Sustainable Public Sector Governance in Nigeria: A Case for the Agenda 2030

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Abstract

This paper highlights quality of Public administration and Governance (PAG), aimed at increasing 'SDG-readiness' at all levels of administration, in a nexus characterized by complexity, volatility, plurality and uncertainty. The study utilized the library research technique to gather data for the work. Most of the information sources were drawn from previous literature. It was found that looking at implementation issues of the SDGs from a public administration and governance perspective in a bid to ensure sustainability, it can be observed that acceleration is necessary. One of the first actions may be to recognize that creating an effective public administration and governance (PAG) is an important strategic policy area. PAG is an essential enabler and leveller for sustainability transitions. Based on the findings of the study it was recommended to use the UN-principles of effective governance for sustainable development as a strategic tool; to strengthen the position of ministries responsible for administration and governance; to adapt monitoring and assessment of progress; and to streamline public administration and governance quality across all SDG implementation documents. Secondly, it was recommended to test reform programs ex ante on their missions; to develop comprehensive mechanisms for policy and institutional coherence for the SDGs, and to pilot 'real-time collaborative multilevel governance' for selected policy challenges.

Keywords: Sustainable development, SDGs, public administration, public governance, mission-oriented

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the strengths and weaknesses of a public sector under stress. The pandemic has shown that well-functioning public administration and effective governance frameworks are preconditions to respond appropriately to a crisis of this magnitude, although other factors also play a role, such as public trust in government or the existence or absence of a tradition of 'whole of government' and 'whole of society' collaboration. It could be argued that the pandemic might have had less impact and been less likely to occur if all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) had already been realized, since this would have increased the resilience and long-term orientation of public administration and governance structures and mechanisms.

Some general lessons on the relation between the pandemic and the quality of public administration and governance were already drawn in the beginning of 2020 (Meuleman, 2020). Firstly, it seems that countries with a functioning public sector that caters for essential health services for all are better equipped to deal with the pandemic than those with privatized health care systems. Market-based health care uses the same strategies as retail companies, including just-in-time delivery, limited stock, and high reliance on logistics. This is not an adequate strategy when a pandemic emerges, and it is important to have an emergency stock of protective clothing and facial masks. The privatization of health care is an example of the general undervaluing of the role of the public sector which, according to Mazzucato (2018), has resulted in a less effective public administration and service, as well as a disregard of the public value that it may create. Even the World Bank, who has promoted privatization for a long time, now advocates a "whole of society" approach with a prominent role for governments to tackle the health care problems during the pandemic (World Bank, 2020). In April 2021, the European Commission published for the very first time an analysis of the critical role of public administration and governance, focused on stimulating a recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and achieving resilience against future crises (European Commission, 2021).

Also, governance should be contextual, adaptive, and resilient. Successful COVID-19 measures are different in each country. Hence, governments need to be sensitive to national values and

traditions (Meuleman, 2013). For example, people in China accept strict rules more easily than in countries such as the Netherlands, where governance traditions are less hierarchical. Governments are making use of this cultural dimension, which was extensively researched some decades ago (Hofstede, 1984). They concentrate on collective responsibility in Asian countries and on individual responsibility in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands as well as in Sweden, the relationship between citizens and public authorities is based on a high level of trust, and governments may rely on recommendations rather than needing legislation to achieve compliance of citizens with COVID-19 crisis measures (Kuhlmann et al., 2021).

Finally, the pandemic has shown that rapid and unprecedented systemic transformation is possible in each country, provided that a problem is framed and broadly felt as a crisis. Messner (2021) links this to an observation made by Cohen et al. (1972) that "as long as everything appears to be working, decision-makers have few incentives to embark on radical change. In a crisis, however, hand-wringing efforts are made to find new solutions".

