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## Work Ethics and Productivity in Local Government System in Nigeria, Problems and Prospects

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### Abstract

*The main thrust of this paper is motivated by the desire to examine the implications of the negative work attitudes that is prevalent among the employees of the local government system in Nigeria. The paper argued that the Nigeria local government system is engulfed in Negative work tendencies characterized by such factors as corruption, lateness to duty, lack of dedication to duty, high level of insubordination, indiscipline, high level of absenteeism and dereliction of duty which hinders efficient service delivery and in turn brings about low productivity. This manifestation has produced a sense of exclusion that has sought expression in what has been considered to be widespread dissatisfaction and disaffection in the entire system. A framework for enhancing a positive work ethics among the employees of the*

*Nigeria local government system were suggested in a bid to ensure enhanced productivity of the workforce.*

**Keywords:** Local government, work ethics, productivity, Attitudes.

### **Introduction**

Every organization desires to be productive. In essence high productivity is the major aim for the existence of any organization. But on the contrary the bid to attain higher productivity has remained a wishful thinking for many organizations in Nigeria including the Nigeria Local Government System. This was the main reason why Simon (1957) argued that the issue of productivity is the only reason for all the various reforms exercises that is being carried out in most public organizations so as to make them efficient. Productivity in public organization entails the attainment of predetermined goals with minimal expenditure of resources. By this therefore, it is not wrong for one to liking productivity with maximum efficiency. This is because, efficiency means using the cheapest means towards achieving the desired result or it could mean the efficiency with which goods and services are produced, that is the ratio of the output of goods and services to the input of resources (Ogunna 2007). He further posits that this could be measured on the basis of output per man hour and that an unproductive organization would produce a wholesome disappointment to its owners and widespread dissatisfaction and disaffection to the entire employees, while a productive organization is seen as a blessing to the owners as this brings profit to the management.

However, productivity or unproductivity of the Nigeria local government system can better be understood when we examine the internal dynamics of the system despite its numerous reforms. Nnadozie (1986) maintained that the productive or the unproductive nature of any organization would be understood when such factors as the characteristics of the organization in question, the character of the Nigerian society where it functions and the nature of the interaction between the organization and the wider society is considered. Mali (1978) posited that productivity is the measure of how well resources of an organization are brought together and utilized for accomplishing of a set of results. This means reaching the highest level of performance with the least expenditure of resources. Productivity in the above context could mean the mixture of resources; physical and Human to achieve greater output. Based on the foregoing, productivity of the employees simply means the ability of the employees of any organization to

discharge their functions very well at the shortest possible time using the available resources. But today, looking at the Nigerian public sector such as the local government system in Nigeria, low productivity has taken its greater toll on them. The employees of the Nigerian local government system are believed to have poor work ethics with some reasons which ranges from economic, sociological managerial and Technological factors (Ikejiani Clark and Ezeh 2009). This they argued has made the Nigerian local government unproductive as resources both human and material are wasted without achieving the desired result. According to Ogunna (2007) productivity in any organization is dependent on a number of factors such as the use of appropriate technology, adequate motivation, adequate resources, which includes optimum use of fund, materials and personnel, and positive work ethics and the professional and technical competence of the workers. The above, however eluded the Nigerian local government system as the system is confronted with so many challenges which ranges from poor motivation of workers, attributed primarily to lack of fund, and high rate of corruption among the officials and the degree of manipulation of the local government affairs by the state government, shortage of skilled manpower as a result of politicized nature of the recruitment procedure where misfits are recruited into the system which leads to low productivity and the negative work ethics common among the employees of the system in Nigeria which makes them unproductive.

However, the main objective of this paper is to examine the causes of negative work ethics in the Nigeria local government system which makes the system to be unproductive and as well proffer solutions on how to curb the malaise and make it more efficient in the delivery of social services to the public.

### **Conceptual clarification**

#### **Work ethics**

Ethics in the public sector is a broad topic. It is a branch of philosophy which seeks to address morality while in the public sector it addresses the fundamental premise of a public administrator's duty as a "steward" to the public. Simply put, it means moral justification and consideration for decisions and actions made during the completion of daily duties when working to provide general services of government and non profit organizations. Ethics are an acceptable standard by which the public will scrutinize the work being conducted by the members of these organizations. However according to Adams and Danny (2007) ethics in the technical-

