

## **“PUBLIC SERVICE REFORMS AND INSTITUTION BUILDING”**

**LECTURE DELIVERED BY JOE ABAH, PH.D., DIRECTOR-GENERAL, BUREAU OF PUBLIC SERVICE REFORMS, TO PARTICIPANTS OF THE EXECUTIVE INTELLIGENCE MANAGEMENT COURSE (EIMC), AT THE INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY STUDIES, ON 8<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2016.**

### **PROTOCOLS**

I am delighted to have been invited back to ISS to share ideas with EIMC 9 participants about one year after I represented the Head of Service of the Federation in a lecture to EIMC 8 participants. While it is a privilege to be invited to address this august gathering in my own right, it means that I must take direct responsibility for whatever I say here. That is why I am so grateful to the organisers that they have chosen a topic that is squarely within my official remit as the nation’s chief reformer. As a part-time academic, the role of public service reforms in institutional building is also an area of research interest for me. This means that, as a senior government official, I have to be measured in my speech, but also outspoken in my ideas as an academic. Not an easy balance to strike, but I will try my best.

2. Before I launch into the topic proper, I must warn that my ideas may not always conform to accepted wisdom. I may sometimes go against the practitioner grain or swim against the academic tide. Also, please pardon me if you find my paper a little bit long. I have been asked to speak on a deep and profound topic, but I will try my best to keep you engaged by not making it boring. In doing so, I will avoid bombastic, highfalutin language in an attempt to impress you with my knowledge of big words. *If necessary, I go talk am for pidgin!* One thing that you can be sure of though is that my submissions are based on 30 years practitioner experience leading public service reforms in various parts of the world, supplemented by rigorous academic analysis and verifiable empirical work.

3. As we should do with any rigorous intellectual work, let us start with definitions. The topic that I have been asked to address is Public Service Reforms and Institution Building. Definitions are important because the term ‘Public Service’ may not mean the same thing to all of us. As an example, some people use ‘Public Service’ and ‘Civil Service’ interchangeably. They may not be the same things. Also, the terms ‘Reform’ can mean different things to different people. To some, it can simply mean sacking people and making life more difficult for workers. To others, it can mean change. Additionally, the term ‘Institution’ is often used interchangeably with the term ‘Organisation.’ So, one could say ‘marriage is an institution’, and, at the same time, refer to a university as an

‘institution of higher learning.’ As a married man of nearly 25 years, I will submit that there is no institution higher in learning than marriage!

4. And so, when we are asked to discuss ‘Public Service Reforms and Institution Building’, are we clear that we are all on the same page? Are we talking about the civil service or the wider public service, including the army and the security services? When we say reforms, are we talking about restructuring and staff reorganisation, or are we talking about changing the way that things are done? Which institution are we talking of building with our public service reforms? Do we mean government organisations or do we mean our cultures, traditions and norms, such as marriage and institutionalised corruption?

5. In the United States of America, the term “civil service” refers to all public services of a civilian nature. So, legislators and even judges are civil servants. Nigeria more closely follows the United Kingdom meaning of civil service, which largely refers to a select core of Whitehall mandarins that are responsible for policy development and advising politicians. The confusion about the terms ‘civil service’ and ‘public service’ in Nigeria may be traceable to the inelegant drafting of the 1999 Constitution. Part D of Chapter VI of the Constitution is titled ‘The Public Service of the Federation’, but starts in Section 169 with “There shall be a *civil* service of the Federation.” It then goes on to use the two terms interchangeably. For our purposes, we will take the civil service to mean the service provided by career officers that are recruited by the Federal Civil Service Commission to work primarily in Ministries.

6. The term ‘public service’ is wider than the civil service. Anybody that does any work in a publicly-owned organisation to serve fellow citizens is a public servant. Because civil servants do so too, they are public servants as well. However, people that work in agencies, parastatals, the army, security services, paramilitary organisations, the legislature, the judiciary and so on are public servants, not civil servants. Therefore, all civil servants are public servants but not all public servants are civil servants! Therefore, when we talk of public service reforms in this paper, we mean the wider public service, including the security services, not just the civil service led by the Head of the Civil Service of the Federation.

7. Let us next look at the word “Reforms.” Unfortunately, that word has acquired a bad reputation in Nigeria, a reputation that we in BPSR are still trying to shed. It has become synonymous with sacking people, reviewing salaries and changing designations. Many commentators on public service reforms will gleefully list the administrative reviews of various commissions, right from the colonial era, as reforms. They will name such commissions as the Tudor Davis Commission of 1946, the

Mbanefo Commission of 1959, the Adebo Commission of 1971, the Udoji Commission of 1974, the Dotun Phillips Commission of 1988, the Ayida Reform of 1995, and what they call the Obasanjo Reforms of 2006-2008. The extent to which these administrative reviews qualify as reforms is debatable, as we will soon see.