Recent publications have highlighted the impact of federalism, decentralization and fragmented authority on government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Decision-making in federal states in Europe was not centralized per definition: this depended on the distribution of powers as well as political and economic factors (Hegele and Schnabel, 2021). In Germany, a decentralized and fragmented health system "oscillated between decentralized and centralized solutions"; it turned out that key factors included an increase in coordinated, cooperative, and collaborative collective action early on in the pandemic, driven by "a common sense of urgency and a shared cognition based on reliable information" (Hegele and Schnabel, 2020). Another study, also conducted in Germany, found that heterogeneous policy responses across states in a federal system trigger public skepticism, and that citizens seem to prefer coordination and a homogeneous containment strategy (Juhl et al., 2021).

It can be concluded that the pandemic has illustrated the importance of strong public institutions and of effective partnerships between governments and other key actors, which is also essential for attaining the SDGs. It has been confirmed that the 2030 Agenda is a good compass for sustainability, and that it is necessary to integrate mechanisms to increase resilience in institutions

and governance to implement all Sustainable Development Goals, in particular, for enabling Goals 16 and 17, without which implementation of Goals 1 to 15 would not be possible.

However, a good compass alone does not help if there is not a progression toward Goals taking place. In 2020, the United Nations stated that the attainment of these Goals by 2030 is not possible with the existing speed and acceleration that the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda and all its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is moving at. Indeed, this was the central theme of the annual high level political forum (HLPF) (UNDESA, 2020). Discussions at the (virtual) HLPF of 2020 showed that policymakers, political decision-makers, societal stakeholders as well as scholars tend to look for causes of the delays first and foremost in policy failure. Indeed, governments and their societal partners often fail to take the correct course of action, however, this is only part of the problem. At least as important, is the fact that the quality of public governance for the SDGs (in other words, doing things the correct way) is not matching the high ambitions of policies. Moreover, many public institutions who should play a leading role in governance, and are themselves part of the institutional governance framework, are not equipped (financially, in terms of human resources, as well as in terms of the mindsets needed) to lead the implementation of the Agenda. Governance failure is therefore at least as much a cause for lagging with the SDGs as policy failure. The increase of global crises, including but not limited to the COVID-19 pandemic, risks further slowing down or even causing a standstill for the 2030 Agenda if effective governance and effective policies are not implemented. The UN Secretary-General addressed this at the virtual Climate Summit in April 2021, stating that the COVID-19 recovery money cannot be used to lock in policies that burden next generations "with a mountain of debt on a broken planet" (United Nations, 2021).

On the positive side, the fear of many that COVID-19 crisis management would push sustainable development from the political agendas, has not broadly materialized. In the EU, implementation of the 2030 Agenda has emerged stronger, with a reconfirmation that the European Green Deal (2019) remains the EU's growth strategy, and with the establishment of an EU Recovery and Resilience financial Facility of 672.5 billion Euros in loans and grants, focusing on a twin "green and digital" transition (EU Regulation, 2021) . In addition, the 2021 EU report on the importance

of public administration reiterated that public administrations have a key role for the achievement of the 2030 sustainable Agenda, which is at the heart of EU policies [4]. In many other countries, however, the pandemic has not stopped unsustainable infrastructure, mobility, production, and consumption.

On the negative side, the attention on governance failure is generally still weak. Although UN Member States have been asked to report, in their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), about the governance SDGs 16 and 17, governance failure is rarely mentioned. Governance failure (the ineffectiveness of governance goals, a governance framework or the management thereof, to achieve policy goals (Meuleman, 2021) is part of, but not the same as government failure: government failure also includes policy failure.

The objectives of this paper was to ascertain how public administration and governance affects strategic policy area, how mission-oriented public administration affects governance reform and next steps on implementation of SDGs in Nigeria.

This paper will help create awareness to the need for sustainable public governance as the country continue to cry for better leadership and a revival in economy. The paper will also serve as insight for other researchers who intend to carryout related research.

The study utilized the library research technique to gather data for the work. Most of the information sources were drawn from previous literature. Thus, secondary sources were used to gather data. The data were gathered from journals, periodicals, textbooks and online materials. In addition, critical observations by the researchers were also utilized to analyze events relating to the paper.

