

Public Policy and Public Interest in Nigeria: An Appraisal of the Treasury Single Account

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Abstract: Over time, ability of governments to implement policies in the interest of the citizenry largely determines their success or failure. This in all ramifications proves the paramount relevance of public policy planning, making, implementation and analysis in efficiency and effectiveness of government. The existence of public policy practice however, is not devoid of challenges. The Nigerian state in its bid to address incoherencies in the Public Sector Accounting implemented the Treasury Single Account Policy in 2015. While the policy has scored the government some electoral points and resulted in increased revenue generation, there abounds no direct correlation between implementation of the policy and enhanced citizen well-being. Rather it has resulted in the loss of employment, created fiscal crunch and remains a subject of controversy. Accordingly, the study claims the need for an integral citizen based reorientation to educate the society in their roles in policy formulation cannot be down toned. Furthermore, it implores the government on the need to identify and implement society based policies as opposed self-driven and political point oriented policies.

Keywords: Treasury Single Account, Public Policy, Public Interest and Mass Reorientation.

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Introduction

It is in the recognition of numerous societal problems that government in its capacity attempt proffer durable and reliable solutions by way of identifying, planning and implementing policies that affects the populace. This is particularly pertinent because if conscious efforts are not made to arrest emerging and prospective societal problems as they arise, they may decadent into overwhelming challenges leading to a myriad of socio-economic growth and development related challenges Okoli and Onah (2012). Resultantly, the underlying literary endeavor conceives a policy as a mindful plan of action and the action itself, instigated to solve a specific social problem. For Lenon (2009) it is a plan or course of action by a government, political party or business designed to influence and determine decisions, actions and other matters. Relatedly, Public policies are purposive set of actions undertaken at different levels of government with a view to addressing pre-existing and anticipatory public challenges. Furthermore, they denote resolute action based initiatives that are riddles through the manifold process of identification, formulation, implementation and appraisal, which emanates from legislations or reforms.

In abstract terms it entails the mechanisms through which they state and society interact, more so in the areas of provision of public goods and services. This view is substantiated by Dye (1995) who conceived public policy as what governments do, why they do it, and what difference it does make. Hence, Yakubu (2018, p. 84) defines policies as purposive courses of resolution based actions, implemented in response to an existing or professed problem. Public policies are riddled through a multifarious process, which includes the strategy of identification, formulation and implemented through legislation or regulatory measures. However, these actions do not necessarily have to emanate exclusively from the government, as the citizenry can initiate them as well. Nevertheless, no matter who the initiator of a public policy is, his initiatives would have to be acted upon by the government before such actions could appropriately be labeled as public policy Dlakwa (2008). Precisely speaking, the concept is central to governments, private organizations and individuals. It addresses the affairs of all persons, groups, organizations and governments in a polity. Public policy therefore, is a function of government in collaboration with the citizenry in form of agreed plan of actions and programmes aimed at solving social problems and improving positivity. It is a purposive course of action followed by a political actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or a matter of common concern.

In lieu, several reformatory measures have been put in place in Nigeria over time with a view to ensuring that public policies are inclusive and represents the aggregate interest of the citizenry. Suffering the hangover of colonial legacy, military incursions and personalist cum hybrid regimes a better part of the policies have failed to alleviate the plight of the citizenry. Rather, the more or less permanent political class has come to view public office as prebends through which they enrich themselves and inner circle. This assumption is buttressed by the then finance minister Okonjo-Iweala (2017) opined that the Nigerian Public bureaucracy is a den of thieves. Against this backdrop, the study set out to examine the existence of a plausible interplay between public policy and public interest in Nigeria. Emphasis will be laid on the Treasury Single Account (TSA) policy implemented in 2015 by the President Muhammad Buhari All Progressive Congress led government. The choice of the TSA was informed by the centrifugal role thought to play by the policy in informing fiscal prudence, accountability and transparency will is thought to foster democratization. It is also pertinent to examine the policy as it formed the cornerstone of the incumbent administration war on corruption.