rational tradition flows from the Theological tradition and focuses on the individuals decision making process in the modern, bureaucratic organization and as a member of a profession. They posit that ethics helps to safeguard the integrity of the organization by helping individuals confirm to professional norms, avoiding mistakes and misdeeds that violate the public trust (corruption, Nepotism) and also helps the public officials in no small way in being accountable to the people. They maintained that public employees must not be allowed to enrich themselves beyond their salaries. In view of this, Friedrich (1940) however argued that ethics was of necessity a matter of the individual's internal standards of conduct that is a moral compass that would help to a large extent in guiding the public administrator through the morass of ethical dilemmas. However as government officials serve the public, the public therefore expects that in discharging their day to day activities that public officials should practice fairness and equality. They should be open in all their dealings with the people so as to ensure that they operate within the public perception of what is right. Writing on the public officials being guided on what is right, Douglas (1952) argued that since our government is now too complex and its activities affects the lives of the people directly, that we cannot be content with merely a moderately decent level of behaviour on the part of our public officials. This is because; he was of the opinion that even a small percentage of their misbehaviour can do more harm to the entire society.

### **Principles for managing ethics in the public service**

According to PUMA report (2000) the following are some of the principles for managing ethics in the public service, the principles includes thus:

- i. That ethical standards for public service should be clear: By implication; this means that for the public servants to be efficient in their dealings or in discharging their day to day activities, efforts should be made by the management to ensure that they are well informed on all the basic principles and standards of operations on how they ought to do their work and also to know where the boundaries of acceptable behaviour or code of conduct lie. To achieve, this noble objective, the report argued that a concise, well published statement of core ethical standards and principles of operation that guides the public service will in no small way help in creating a shared understanding between the government and the community.

- ii. Ethical standards should be reflected in the legal framework: As the legal framework serve as the basis for communicating the minimum obligatory standards and principles of behaviour among public servants, there is need for the existence of laws and regulations that will provide the framework for guidance, investigation, disciplinary action, and prosecution of erring public servants.
- iii. Ethical guidance to be made available to public servants: Guidance and internal consultation mechanism should be made available to help public servants apply basic ethical standards in the workplace. There should be professional socialization which helps in the development of the necessary judgment and skills which enable the public servants to apply ethical principles in concrete circumstances. Training will go a long way in inculcating ethical awareness and will help to develop essential skills for ethical analysis and moral reasoning.
- iv. Public servants should know their rights and obligations when exposing wrongdoing. According to PUMA reports, for public servants to perform their functions with all fairness, they should be made to know their rights and obligations in terms of suspected wrongdoings within the public service. These rules and procedures should be clear for officials of the public service to follow. Public servants should also know the extent of protection the law will accord them in case of any breach.
- v. Managers should demonstrate and promote ethical conduct: In a bid to promote good ethical conduct among public servants, the PUMA report stressed the need for the management of organizations to provide adequate incentives to the employees which will in turn help in enhancing good ethical behaviour. The management should provide good working environment with the basic working tools and as well ensure effective performance assessment that will enhance public service values and ethical standards. In order to ensure the maintenance of a productive workforce among the employees, manager should provide a consistent leadership and as well serve as role models in terms of their ethical conducts in all their dealings with politicians and other public servants and the entire citizenry.
- vi. The Decision-making process should be transparent and open to scrutiny. The public has a right to know how public institutions use

the power and resources entrusted to them. There should be transparency in all government dealings and the legislature should ensure that they perform the oversight functions to checkmate the activities of all government agencies and also the people should have access to public information, via, the passage of freedom of information bill by the government of Nigeria.

- vii. Adequate accountability mechanism should be put in place within the public service to enhance productivity: To ensure efficient delivery of social services to the people, the public servants should be accountable to the public for all their actions. This means total compliance to lay down rules and ethical standards so as to achieve stated objectives. The mechanisms to be adopted should be able to provide adequate controls and at the same time make provisions for flexible management.
- viii. There should be adequate procedures and sanctions to deal with misconduct. There should be mechanisms for detecting and investigating any act of wrongdoings such as corruption as part of measures to enhance ethical conducts among public servants. This will include procedures for monitoring, reporting, investigating any breach of public service rules, and to as well to give appropriate sanctions to serve as deterrent. It is however advised that managers should be very careful in exercising these powers.
- ix. Public service conditions and management of Human resources should promote ethical conduct among public servants. The procedures for recruitment, promotions, transfer, discipline, training, adequate compensation, etc should be just so as to create room for good ethical conduct. Merit should be the guiding principles so as to promote integrity in the public service in Nigeria.

### **Nature of work ethics in the local government system in Nigeria**

Nigeria is a country endowed with abundant human and material resources needed to attain her developmental initiatives. However, these resources are not fully exploited, harnessed and utilized so as to achieve rapid National development due to negative attitude to work by the Nigerian workers (Ogunna 2007). He lamented that the work ethics of the Nigerian workers is among the lowest in the world today. According to him, these negative attitude to work among the employees of the Nigerian local government system are manifested in the following ways.