Public Administration and Governance as a Strategic Policy Area

The first priority area concerns the quality of public administration and governance (PAG) as a crucial means to steer, guide and stimulate the attainment of the SDGs. This concerns the quality of plans and strategies, resources, skills, competences, agility, and mindsets, as well as about how to create a match with existing traditions and cultures of governance, or more generally, societal problem-solving. SDGs 16 (institutions) and 17 (means of implementation) are the main governance Goals, but all other SDGs have enabling governance targets. Still, SDGs 16 and 17 can be considered as the enabling Goals of the 2030 Agenda. These are important motivating factors without which nothing happens.

Creating an effective public administration and governance is more than a technical matter linked to an administrative 'overhead'. PAG is an important, strategic policy area, linked to SDG 16 as it relates to the quality of public institutions, SDG 17 with its concern for policy coherence for sustainable development, and the cross-cutting SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities. On the one hand, we generally consider debates on the size of public administration, devolvement of tasks to subnational authorities, and on the nature of public tasks as well as what can be privatized, as being deeply normative and therefore, political. For example, the level of privatization of the health system in a country is the result of a specific political ideology. On the other hand, we usually do not consider attaining adequate quality of public administration and governance as a strategic policy area. As Pollit & Bouckaert (2011) have argued in their seminal book on public management reform, although "public administration reform is usually thought as a means to an end, not an end in itself. It may also serve a number of intermediate ends, including those of strengthening the control of politicians over the bureaucracy, freeing public officials from bureaucratic constraints that inhibit their opportunities to manage and enhancing the government's

accountability to the legislature and the citizenry for its policies and programs" (Pollit & Bouckaert, 2011). The paradox, that PAG is political and strategic, and at the same time rather a means than an end, needs to be looked at, since the SDGs will not be attained by 2030 without well-functioning public institutions and effective governance at all levels.

Public officials responsible for governance and administration often consider themselves as not being part of the 2030 Agenda policy framework. Nonetheless, they should be essential partners in national inter-ministerial committees on the implementation of the SDGs if they should develop adequate institutional mechanisms and ensure competences and skills of the workforce directed to enable mainstreaming of the SDGs.

Policies tend to attract more political and media attention than issues around public administration and governance. This results usually in an imbalance in terms of strategic priorities, in which administrative quality and governance are the weakest part. In addition, governance is more than a theory about the relations between government and non-governmental actors. Governance is about the quality of the institutions, processes, tools, skills, etc., which should enable effective policy making and policy implementation (Meuleman, 2021).

Making PAG a strategic priority could begin with applying a set of principles. In 2018, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and the UN Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA) developed a set of 11 'principles of effective governance for sustainable development'. The 11 principles are clustered along the three criteria mentioned in SDG 16 for institutional quality: effectiveness, accountability, and inclusiveness. With five of the eleven principles covering the inclusiveness dimension, the principles stand out compared to other similar sets, from e.g., OECD or World Bank. The principles are accompanied by 62 commonly used strategies, for some of which strategic guidance documents have already been published online, on budget transparency; public sector workforce diversity; monitoring and evaluation; risk management frameworks; and on coherent policymaking (UNCEPA, 2018). Since the UN Member States, through their ECOSOC Council, have endorsed the principles in 2018, they are being used to analyze existing and/or design new governance frameworks in a growing number of countries. The African Peer Review Mechanism of the African Union is preparing a study on the

use of the principles in a selection of African countries which was published in mid-2021 (APRM, 2021).

Also about better cooperation across political, institutional, and mental 'silos', which requires rethinking institutions, instruments, skills, human resources development and governance processes at all levels. This requires better horizontal and vertical coordination mechanisms, including mechanisms such as self-organizing governance institutions who aim to mitigate problems arising from fragmented authority (Feiock & Scholz, 2009), multiple forms of leadership, and inclusiveness with co-creation and co-responsibility.

In the mindset of many public officials, being responsible for the internal 'hardware' institutions, governance, and human resource management of the administration is not very attractive, predominantly because it is about managing the internal business and thus has little external exposure, criticism or praise. This image exists also in the general public's mind. It is no coincidence that the famous satirical BBC TV series 'Yes, Minister' which is after more than three decades still relevant as critical mirror for public administration evolved around a 'Ministry of Administrative Affairs'.