In abstract terms TSA is harnessed with the responsibility or serves as a platform for collecting and disbursing government revenue and expenditure. Accordingly Onyekpere (2015), Oyedele (2015), and Ekubiat and Ime (2016), define TSA as an integrated structure of government bank accounts aiding the merging and ideal utilization of government funds. While the World Bank (2013:1) conceives TSA as a unique and established practice in convalescing the payment and revenue collection system, and carrying out consistent oversight of public expenditure through a consolidated government bank accounts. Furthermore, Liman, Erunko and Yakubu (2008, p. 151) are optimistic the implementation of TSA will address the concern of operational secrecy surrounding Public Finance Management (PFM). Secondly, revenue generating organs will also find it difficult to short change the national coffers. Farther than transparency and accountability, the TSA will infuse proficiency into the overall management of public funds.

Analytical Framework

The subject matter of policy formulation and implementation in Nigerian is an age-long one that revolves around inculcating interests and translating established policies into action. This

however has thought lag behind, in the sense that the margin between expectation and reality remains particularly wide. In a bid to systematically establish this argument in literary terms, the underlying endeavor adopts the pluralist-interest group theory. The Pluralist-interest group theory centers on how power and influence are distributed in a socio-politico-economic process. This theory which was propounded in the 17th century and expounded in the 1950's by Alexis De Tocqueville, James Madison, David Truman amongst others, holds that in every society, there exists groups with often varying and conflicting interests who strive to maximize the achievement of their respective interests foremost. Accordingly, it is the view of this study that pluralism revolves around the notion for the inculcation of diverse individual or group interest into larger societal interests.

A historical appraisal of public policy in Nigeria will largely fail to depict elements of pluralist-interest group theory. Been a multi ethnic society encompassing a myriad of varying and often conflicting interests who strive to ensure that each of their various interests are captured, accommodated and actualized. Resultantly, the inability of the state to aggregate public interest into policy formulation and implementation since time immemorial has aggravated the plight of the average Nigerian. Little to do wonder why we rank highest in numerous corruption, poverty and unemployment indexes in the world over. It is against this that, Truman (1950) opined that in pluralism, lines of conflict are multiple and shifting as power is a continuous bargaining process between competing groups. Hence it will suffice to claim that the Nigerian public policy practice is well captured by the pluralist-interest group theory as there exist a number of ethno-religious groups with different and often conflicting interests who compete to influence and control government policy.

It is also pertinent to stress the unhealthy nature of contestation that underpins contemporary public policy realm in Nigeria. Conclusively, a precarious look at the functionality of Pluralist-Interest group theory in Nigerian public policy practice will paint a realistic picture of the presence of multifarious ethno-religious groups having strong oligarchy (power bourgeoisie) each, who's varying and often conflicting interest is what the Nigerian government have been trying to incorporate into public policy and not that of the citizenry. A closer watch also reveals that at each point that the government internalizes the interest of the citizenry irrespective of the ethno-divergent nature of the country into public policy, implementation problem arises as these strong individuals tend to use their influence to ensure that the policy develops the on-paper-non-practice syndrome having logically reasoned the outcome of the policy on the power and interest of their oligarchy.

Policy and Public Interest: Exploration of Treasury Single Account

Like a handful of states in the developing world, Nigeria is notorious for operating a disjointed public accounting system, void of an interface between relevant stakeholder lacking the basic principles of fiscal transparency and accountability. In a bid to address this menace the federal government in 2015 mandated all government organs to implement the TSA policy as stipulated by the constitution in section 8 (20) of the 1999 constitutions as amended, mandating the remittance of all government revenues to a single or allied set of accounts domiciled with the Central Bank of Nigeria. In buttressing the above argument renowned economist and former finance minister Okonjo-Iweala (2017, p. 92-93) argue that, government agencies operated multiple bank accounts with favorable financial terms, allowing them to amass high interests rates on governments revenue in connivance with money deposit banks. Pre-existing banking arrangement and fiscal regulations allowed for government agencies to appropriate a fraction of their revenue for operational cost. This system did not allow institutionalized fiscal mismanagement and misappropriation it upheld

the looting of the treasury. Necessitating the need for a consolidated banking arrangement as obtained in TSA. While the TSA may have instilled some undeniable level of fiscal accountability and transparency in the public sector, the policy in itself remains a subject of numerous controversies. To capture the supposed incoherencies associated with the policy a few cases of wanton theft in the Nigerian Ports Authority a major revenue source of the government which is thought to be implementing the policy has been subject of concerns in recent times, despite recording higher revenue generation since implementing the TSA.

