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Nature and scope of public administration

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Abstract

The success and survival of any organizations be they government or not is contingent upon group efforts and cooperation to achieve set goals. This paper discusses the nature and scope of public administration to say that in modern day societies, any administration in the public interest transcends beyond government circles and finds expression in other spheres of human endeavors including the church, mosques, postal services as well as international relations and diplomacy, respectively. The paper discusses the concepts of administration and public administration thereby creating a distinction between the two concepts. Furthermore, the understanding of the scope of administration through the various schools of thought have also been captured, the essence of which is to generate a clearer understanding of the discourse under review. The paper ends with conclusions.

Keywords: Administration, Public, Schools of thought, Private administration

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1. Introduction

The existence and progress of human society depends to a large extent, on the cooperation and utilization of group efforts to accomplish certain societal objectives. In fact, the development of human society and the concomitant increase in the number of societal problems has shown clearly that men have to intensify efforts and ideas to manage and cope with their fast-growing and changing society. Furthermore, from its rudimentary level in the primitive society, cooperative efforts of men have grown to a national level where government bureaucracy 'is used' for decision making to achieve certain national objectives. And at present, there is what could be called as internationalization of cooperative efforts in the quest of nations to solve or address certain problems or issues that are of international concern (Simon, 1970). These cooperative efforts of men are geared towards the achievement of public goals and this is called public administration, which is the subject matter of this study. Therefore, it is of intellectual significance to understand not only the meaning of public administration but also its nature and scope.

2. Conceptual clarification

A review of literature shows that an understanding of public administration cannot be sufficient without first of all understanding the concept of Administration. Like other fundamental concepts in political science and public administration, administration has no universally accepted definition. This is because the different definitions focus on different aspects of the concept and environment of the scholars. According to Simon, administration is the activities of groups/individuals cooperating to accomplish common goals. He added that administration takes place when two men cooperate to roll a stone that none of them can move alone. Simons' definition laid emphasis on cooperation. For him, it is necessary to have groups/individuals cooperating and such cooperation must have a purpose. Therefore, we can look at administration as the activities of groups/individuals that are aimed at getting something done. Thus, Nwosu asserted that administration is inevitable in any given situation where a piece of work that has to be done requires the efforts of more than one person to accomplish it. A more elaborate and comprehensive definition of administration was provided by Balogun (1983) when he asserted that:

We shall regard as administrative any action that is directed to the analysis of policies, the identification of options and to a substantial degree, the implementation of programmes as well as the efficient allocation of resources. In addition to all these calculated decisions, a typical administrative action taken into consideration the enduring and the goals of the organization as well as the environment within which the action takes place (1983:17).

We can therefore say that administration, regardless of its diverse definitions, is concerned with the mobilization, deployment, organization and intensification of group efforts for the attainment of specified aims.

3. Meaning of public administration

Since administration is a cooperative effort of a group of people to achieve specific objectives, public administration therefore could be seen as a cooperative effort of groups/individuals to achieve the aims of the general public. Public administration is more related to the activities of government. Hence, it is seen as the mobilization, deployment and management of men and materials to achieve the purpose of the government. As Mbah (2007) puts it, public administration sector consists of establishments of Federal, State and Local Government agencies that administer, oversee, and manage public programmes and have executive, legislative or judicial authority within a given area (Nwosu, 1985). Williams (1985) emphasized the point when he defines public administration as the technical knowledge of the field which enables the administrator to perform his duty. He also sees public administration as the techniques of management and principles to which operative programmes are carried through to success (White, 1986). In essence, public administration is the sum total of all the activities of organizations or groups that are directed towards the accomplishment of the interests of the general public.

4. Scope of public administration

Public administration is a broad and encompassing area of study; and as a result, one cannot with sense of certainty point up the specific focus and scope of public administration. The field of public administration today transcends government circles and includes other areas, namely, schools, churches, mosques, markets, postal services, transportation, international relations, etc. However, further insight into the scope of public administration can be understood using the following schools of thought:

1. The Integral School
2. The Managerial School
3. The 'Body of Knowledge' School.

4.1. The integral school

To the Integral School, public administration is a sum total of all the activities undertaken in pursuit of and in fulfillment of public policy. These activities include not only managerial and technical but also manual and clerical. The central argument of the integral scholars is that public administration is only concerned with all the activities of government, undertaken whether by one or all of the three arms of government. This argument is reflected in the definition of public administration provided by one of the integral scholars, Leonard White who defined the public administration as consisting of all those operations having to their purpose the fulfilment or enforcement of public policy (Tout, 1927). Thus, public administration covers the three core activities of organization which include accomplishing goals, maintaining organizational vitality, and defending the organization. The integral view, therefore, shows the vastness and multiplicity of the scope of public administration in any nation state. In Nigeria, for instance, public administration is carried out

within different categories of public organization: Federal, State and Local Government. Civil Services, and within them are multiple tasks that fall within the domain of public administration. While delivering a Public Lecture on the English Civil Service, Tout pointed out the reason for the vastness of the scope of public administration, when he said that “however much we may gamble, this growth of the bureaucracy is inevitable” (Gulick, 1937).