Finally, those who coordinate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the national level often do not consider their 'administrative affairs' Ministry as a logical and needed partner. Quality of public administration and governance is seen as belonging to the overhead of governmental organizations. All in all, the quality of public institutions can either slow down or accelerate SDG implementation, but is still not considered as a strategic policy area.

Mission-Oriented Public Administration and Governance Reform

The second priority area concerns public administration and governance reform. Reform and innovation in the public sector are not straightforward. For decades, the sometimes implicit reform objectives originated from New Public Management, focusing on, among other things, decentralization, but always on improving efficiency, even to the detriment of effectiveness. Many public sector reform programs have been inspired by this type of thinking, which is primarily based upon literature derived from the private sector (Hartley, 2005). Such reforms have been carried

out globally, starting in Anglo-Saxon countries, spreading across Europe, and inspiring many Asian countries. Conversely, Pollit and Bouckaert (2011) have observed a resistance to NPM in France, Germany and the Mediterranean countries because it was considered as not matching with their cultural, ethical and political features.

NPM has introduced slogans that sound simple and attractive but should be handled with care. Some of them are known to have resulted in governance failure in areas relevant to the 2030 Agenda (Meuleman, 2018).

Firstly, the expression 'best practice' is not value-neutral. The 'best practice' ideology is the opposite of the principle of the SDGs that states that, there is no one-size-fits-all and that the best solutions are contextualized. It is related to the market governance value of competition ("who is the winner, who is the best?"). It suggests that every alternative practice has been considered and rigorously evaluated based on some agreed criteria. Alternative wording would be 'good practice', 'successful practice', or 'inspiring example'; the latter was systematically used by the European Commission in its Toolbox Quality of Public Administration (European Commission, 2017).

The phrase 'less is more' is inspired by efficiency thinking, which would normally be a secondary objective of an organization. As soon as the primary objective suffers from efficiency measures, something is wrong. Therefore, it is not a universally sound principle. 'Less is more' is often used to suggest that governmental organizations should be smaller, actually meaning 'Less state, more market'. Related to the 'less is more' mantra is the idea that governments should be 'steering, not rowing' (Peters, 2011); they should make policies but utilize other sectors to deliver public services. 'Less is more' has stimulated privatization of, for example, health services in many countries. The Covid-19 crisis has shown some negative impacts of this on SDG 3 (good health and well-being), such as the lack of stock of medical equipment in hospitals, as mentioned before (Meuleman, 2018).

Another NPM slogan is 'evidence-based policy making' (Head, 2016). On the one hand, it is the opposite of policy being based on prejudices and populism. It is sometimes interpreted as a claim that policies need an indisputable, 'true' knowledge base. This claim is in contrast with the low

level of certainty that social sciences consider realistic regarding the politics of complex, disputed, so-called 'wicked' problems of the sustainability Agenda. Hence, it is being overtaken in academic publications; not yet in public administration practice by the more nuanced term 'evidence-informed policy making' (Head, 2016).

The NPM concept 'better regulation' has in the past been used as a euphemism for 'less regulation' and had the connotation of 'cutting red tape'. The downside of breaking down regulation can be less reliability, legitimacy, and steering power of government. Used in a more literal sense, the impact can be very positive in terms of effective governance. The European Commission's Better Regulation initiative includes, besides a 'refit' exercise of existing EU legislation, a philosophy which is pluralist and close to the concept of meta-governance (European Commission, 2015).

New Public Management also introduced public-private partnerships (PPP), resulting in both benefits and flaws. On the positive side, it has provided governments with investments, technology and innovation options beyond their budget and capacities. The downsides of PPP as blueprint for partnerships between governments and societal partners include that PPP for the administration is mainly about cost-saving, that the business partner in the partnership is often dominant, and that it is not designed to include civil society organizations as a partner on equal footing. The first is against the 2030 Agenda's effectiveness principle, the second against accountability and the third against inclusiveness.