Accordingly, the President of Nigerian Senate in a national daily Vanguard Editorial (July 7, 2012) accused the Nigerian Port authority of being unable to judiciously account for large sums of public funds, thought to be around four times the annual budget of the entire Nigerian state. Relatedly, as seen in Wale (2017) Senator Ovie Omo-Agege a senator of the federal republic representing Delta Central constituency claims there to be incidence of fraud in the Nigerian Ports Authority to the tune of \$3 billion. While the underlying claims and numerous related others continue to plague the implementation of the policy, a better of them are yet to be established beyond reasonable doubts. Having attempted to abstractly establish the numerous controversies surrounding the implementation of the TSA policy, the need section is committed to reviewing the implications of the policy which a view to ascertaining its effects on the citizenry parochially.

To being with TSA as integrated financial management information scheme is hosted by Remita a software developed by a private firm SystemSpecs. Accordingly, Nwankwo (2017, p. 27) defines remitta as a centralized payment podium aiding the electronic interfaced payment between the Nigerian government and its agencies under the TSA scheme. While Remita has largely remained effective, the nature of the contract between SystemSpecs and the Nigerian government in terms of commission on transaction is shrouded in utmost secrecy. To start with, this goes against the principles of fiscal transparency, as it is near impossible to obtain the nature of the contract either in digital prints or other forms, neither is there an official document or statement by the government in the same regard.

In lieu, the Economic Confidential (2015) claims a motion co-sponsored by 35 Senators opines that remitta charges the FG a whopping N25 billion on daily basis, to expedite for transfer of government revenue from subsidiary, holding and transit accounts into TSA main account domiciled with the Central Bank of Nigeria. Compelling the constitution of a public probe by the senate, in their defence Mr David Okeme Chief Commercial Officer of SystemSpecs debunked the allegations while answering fielding questions from the Editor of Business Day Newspaper. Though he brushed off questions regarding to amount been charged by his firm, he claims both parties agreed to the terms of the contract Business Day Newspaper (2015). Consequentially, the research calls to question the adoption of Remita as the platform for hosting the TSA haven constituted the National Information Technological Development Agency (NITDA) a government body harnessed with the responsibility of promoting the use of Information Technology in governance.

Owing that the vision statement of NITDA as obtained on the official webpage; states that the agency sets out to be the prime catalyst for transforming Nigeria into a knowledge based and Info-Tech driven economy nitda.gov.ng. Surprisingly, NITDA is not in any way involved in the implementation of the TSA policy, and neither as they any prospects of possible incorporation into the scheme. This in itself questions the rationality behind the constitution of the agency like numerous others, who have either become redundant and continue to constitute huge financial burden on the state with no societal value.

Secondly, while the TSA may have had certain positive effects on Public Sector Accounting in Nigeria, the same cannot be said for the banking sector. The hurried manner in which the policy was implemented with little recourse to possible unintended negative effects has resulted in unprecedented fiscal crunch which led to the laying off of numerous workers. Although the policy also propelled the banking sector to source for private capital and further innovation, taking into cognizance the relatively scarce nature of private capital in Nigeria, the policy should have been implemented in phases to avoid sudden fiscal shock wave as experienced in the banking sector.

Lastly, enacting public policies in Nigeria and carry out government projects remains particularly expensive in the opinion of this study. While uncompleted and abandoned projects and policies litter the country, budgets are thought to be fully expended. Resultantly, contractors are thought to connive with public officials and deprive the citizenry of much need infrastructure and basic public goods and services. Although with the exception of a few government organs the Treasury Single Account policy has been fully implemented by respective agencies as provided by the 1999 constitution as amended. Analytically this study calls to question the cost effective analysis of the policy as well as its impact on the citizenry.