8. For me, reforms simply means changing something to a better state. More importantly, my view is that the purpose of ALL public service reforms must be to bring about tangible improvements in the life of citizens. Of course, administrative reviews re-designating Permanent Secretaries as Directors General in 1988 and reversing it in 1995 are important, as are periodic salary adjustments. However, they are of absolutely no interest to our mothers and grandmothers in the village. For them, what is important is: Can I see a doctor within 4 hours when I am sick? Will the drugs I get issued at the hospital be genuine or fake? Will the teachers be in the school to teach my grandchildren or will they have played truant? Will I get my pension automatically and on time, without going to sleep on a Ghana-must-go bag for days outside the office of the Head of Service? If I want a passport to go and do “omugo” with my daughter in London, can I get it in 7 days without paying a bribe? And so, my view of public service reforms is making positive tangible changes to the experience of our citizens when they come into contact with their government. Anything else, in my view, is administrative navel-gazing and tinkering.

9. To my mind, therefore, most of the so-called reforms have not been reforms at all. It is my unapologetic view that serious public service reforms started under former President Obasanjo. Of course the severance of public servants and the abolition of certain junior cadres carried out under the Obasanjo regime followed the pattern of other administrative reviews, but those were not the real Obasanjo reforms. By the way, many of those that were disengaged found their ways back into the system within a few years, so nothing really changed.

10. The real Obasanjo reforms include strengthening NAFDAC, which has brought down the incidence of fake drugs from 41% in 2000 (80% in Lagos) to about 4% now. The real reforms include ensuring that everyone that retires from the public service actually gets a pension now, with the contributory pensions scheme moving the country from a pensions deficit of N46 billion in 2004 to a healthy credit of N5 trillion in 2015. The real reforms include deregulating the communications industry, such that from only 500,000 phone lines in Nigeria in 1999, we now have more than 200 million active phone lines. That is an increase of 40,000%, which means that we now have more phone lines than we have people.

11. Of course, this trend of real reforms has been continued by Presidents Yar'adua, Jonathan and Buhari. The electoral reforms under President Jonathan meant that, for the first time in our history, we were able to choose our leaders credibly and without violence. The importance of this reform cannot be over-estimated, as it is the ultimate accountability tool in any democracy. Nigerians massively voted-in the Jonathan government in 2011, and also massively voted them out in 2015 when they did not want them anymore. Perhaps for the first time in our history, the Buhari administration is making social protection and caring for the disadvantaged a central part of state policy and not the pet project of a First Lady. This reform will have real impact on the lives of the poorest, the unemployed and the vulnerable. These to me are the real reforms, not the occasional administrative reviews of the past focusing on the structure and welfare of public servants, and not on the wellbeing of the public that we are paid to serve.

12. Ladies and gentlemen, let us now move to the second arm of our topic for today: building institutions. It is after we examine this aspect that we will draw a link between public service reforms and institution-building to conclude the paper. As I said early, many people use the terms "institution" and "organisation" interchangeable. For the purpose of this paper, I will be using the technical, rather than the colloquial meanings of both terms.

13. In the Organisational Development literature, an organisation can be defined as a group of people intentionally assembled to achieve a common purpose. Therefore, I would take the Institute of Security Studies to be an organisation, and not an institution. On the other hand the literature on Institutional Theory defines "Institutions" as the ways in which things are done in a society. They are the rules of the game in a society, together with their enforcement arrangements. They shape the way that societies evolve over time, and are handed down from generation-to-generation through socialisation and education. Therefore, while I will call this Institute an organisation, the system of gathering intelligence and maintaining internal security in Nigeria is an institution. The marriage registry is an organisation but marriage itself is an institution. Anybody from South East Nigeria will tell you that "omugo" is an institution. It is the way things are done in a society.

14. Having set out these concepts and constructs, you can probably see that my interpretation of the topic "Public Service Reforms and Institution Building" alludes to how we can make changes to the way we do things in government to affect, for the better, the way that we do things in our society (the rules of the game). If I have misinterpreted the topic, let me apologise and leave now! Alternatively, I could continue and take

questions on my interpretation of the topic after the paper. Which one should I do?

15. Because the public service is so large, reforming it is never easy. It is also very easy to lose focus and focus on things that are easy or popular. That is precisely what happened to the Udoji Commission's work. While that review had the potential to change the DNA of the civil service institution forever, the government of the day only went for the aspect on pay increase for public servants. Of course, following the "Udoji Award", inflation jumped overnight from 13% to 34%. We will, therefore, keep a strict focus on those changes that will bring positive and tangible impact to the lives of citizens, and bring about a change for the better in the way that things are done in our society.

16. Ladies and gentlemen, with your permission I will now use a few examples to draw the link between public service reforms and institution building. In a recent media chat, President Buhari said: "The era of agencies and parastatals earning money, spending what they like and giving government the change is over." The Treasury Single Account has actually been in place since 2011. However, there was insufficient political will to apply it fully across the board. That meant that organisations such as NNPC, NIMASA, NDDC, NPA and TETFUND continued to treat public funds like private income. Although they were supposed to take out their operating costs and remit the rest to government, they ensured that, every year, their operating costs rose to meet any revenue they generate, leaving little or nothing for fellow Nigerians. Their chief executives made a very easy transition from heading government agencies to running for high public office, often an extremely expensive endeavour. Since the full implementation of the TSA late last year, government has already saved about N3 trillion which is being ploughed into the capital budget for the benefit of Nigerians. This is a change in the way things are done. This is real reform.