4.2. The managerial school

The Managerial School sees public administration as an area that is specifically concerned with only those persons engaged in the performance of managerial functions in an organization. This implies that only those who plan, programme and manage the activities of an organization are the main focus of public administration. The functions of these people are numerous, and are geared towards the achievement of certain goals. Gulick et al. (1980) comprehensively outlined these functions using the acronym POSDCORB, meaning:

- P - Planning
- O - Organizing
- S - Staffing
- D - Directing
- CO - Coordinating
- R - Reporting
- B - Budgeting.

4.3. The ‘body of knowledge’ school

As a body of knowledge, public administration is directed towards the understanding of government and administration. Public administration is therefore viewed as an academic field of study that is concerned with the workings of government in the pursuit of some set objectives. It is best considered as a branch of social sciences that has a strong root in political science and borrows ideas, methods, theories, frameworks and tools of analysis from economics, sociology, psychology mathematics, business administration, physical and biological sciences (Balogun, 1983).

Within this context, public administration promotes the use of human cooperative action, at the theoretical or practical level, to solve the practical problems that affect government performance. It therefore, examines and studies all actions relating to the formulation, implementation and evaluation of policy and the search for the productive, efficient and effective use of money, materials and men in the public realm.

5. The nexus between private and public administration

Administration usually takes place within an organization, for example in universities, companies, and government departments and agencies. While some of the organizations are called public, others are referred to as private. Public organizations such as Ministries, Corporations, Parastatals are those which are concerned with the attainment of the aims of the Government or the State. The private sector is often used as a collective phrase to refer to organizations such as Mobil Nigeria Plc which are neither State-owned nor are they operating specifically to achieve State goals.

Administration within the two organizations (public and private) differs in many ways private organizations are usually established and financed by individuals and groups. Administration within this organization is answerable to the owners and its success or efficiency is usually measured in terms of the amount of profit it makes. But public organizations are usually established by the Acts of Parliament or Executive Orders, and their goals are expected to reflect the needs of the citizens. Furthermore, the process of administration in government organizations is much slower when compared with the process in private organizations. The process which is generally referred to as 'Red-tapism' is a serious threat to public administration in Nigeria (Willian, 1985). Additionally, the scope of government activities pervades the entire socio-economic structure of the society. The vastly expanded government activities range from Universal Basic Education in Nigeria to multi-million naira projects all over the entire society that public administration serves. Inevitably, the variety of skills required in public employment is usually higher than that found in private companies, except for a few private trans-national companies.

6. Contributions of public administration to political development in Nigeria

One can hardly think of any modern State without a well established bureaucratic organization. In fact, public bureaucracy is the only machinery through which government carries out its responsibilities. Hence, it can be said that public administration has contributed immensely to the political development of Nigeria. Five of such contributions deserve special mention.

First, is a collection of data. Public bureaucracy collects data for government decisions. Data is not only collected and assembled by administrators, but they evaluate the same for decision-making. The quality of governmental decision output is generally a reflection of the quality of information possessed by public bureaucracy. For instance, in Nigeria, there is the Federal Office of Statistics and National Planning Commission that provide information to the government for decision-making. Second, is investigation. This is one of the important activities performed by government of any nation. In fact, investigation or inspection by public bureaucracy hovers around all aspects of human endeavour. The standard of product of industry will be of low quality without building and factory inspection. Through investigation, and research, there will be discovery and development of new facts and techniques that could pave way for higher productivity. In Nigeria, the National Agency for Food, Drug Administration Control (NAFDAC) is seriously discharging the responsibility of investigating health-related issues and problems in order to ensure a healthy living of the

citizens. Third, is the framing of bureaucrats performing a cardinal role in the framing of legislation in most nations of the world. In a country like Nigeria, many laws are drafted by public servants. Although we cannot ignore the influence of organized pressure groups in law making, public servants formalize the intention of government and the wishes of people into legislation. Fourth, public bureaucracy is the main instrument through which government implements social change. Indeed, the skills and experiences needed to institutionalize innovation are provided by the Civil Service. It therefore serves as a medium for transforming the dream of government into a reality. The role of public administration in social growth and development are of greater significance in developing countries like Nigeria where government is in need for urgent provision of social amenities. Finally, government decisions are given value and meaning by the bureaucrats as they apply government regulations in their day-to-day dealings with members of the public. Without the activities of public bureaucrats, the existence of law in Nigeria would have been a thing on paper alone. Besides that, they help in the generation of government revenue. For example, they collect taxes which are sources of government revenue.

7. Conclusion

Obviously, public administration is a very broad and encompassing area of study. Indeed, drawing a clear map of the area covered by the discipline of public administration is a difficult task to public administrators and this emerged as a result of the dynamics and complexities of the discipline.

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