**There is wide spread lateness to duty**

This is because as offices open at 8.00am, many of the employees at the local government especially those in the rural areas, report to work at about 10.00am to 11.00 am and sometimes leave very early. Some of the employees at the rural areas are now full time farmers while those in the city engage in one business or the other. It will be pointed out here that even though some officials report to the office late, yet, they engage in long period of conversation loitering and truancy, abandoning their duties and all these are detrimental to achieving the goals of the local government system in Nigeria.

**There is high rate of corruption among local government employees in Nigeria**

Corruption among public officials takes various forms such as bribery, fraud, forgery, embezzlement of public funds; misappropriation of funds and materials, etc. According to Ezeani (2004) corruption remains a major problem which has constrained local government in Nigeria from contributing meaningfully to the upliftment of the living standards of the people in the rural areas. However, scholars such as Huntington (1968), Leff (1964), Merton (1957), Barley (1966), Nye (1967) all defined corruption in many different ways that are similar, that is deviation from accepted public roles and standards. Huntington (1968) as quoted in Ikejiani (1995) corruption is “the behaviour of public officials which deviates from norms in order to serve private ends. Barley (1996) opines that corruption is a general term covering misuse of authority as a result of considerations of personal gains: To Abueva 1966 in Ikejiani (1995) argued that corruption is of three categories such as Nepotism, spoil and misappropriation.

Also Nye (1967) quoted also in Ikejiani (1995) corruption is defined as behaviour which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private retarding (personal, close family, private, clique) pecuniary or status gain, or violates rule against the exercise of certain types of private regarding influence. By way of illustration corruption in the local government system in Nigeria manifests itself in several ways such as the attitude of most revenue collectors in the local government who collect revenue and divert it into their private pockets, some valuation officers at the local government level collude with landlord in either under assessing or not to assess their property in its entirety but rather some amount of money will be given to them on monthly basis. Ogunna (2007) laments that one of the major problems confronting local government internally generated revenue is that

market officials and motor park officials always print fake receipts or sometimes collect money from individuals without issuing receipts and that such money so collected are diverted into the personal pocket of such official. Also to worsen issues at this level of government in Nigeria, he argued that local government officials do not comply with the stipulations of the financial memorandum. In the local government system in Nigeria, there is widespread falsification of the accounts of the local government, sometimes payments are made without the services being rendered, local government officials usually collude with contractors to defraud the council through inflation of contract sums and as a result, these forms of negative work ethics are responsible for a very wide margin between expenditure and the provision of real services to the public. Ezeani (2004) however noted that corruption in the form of fraud and embezzlement of funds have been responsible for the failure of some local government councils in Nigeria to execute some developmental projects to the people and sometimes unable to pay staff salaries.

#### **Absenteeism and abandonment of one's duty**

Common among the employees of local government system throughout the country right from the colonial era till date is the high rate of absenteeism and abandonment of one's duty. Many local government officials are in the habit of abandoning their official duties in pursuance of some private business, though many reasons have been given by such official which range from poor salaries, lack of provision of work incentives, lack of good working environments, lack of training among others. This negative attitude of workers in the local government system retards the effort of both the federal and state governments to provide for the basic needs of the Nigerian masses in the rural areas.

#### **Indiscipline among local government officials**

According to Achebe (1983) indiscipline is the failure or refusal to submit one's desire and action to the restraint of orderly social conduct in recognition of the rights and desires of others. In the same way Ogunna (2007) posits that indiscipline is the state of affairs where a public officer is unable to conform to the norms and rules of an organization. In Nigeria, local government official's break lay down rules and regulations and the financial memorandum at will without questioning. This singular act of the local government officials makes it difficult in enhancing high productivity among council officials; hence there is low productivity among local government employees

### **Lack of dedication to duty among local government staff in Nigeria**

Common among local government staff In Nigeria, is lack of dedication and total commitment to duty. It is worrisome to point out here that many of the local government staff fail to understand the reasons why they should put in all their effort towards achieving the aim of establishing local government system in Nigeria. Rather than being committed in the discharge of their duties, the employees of the local government exhibits different forms of negative work ethics such as lateness, absenteeism, malingering, bribery and corruption. The employees of the local government who are in the village readily became full time farmers while those in the cities turn themselves into full time business men and women.

### **Causes of negative work ethics among employees of Nigeria local government system**

Many factors have been responsible for all forms of negative attitude to work which brings about low productivity in the Nigerian local government system. These factors according to Ogunna (2007) include the following.

