

Corruption as an Impediment
to
Sustainable Development

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Introduction

President Buhari has said repeatedly that we must kill corruption in this country otherwise it will kill us. Some people often are amused by this statement because they cannot imagine the nation, Nigeria, being killed by corruption. But when we think seriously about the many problems that face this country today – problems that have held back progress in meeting our food needs, providing housing for all, providing the quality education we need, fixing our roads, supplying electricity to all homes and factories, and defeating people who have challenged our sovereignty – all of which can be traced to corruption, we must agree with Mr. President. Let us begin by examining what corruption is so that we can see why it must be killed if we truly wish to make progress in the various aspects of our life as a country.

What is Corruption?

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines corruption as "Dishonest or illegal behavior, especially of people in authority". The World Bank makes it clearer. It says that corruption is "The abuse of public office for private gains". The bank goes on to explain that "Public office is abused for private gain when an official accepts, solicits or extorts a bribe. It is also abused when private agents actively offer bribes to circumvent public policies and processes for competitive advantage and profit," i.e., when private people or private organizations offer bribes to public officers so that the officers would allow them to avoid certain rules and regulations that bind others.¹The World Bank points out further that public offices can be abused for private gains "through patronage and nepotism" even if bribery is not involved.²

The Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offenses Commission (ICPC) makes matters much clearer. It states that: "... a conduct is deemed to be corrupt when it:

- Results or could result in a public official or authority exercising their functions in a partial or dishonest way, breaching the public trust.

- Results or could result in wastages or misuse or misappropriation of information or public resources and funds.
- Constitutes or could constitute reasonable grounds for a criminal or disciplinary sanction such as dismissal or termination of services of a public official.
- Results or could result in substantial breach of any applicable code of conduct/oath of office.
- Confers or could confer unmerited/undue advantage to a person, group or organization at the expense of public integrity.
- Confers benefits of illegitimate material or pecuniary gratification”.

(ICPC: Counseling on Corruption: Guide for Community Leaders, p.7)

From these definitions, we can see that although we often think of bribery whenever corruption is mentioned, bribery is not the only form of corruption. Any form of abuse of power, for instance, embezzlement, inflation of contracts, extortion, demanding and giving kickbacks in contract procurement, diversion of funds, falsification of records (including receipts), suppression of information, perversion of justice, manipulation of voters records and other forms of electoral malpractice, examination malpractice, drug trafficking, money laundering, sexual harassment, award of grades to undeserving students, and abuse of selection processes, among others.

How about Sustainable Development?

To understand this term, we must first clarify the meaning of *development* as it is generally used in the social sciences. In economics, in particular, *development* is used to describe a process of improvement in the various aspects of the life of a society or a country. The aspects include:

- the production of goods and services which people want to consume, and the quantity and quality of goods that are produced,
- employment opportunities for people who are able and willing to work,
- the state of infrastructure, e.g., power supply, water, and transport facilities and services,
- educational opportunities and the quality of education available to citizens,

- knowledge and skills for doing a variety of things, and
- the quality of life in the society, among others.

A country is said to be **developing** if positive changes are taking place in these and the several other aspects of life in the country. Thus, in a developing country, we expect:

- total output of goods and services, usually measured as the gross domestic product (GDP), to be growing,
- unemployment to be falling, as a result of increases in employment opportunities,
- poverty to be falling, as a result of increases in employment and higher incomes,
- improvement in knowledge and skills, and greater ability to do many more things for the society without external assistance,
- improvement in the quantity and quality of educational opportunities, and
- improvement in the quality of life, which is usually measured by access to health facilities, access to clean and safe water, and improved housing conditions.

These conditions are often referred to as **indicators of development**. They are the conditions countries often seek to achieve when they announce **development plans or programmes**.

Everywhere in the world, nations pursue development through projects. They design and implement specific projects they believe will bring about the changes they want to see in their societies. It is in the process of implementing these development projects that the question of *sustainability of development* arises.

