public. In the opinion of Akintoye (2023), JAMB began an impressive remittance since 2017

which was different from the previous years. The Prof. Is-haq Oloyede the leadership of the agency ensured this by improving service delivery in terms of purchase of examination materials, reduction in examination malpractices at the exam with the assistance of new technologies and uncovering fraudulent transaction of her officials that had taken place in the past. This goes to show the importance of the competence and integrity of the Directors/ CEOs of these agencies.

Challenges Inherent

There is now a growing trend in agentification in service contracts globally. Under this arrangement a government agency contracts with a private firm to provide a specific service for a specified period of time. One major challenge of agentification in the present day Nigeria is the general inadequacy of the needed funds, knowledge, experience and equipment to execute certain projects which might necessitate partnering with the private sector in some instances. There are a number of conditions that the prospective private sector partners are supposed to fulfill before entering into a partnership arrangement. These include possession of appropriate funds, knowledge, equipment and experience.

Some private firms may be having these, but due to the huge informality of the sector, these may be undocumented. It becomes a challenge for instance, to get quality service providers that can adhere to standards and terms of reference in service provision (Nwogi, 2006). Sequel to this lack of continuity in administrative policies by political office holders over the years has affected the smooth operations of the agencies, especially with incessant change of the principal officers; for instance the Muritala Mohammed Airport II concessionaire over a period of 7 years had to deal with 6 different ministers and 5 different Chief Executives of the Federal Airports Authority of Nigeria (FAAN), each with diverse policies and opinions with respect to Public Private Partnership (Afolabi, 2011).

This practice is not limited to Nigeria, the agencies in United Kingdom partners with the private sector to modernize government housing projects, obtain defense equipment, and expand schools, prisons and hospitals (Lakomy-Zinowik & Horvathova, 2016). In the United States, federal, state and local governments contract with private organizations to help provide infrastructure and services that public agencies cannot offer efficiently or effectively on their own. In the United States municipalities contract out more than 25 per cent of their services to the private sector (Knorr & Shomaker, 2016).

Among the services local governments in the United States most frequently contract out to private companies are street light maintenance, solid waste collection, street repairs, hospital management, mental health facilities, day care programs, ambulance services, bus operations, and drug and alcohol treatment programs (Ivanov, & Zimmermann, 2024). Canada and most European countries also use private companies as public service providers, and an increasing number of developing countries are turning to private sector service contracts as well.

A number of empirical studies shows that the political decision is mostly in favour of a Public Private Partnership, the tender process itself, the post-tender stage has been widely ignored so far, as well as the potential problems arising from the Public Private Partnership- inherent multilevel characteristics (Lossa & Martimort, 2016). Corrupt practices can take place at this stage, independently of previous corruption on the political level, once a private organisation pays some incentives to turn a specific project into a PPP, the misunderstanding of “sunk costs” may lead to corruption at a later stage (Knorr & Schomaker 2016).

Agentification was introduced to achieve improved effectiveness and efficiency, which suggests that there are occasions when the agencies may need to partner with the private sector. In most countries, formal public procurement law has to be applied before a PPP can be established. It is clear that, the formulation of policies has never been a major challenge in Nigeria however shoddy implementation has been the bane of our society. The critical elements in both the internal and external environments and the implementation process account for the gap between goals and achievements (Effiong, 2013).

The quandary as it relates to Nigeria is the concern of nepotism where services are contracted to the private sector even when the required human and capital resources are in place internally (Chiamogu & Chiamogu, 2019). In some instances, the chief executive officers or a principal officer has vested interest in a particular private organisation that may not be necessarily competent. This development has resulted into a number of incomplete projects and waste of public funds.

Most States in Nigeria have a large work force of civil servants who in this context are staff of the ministries and public servants who are staff of the agencies. This calls to question the competence of these ministries and agencies with increasingly large workforce when almost every function of government is re-contracted and public funds has to be expended with no feasible result. This aspect in the agentification process is a rising phenomenon that calls for a great concern in Nigeria, as the civil servants are practically redundant in some instances, despite the training and retraining the staffers have been exposed to (Onah, 2008).

Agentification has grown organically, without any conscious and visible strategy, creating a complicated structure. According to OECD report, agentification has not lived up to the expectations of New Public Management (NPM) rhetoric as an all-purpose key to better provision of public services (Hood, 1991, Lapuente & Van de Walle, 2020). The main skepticism and criticism concerning agentification was related to its negative effect on governments' ability to plan and act coherently and strategically. Agentification thereby has become a question of power and power distribution in the modern democratic state, which has invariably led to reduction of transparency in the input and output processes, a salient reason for the creation of agentification in the first instance, although annual reports and evaluations are presented periodically. Agencies have primarily become the business of the executive committee and a small group of elite politicians. In developing nations like Nigeria, the advent of a new administration could cause disruption either in terms of schemes, programs or the management.

An example is the issue of waste management disposal in Lagos State, Governor Akinwumi Ambode's Administration (2015-2019) embarked on a review of its waste management scheme and commissioned a consortium of waste management, led by Visionscape, an environmental utility group. This initiative is being questioned by the public as it did not translate into improved service delivery.

Another major constraint in agentification is the duplication of roles, which sometimes result in conflict. A number of the institutes play similar roles, though they might have slight differences in principle, however in practice they carry out the same roles and function, a good example is Public Service Institute (PSI), Abuja, a training institute that plays the same role as Administrative Staff College of Nigeria (ASCON). This duplicity of roles give the impression of lack of focus by the Federal government and reduces the vision for good service delivery.

Conclusion

In spite of the challenges and complexities of Agentification, experience suggests that no single approach is suitable for all countries or for all types of services. Agentification is not the universal remedy for confronting the inadequacies of the government. It has been observed that for Agentification to be of continuous benefit to the public, thoroughness and caution must be observed in the discharge of responsibilities and public procurement process must be implemented with the highest sense of accountability, ethics and integrity devoid of any form of nepotism.

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