Salaries, wages and allowances paid to workers are abysmally very low. This is a very worrisome situation as all forms of negative attitudes among local government staff are attributable to this. A situation where politicians in Nigeria earn huge amount of money every month while the public servants earn meagre amount that cannot cater for the well being of their individual families and in an attempt to meet up with daily challenges they however engage in all forms of negative works ethics which ranges from corruption, or engage in one form of private business or the other so as to survive. The low salaries being paid to workers at the local government level was also worsened by the high rate of inflation which made the lives of workers very difficult. This is however compounded by late payment or non payment of staff salaries and allowance. Sometimes due to the joint account between the state and the local government, the statutory allocations due to the local government are either not released on time as it is being delayed by the state government or not given to them.

Another factor that causes negative work ethics among local government staff in Nigeria is the colonial mentality which up till today retards productivity among local government officials, the notion that government work is not a personal work or community work. Even though this according to Obikeze (2011) was a strategy being devised by our people to resist the manipulation of the colonial masters where our people exhibited a high rate

of absenteeism from work, report late to office, left office very early, and even when in the office would not produce much, all these were an attempt to frustrate the colonial masters. Today even though the Whiteman has gone, any casual reflection of any public institution in Nigeria depicts corruption, ineptitude, lack of productivity, embezzlement, inefficiency, heading to total collapse (Obikeze 2011). However, in an attempt to improve the living conditions of the work force in Nigeria, the New National Minimum wage was signed into law by the Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan so as to increase the moral of the worker and make them productive, yet this noble idea and good intention of the federal government of Nigeria are being frustrated at various level especially the Governors of the various state in Nigeria on the wrong notion that they are unable to pay. This act therefore violates the fundamental rights of the Nigerian workers.

In Nigeria the quest for material wealth is seen by most people as the end in itself and as a result, people join the public service as the only quickest means to amass wealth. To achieve their objective fund set aside for the provision of amenities are being diverted into personal pockets. This however breeds all forms of corrupt practices at this level of government.

Another factor that causes negative attitude to work common in the local government system in Nigeria is lack of involvement of the subordinates in the process of decision making. The administrative class in the local government level demonstrates a high degree of authoritarian leadership style negating the notion that if the employees were carried along, it will give them sense of belonging and this will go a long way in motivating them thereby enhancing higher productivity. On the contrary the leadership style in the Nigerian local government system produces aloofness, alienation as the people were not usually being carried along, apathy and a high degree of frustration among the staff.

### **Conclusion**

As the local government system in Nigeria is bedevilled by such negative attitudes to work among the staff of the council, the operations of the system is being retarded by such factors like corruption, lateness to duty, lack of dedication, indiscipline, abandonment of one's duty, there is need for urgent step to be taken in order to reverse this trend to make the system more productive thereby delivering efficient services to the public. This paper however assessed these factors responsible for this negative attitudes common among local government staff in Nigeria such as low wages, lack of

involvement of subordinates in decision making process, colonial mentality, the quest for material wealth among others and as well suggested practical solutions on how to curb the malaise.

### **Recommendations**

Having assessed the nature of work ethics in the Nigerian local government system as being responsible for its low productivity, the following recommendations were made:

- i. In order to make the Nigerian local government system to be efficient, in the delivery of social services to the people, efforts should be made by the Government of the day to ensure that salaries and allowances to be paid to local government staff in Nigeria are fixed at a level commensurate with the degree of efforts being put in by these employees. As the main aim of any worker by taking up any employment opportunity is to satisfy his personal needs and that of his immediate family, the wage system should be adequate enough to cater for these needs. In line with the above premise, government at all levels in Nigeria should owe it as a duty to implement the new National Minimum wage of N18,000.00 as this will go a long way in motivating the workforce so as to achieve maximum productivity.
- ii. Delegation of authority which is an important mechanism for enhancing the work ethics among the employees of the local government system, management of local government system should encourage this act as it will help in tapping the professional knowledge, talents and skills of all officers across board thereby giving all employees that sense of belonging.
- iii. The management local government system in Nigeria should endeavour to adopt the democratic leadership style in the system, as it will help in no small way in encouraging efficient supervision, free flow of information, participative management etc. with this therefore, both the superiors and the subordinates with jointly channel all available resources together so as to achieve result.
- iv. Efforts should be made to ensure that the pensions and gratuities to retiring staff are paid as this will serve as a morale booster for those currently in service.

- v. There should be a way of rewarding the employees of the local government as this will help in motivating them the more.
- vi. Strict discipline should be encouraged in the system in order to make it more viable.

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