The development process is said to be sustainable if, in meeting the needs of the people today, it does not make it difficult for future generations to meet their own needs; it is unsustainable if it does. For instance, if in building roads and bridges, constructing modern houses, building factories, mining for minerals, and fishing for seafood for the purpose of achieving development today we employ techniques that destroy farmlands, waste forests and other resources, poison the seas, and pollute

and degrade the environment, whatever development is achieved would be said to be unsustainable because it has destroyed its very basis, and the basis of future development of the society, namely the environment.¹

But what has corruption got to do with sustainable development? My answer to this is: A lot. Let's reason together. In every society, laws are made to guide behaviour, and sanctions are provided for those who break the law. When every person in the society behaves according to the law, things work well and the society develops properly. But there will always be people who will not behave according to the law – people who will break the law – who should be punished appropriately and promptly in order to discourage such bad behaviour for the good of the society.

When people break the law, things go wrong in some part of the society and, ultimately, the entire society. Think of what happens to the society in each of the following circumstances:

- A teacher or an examiner takes bribe and awards a grade to an undeserving candidate.
- A traffic officer takes a bribe and allows criminals to pass with guns in the boot of their vehicle.
- A recruitment officer ignores a competent and qualified candidate for a job and selects his brother/sister or someone from his village without the required skills and competence for the job.
- A public officer accepts gifts and awards a contract to an incompetent and unqualified contractor.
- An engineer takes a bribe and approves a poorly constructed building or road somewhere in the country.
- An administrator diverts funds meant for schools and social programmes into building petrol filling stations and hotels to make money for himself and his family.

In the first of these cases, for example, the candidate ends up with a certificate he/she does not deserve. Eventually the society is misled into employing an

unqualified person. An unqualified person in a job anywhere is a waste of resources – a potential disaster. All the other cases similarly result in waste; they give the impression of some progress when nothing of real value has been achieved. In fact, virtually everywhere it occurs, the employment of unqualified people as a result of corruption hurts the society in ways that are often not easily noticed. It enthrones mediocrity, suppresses talents, kills creativity, perpetuates external dependence of the society, and, in cases like the many failed roads and collapsed buildings in the country, takes lives. This is the reason nations fight corruption.

The State of the Anti-Corruption Campaign in Nigeria

Some people think that we are not getting anywhere with our campaign; that we are not achieving much. But I disagree. When we consider the many convictions on corruption charges, and reports of stolen public assets that we now see in the media almost every day – the reported refunds or promises of refund of stolen money that are being made to government, and the seizure and forfeiture of huge amounts of money and other assets that were acquired illegally – matters which would not have been reported in the past, we must admit that a lot has been achieved. I suspect that those who condemn the anti-corruption campaign must be people who know some embarrassing things about their own wealth and would like to avoid ever being asked to explain, or people who are somehow benefiting from corrupt practices and therefore have a vested interest in intimidating the campaigners and stopping the campaign. What needs to be done is to stoutly resist the critics and intensify the campaign.

Intensifying the Anti-Corruption Campaign

To succeed in this noble struggle and shame detractors, those citizens who are involved in it must constantly assess themselves and ensure that they demonstrate discipline and integrity in all they do. When we are this strong, when we know we have no skeleton in our cupboard, we can:

- put ourselves up as examples for others to follow,
- arrange integrity camps for others,

- put pressure on our leaders, especially administrators and political leaders, for stronger anti-corruption laws and institutions,
- stand up to protest against lack of transparency and accountability in the decisions and actions of public officers, and
- make our elders generally uncomfortable with corrupt practices.

These steps and actions should help Nigeria in the struggle to curb corruption.

Conclusion

We have lived with corruption for too long in this country; corrupt practices have virtually become a way of life. For this reason, some people do not think we will get anywhere with the anti-corruption campaign; they argue that we should not try to fight corruption because it is always there. But the campaign is certainly getting somewhere; there is evidence that good progress is being made. Nigeria will win the war if the campaign is intensified and sustained.

Footnote

1. The description of sustainable development in this discussion is based on the definition of the term by the United Nations –sponsored *World Commission on Environment and Development 1987* (sometimes referred to as the *Brundtland Commission* after its Chairman, Gro Harlem Brundtland of Norway). The commission defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. See Field, B.C. (2001). *Natural Resource Economics*. Boston, Massachusetts (USA): McGraw Hill, p. 82, and Pearson, C. S. (2000). *Economics and the Global Environment*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, p. 464.

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