Finally, the slogan 'breaking down the silos' has become almost a mantra in debates on governance for sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda, as requirement to fulfill its comprehensive, holistic, and systemic approach. As addressed in Section 5, an adaptation here is 'teaching silos to dance', relating to the need for capacity-building and skills development in the public service. It is a positive development that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in many countries rediscovering the crucial role of the values created by the public sector. An increased political priority for quality of public administration and governance *(Section 2)* could make it more feasible than in the past to use 'mission-oriented' public administration and governance reform for better implementation of the 2030 Agenda, as promoted by Mazzucato (2018) for research innovation. What the Agenda requires is in the first place effective and tailor-made governance instead of

efficient and standardized modernization recipes. The mission would be to achieve the SDGs by 2030 and would be open to use all available tools and resources that can help acceleration, including the budget, the tax system and public procurement. Such a mission would be compatible with the principles of effective governance.

Mission-oriented public sector reform would include both horizontal and vertical coordination, and collaboration within a 'whole of government' and a 'whole of society' concept. Looking through a multilevel lens brings about new perspectives and ideas for more interconnected and mutually reinforcing actions, thus 'dynamising the multilevel governance for SDGs' (Niestroy et al., 2019). Coordination of governance across administrative levels has been researched already from a cultural perspective, showing, for instance, that multilevel governance can be characterized by hierarchical governance in a legalist or centrist culture, and by voluntary agreements in a consensus democracy. Generally, it may take years before a national strategy becomes local practice; in the EU, a new piece of legislation may be implemented by local authorities only six or seven years after the initiative was taken by the European Commission. The same slowness occurs when innovative local ideas could benefit from being to higher levels. A third approach has emerged in some countries, referred to as a 'real-time collaborative multilevel governance' approach (Meuleman, 2019).

In the Netherlands, with its centuries-old network governance culture, for certain important and urgent challenges of national interest, all levels of government get together in so-called 'inter-administrative dossier teams' ('interbestuurlijke dossierteams'). In other countries, the approach could be different: comparative research on urban sustainability transitions has shown that multilevel relations may differ according to national governance cultures (Ehnert et al., 2017).

Next Steps on Implementation of SDGs in Nigeria

Having achieved a relatively good record of success in establishing the policy and enabling environment that will accelerate implementation of SDGs related interventions, there are other initiatives that are critical to actualization of the SDGs. While some of these initiatives have

already started, others are yet to commence. Within the current fiscal year, the following is a considered list of select activities that are critical to the consolidation of the achieved progress:

There is an ongoing plan to conduct a Needs Assessment and Policy Analysis and estimate the cost of SDGs related programmes, projects and activities. This is aimed at establishing the volume of financial resources required for achieving the SDGs and to also guide other resource mobilization efforts in partnership with the MDAs, sub-national governments, and development partners.

Deepen integration of the SDGs -related programmes into sector plans and implementation plans of the Nigerian Economic Recovery Growth Plan (NERGP) through the Office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on Sustainable Development Goals (OSSAP-SDGs) has commenced arrangement for inter-agency engagement for integration of the SDGs related programmes and projects within the Medium-Term Sector Strategies (MTSSs) of key sectors, work-plans of relevant MDAs, and the strategic implementation plan of the NERGP. This is aimed at deepening existing SDGs integration into the annual budgets for resource allocation and implementation.

Enhance the strategic framework for effective implementation: To accelerate effective implementation of the SDGs related programmes at the national and subnational level, OSSAP-SDGs aims to deploy a strategic tool for Mainstreaming, Accelerating and Policy Support (MAPS).

Develop an SDGs Results Framework: OSSAP-SDGs aims to coordinate development of Nigeria's realistic and agreed performance milestones and benchmarks across a select set of SDGs targets and indicators. This will provide framework of results the country will realistically promise to deliver on. It will also form the framework for performance tracking, reporting and accountability.

Integration of SDGs into the revised National Long-Term Plan: Nigeria is at the verge of revising her long-term plan, NV20:2020. OSSAP-SDGs plans to work closely with the Ministry for Budget and National Planning to facilitate proper integration of the SDGs and its three dimensions in the revised long-term vision document.