Challenges of Recurring Incoherent Policies in Nigeria

Having attempted to analyze the TSA and its cost and benefit evaluation to the citizenry, this section is committed to abstractly highlighting some of the known but neglected shortfalls of policy process in Nigeria. It has been claimed that Nigeria has often formulated good policies but these get bungled at the implementation stage Eminue (2005). Accordingly, Ekelegbe (1996) observes that implementation involves the committal of funds, the establishment of structures and methods, the hiring of personnel, the administering or executing of activities, and the security of policy goals, services and other intended outcomes.

Contrary to conventional presuppositions which uphold corruption as the bane of policy summersault or failures in Nigeria, this study is of the view that the challenges bewildering public policies goes beyond widespread corruption. It goes on to claim that policies in Nigeria largely fail to achieve predetermined outcomes owing to amongst other factors their scope, lack of data and indiscipline. With regards to the subject matter of data, it is of the view that to effectively provide services or goods the government must as a prerequisite have verifiable data on the number of citizens whom require such goods or services. Regrettably, this is not the case as policies are either carried out to score cheap electoral points, win regional or ethnic support and to pacify interest of certain agents. This has created a sense of estrangement between the society and the state. For Effiong (2013) the death of data or relevant information is responsible for most policy failures in Nigeria. Nigeria lacks the culture of record-keeping and information-gathering. Most planning ministries or agencies work without data: even when one is available, most of the time is unreliable and defective. Chief Ernest Shonekan, the Chairman of Vision 2020 observes this when he said that he could not guarantee the authenticity or veracity of the data from rural Nigeria for the “vision document”. His committee therefore had to contract the UNDP to handle the gathering of the data from rural areas (Eminue, 2005).

With regards to scope, government policies in Nigeria aim to cover a wide range or attempt to carter for almost 200 million citizens through a single policy, not taking into cognizance the obsolete nature of public sector bureaucracy in obtained in Nigeria. This assumption is buttressed by Makinde (2005) who noted that most of these over ambitious and too many agenda policies are not borne out of genuine or sincere effort to bring about rapid and radical

development but just to boast the ego of the political leaders. Instances are those policies directed towards complete eradication of poverty which is clear to all and sundry that not enough resources are available to achieve even in the advanced countries. In furtherance, Effiong (2013, p. 29) claims Nigeria tends to over indulged in over ambitious policies either owing to the desire to establish support base and legitimacy for government to bring about economic development or to serve ideological ends. On the subject matter of discipline, as regimes change in Nigeria so do policies regardless of the amount been expended or ground covered. This single act has led to the littering of white elephant and abandoned projects across the country. This does not only cost taxpayers money, it has served as avenue for public officials to add same or similar project in the budget year in year out. Most pronounced amongst others is the incessant purchase of officer hardware and frivolous spending hosting state guest as it is referred to most times. According to Effiong (2013) erratic policies are dysfunctional to growth while policy stability tends to promote and engender planning as well as proper and effective implementation.

Summary

While it is no news that public sector in Nigeria is in want of capacity and in dire need of extensive reforms, there is a need for mass reorientation, sensitization and ideological social engineering to correct their laissez-faire attitude towards prebendalism and kleptocracy. Accordingly, the study is of the opinion that the TSA policy can be viewed from a myriad of perspective. First, it remains a major point for the current administration as they have defied the odds and implemented a policy that has been signed into legislation after 11 years. Though previous governments ran pilot scheme they failed to see out full implementation of the policy.

Secondly the policy has saved the government billions in frivolous spending, augmented overall revenue earnings and addressed certain loopholes in public sector accounting. But it has also resulted in the loss of means of sustenance for a handful. Coincidentally, the implementation of the policy and its unintended negative effect also fueled the 2016 economic recession in Nigeria. Accordingly, it is of the views of this literary endeavor that the state stands to benefit more from implementation, as the increased revenue generated from the policy has made no significant impact in alleviating the plight of the average Nigerian.

Conclusion

Public policies are powerful developmental instruments in the hands of government operational countries. The reverse should not be the case for Nigeria because of its heterogeneity and other bedeviling factors, when these factors can be technically and strategically handled. Therefore, urgent institutional measures and overhaul as well as reorientation towards the end of policies need to be adopted to take capture the diverse interest of the populace.

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