17. Another institution that we are tackling hard is Corruption. By the time Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999, it was perceived to be the 2<sup>nd</sup> most corrupt country in the world. In the four years before that, it had been either the most corrupt or the 2<sup>nd</sup> most corrupt country in the world, according to Transparency International. Corruption is simply the way things have been done in our society for a very long time. One 'yeye' foreign politician even recently described us as "fantastically corrupt", but Mr President gave us all a master class in dignified response to immature provocation by simply asking him to return the loot kept in his country to us, instead of apologising.

18. With the establishment and strengthening of anticorruption agencies, our corruption perception improved by 58 places between 2000 and 2008. Although some momentum was lost between 2009 and 2015, we are beginning to see major reforms again in this area. For the first time in our history, we are beaming the searchlight on security expenditure. I expect that, with time, ongoing trials will have a major bearing on election financing in Nigeria. The corrupt institution of how elections have been financed for years will begin to change. So how does that affect the ordinary citizen? Well, a perception of corruption means that investors are more wary of doing business here. It means that our citizens are subjected to humiliating searches at foreign airports. It means that our businesses cannot get letters of credit to do business abroad. It means that every Nigerian, no matter how upright, is automatically labelled a thief. That is why this reform is important. That is why this is real reform.

19. I must not end without addressing the reform of the civil service as an institution. The civil service is central to policy and decision-making, and how that institution does things affects everybody else. One of the key reforms that we are currently engaged in is the development of a new performance management system to replace the discredited Annual Performance Evaluation and Review system (APER). A system in which 99% of civil servants score 99% of available marks, in a public service that is not delivering optimally, cannot be a good system.

20. The new Performance Management System (PMS) to be launched later this year will mean that performance targets are agreed up front, with clear key performance indicators. The report on performance at the end of the year should therefore be immune from accusations of ethnic, tribal, religious or any bias. Why is it important to get the PMS right? It is important because it will change the attitude of the civil and public service to work. It will start to reward good performance and highlight and sanction poor performance. It will start to base career advancement on performance, not on length of service or brilliance in examinations only. It will have the effect of reforming the civil service as an institution – changing the way that it does things.

21. We are also focusing heavily on agencies and parastatals. BPSR has conducted a holistic review of both the Oronsaye Report and the government White Paper in response to it. Our expectation is that the review will lead to a revised, more realistic White Paper that we will drive through to implementation. Beyond this work to rationalise and reduce the cost of agencies, we are also looking into the way that agencies do their work. BPSR has already piloted a new Self Assessment Tool for agencies and parastatals in the Federal Road Safety Commission and the National

Communications Commission among others. We are set to extend it to other agencies later this year.

22. Why is this important? Agency reform is important because the Nigerian on the street encounters agencies more directly than it encounters ministries. She comes into contact with the Immigration Service, not the Ministry of Interior. He comes into contact with Asokoro General Hospital, not the Federal Ministry of Health. When agencies are working, government is seen to be working. Agencies have the autonomy and specific mandates to deliver directly to citizens. A change of institutions here to bring about more success stories similar to those of NAFDAC, NDLEA, EFCC, and the Passport Service of the Nigerian Immigration Service will make a big difference to the lives of ordinary Nigerians. Agency reform is real reform. Unfortunately, we have not focused sufficiently on it in the past.

23. In conclusion, therefore, Public Service Reforms, properly done, has a direct bearing on Institution Building. It changes the way that things are done in a society and delivers tangible benefits for citizens. Public Service Reforms can improve efficiency and effectiveness and promote the better use of resources. By relying on technology such as the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), it can improve processes and help to fight corruption. Linking IPPIS to Bank Verification Numbers has exposed more than 23,000 people collecting multiple salaries, in addition to the more than N200 billion that has been saved and the 65,000 ghost workers exposed by IPPIS. The audit of security agencies payroll has already revealed 43,000 ghost workers and saved government N50 billion. Why is this important? The less we lose to pay fraud, the more resources we can devote to capital expenditure. The effect of Public Service Reforms is, therefore, to cause a dislocation to weak and unproductive systems and get a better deal for the ordinary citizen. That is the work we are striving to do. That is the work I am privileged to lead.

24. Let me end by thanking all of you here on the EIMC Course 9 for the wonderful work that you do in service to our country. You put your lives on the line so that the rest of us can sleep with our two eyes closed. I am aware that many of you here have lost colleagues to criminal elements in the course of the work you do, but you have not wavered in your diligence and your patriotism. As an ordinary Nigerian, I thank you for your dedication. We may not always get the opportunity to thank you collectively for your sacrifice, and I do not want to lose this opportunity that I have to do so today. Nigeria is proud of you.

**May God bless you all.**

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