Advancing the SDGs monitoring to outcome performance monitoring: The OSSAP-SDGs already has a functional unit on Monitoring and Evaluation. The current operations of the unit are very vast on tracking SDGs directly funded projects and their outputs. With the vast integration of SDGs in the NERGP, the office plans to advance this effort to outcome and impact level performance monitoring and ensuring proper integration of the SDGs indicators into the national Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) framework for the Nigerian Economic Recovery Growth Plan (NERGP). In addition to this, there will be a comprehensive review of the Office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on Sustainable Development Goals (OSSAP-SDGs) OPEN M&E System.

Developing an SDG Information Management System: During the implementation of the MDGs, Nigeria developed an MDGs Information Management System (NMIS). The NMIS served as a repository web portal for all MDGs project and performance information/ data. With the transition from MDGs to SDGs, OSSAP-SDGs have concluded plans to review and rebrand the NMIS into an NSIS to continue to serve the same purpose.

Strengthening partnerships and collaborative platforms in order to accelerate implementation: Nigeria has planned to harmonize the Agenda 2063 with Agenda 2030, in collaboration with the UN Economic Commission for Africa, providing the necessary platform for the integration. As part of the partnership strengthening plan, OSSAP-SDGs will work closely with the established partnership platforms, development partners' forum on SDGs, to accelerate implementation of SDGs interventions through the Appropriations for the Conditional Grant Scheme at the sub-national levels as well as the SDGs Social Safety Net programmes across the country.

Deepening Advocacy and Communication for intended and targeted behaviour change: The UN-SDGs Action Campaign has supported the OSSAP-SDGs to produce a draft SDGs communication strategy for Nigeria. An immediate focus will be to complete and commence implementation of the communication strategy. Existing structures, such as the CSOs Group on SDGs, National Orientation Agency, SDGs champions, SDGs focal persons at MDAs and sub-national governments and other relevant stakeholders, will be used to facilitate the implementation of this strategy.

Findings

Looking at implementation issues of the SDGs from a public administration and governance perspective in a bid to ensure sustainability, it can be observed that acceleration is necessary. One of the first actions may be to recognize that creating an effective public administration and governance (PAG) is an important strategic policy area. PAG is an essential enabler and leveller for sustainability transitions.

Conclusion

Implement concrete mechanisms for policy and institutional coherence for the SDGs, which should be inclusive, well-coordinated in e.g., national programs, based on a range of available approaches, supported by dedicated reforms, and accompanied by peer learning programs, training and networks of practitioners. Start pilots using 'real-time collaborative multilevel governance' for selected policy challenges which are both important and urgent.

Governance failure can delay the achievement of the SDGs substantially. Where such failure can be linked to insufficient public administration quality, or governance frameworks which are not optimized for the context and the problem types, this can, in principle, be prevented. Successful governance requires leaders to have an open mind for emerging windows of opportunity, and a sense for using those opportunities successfully. An open mind for using opportunities is a prerequisite of effective governance for sustainable development.

Having an open mind is not enough. Even if we do not realize it, each of us has an inclination for governance by either rules (hierarchical governance), partnerships (network governance) or market-based solutions (market governance), or a specific combination of these. This preference can be personal, organizational, part of a national culture, or all the above.

Recommendations

It would be recommendable to:

It is recommended to use the UN-principles of effective governance for sustainable development as a strategic tool; to strengthen the position of ministries responsible for administration and

governance; to adapt monitoring and assessment of progress; and to streamline public administration and governance quality across all SDG implementation documents.

Secondly, it is recommended to test reform programs ex ante on their missions; to develop comprehensive mechanisms for policy and institutional coherence for the SDGs, and to pilot 'real-time collaborative multilevel governance' for selected policy challenges.

Thridly, it is recommended to increase the awareness of existing mindsets; to consider a general Mutual Gains Approach training for all policy officers and managers; to integrate informal cross-silo working in existing training programs.

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