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ETHICAL CRISIS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses ethical crisis and its implications on Nigerian sustainable development. The theory of utilitarianism serves as the framework, while the qualitative research method, which uses secondary sources of data such as textbooks, journals, newspapers, internet sources, documents from international agencies, etc., was adopted. The data were analyzed using content analysis. Analysis reveals that ethical crises or failures inherent in Nigeria are corruption, politics as warfare, reckless pursuit of power, lack of accountability, personalization of administration, diffusion of attitudinal orientations, and electoral fraud. The finding further reveals that ethical crisis portends some implications for sustainable development in Nigeria. These include divided loyalty, which affects work decency, low productivity, inability to conduct free and fair elections, corruption, etc., which make the actual realization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) difficult to achieve. The paper concludes that sustainable development, economic stability, and political stability remain elusive due to unethical values exhibited by the Nigerian citizens. The paper recommends, amongst others, that for the SDGs' promises to be significantly actualized, ethical behaviour should be promoted by individuals, and the value of integrity should be internalized in Nigeria.

Keywords: Ethics, Values, Development, Sustainable Development, Corruption

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, virtually all the successive regimes have made some elaborate pronouncements of their commitment to development. Despite the abundant wealth and resources that the country is endowed with, the standard of living in the country has been ridiculously low (Ugoani, 2018). The gap between development and service delivery has been so wide due to ethical failure. To corroborate this, corruption emanates as a result of ethical failure, which retards economic growth and weakens public service delivery and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Aluko, 2025; Awopeju et al, 2015).

The problem of development in Nigeria is a product of the lingering ethical crisis in all spheres of the country. A general assessment of the various spheres of life across the country shows a remarkable deviation from the expected norms. For example, while rules are flagrantly side-tracked, loopholes and situations are readily exploited. All these have led to a high incidence of corruption, abuse of power and privilege, moral bankruptcy, selfishness and retardation of progress in the country. They have created not only negative domestic effects but also an external negative image. This disturbing and appalling situation made Onyeizugbo (2003) to describe ethics as a forgotten agenda in Nigeria. The question then remains thus: why, how, and to what specific effect?

The major thrust of this study is that ethical crisis has been responsible for the failure of developmental efforts in Nigeria. The political leaders are ordinarily expected to lead by example and ensure that rules and regulations are adhered to. They are expected to formulate policies that would enhance the well-being of the Nigerian citizenry. In the same vein, the bureaucratic class is expected to provide all necessary control measures to safeguard the thorough operation of the system. They are also expected to faithfully implement government policies to achieve the

goals of the people and the state. Also, the citizenry who constitute the target of developments are expected to defend the system.

Unfortunately, the political leaders, whether civilian or military, do not keep the oath of office they have sworn. Rather, they abuse their privileged position without any punishment. Unlike countries where any leader who brings disrespect to his office either resigns voluntarily or is forced to resign, the situation is different in Nigeria. Even the bureaucrats and professionals hardly consider the prestige of their professions.

Studies by Ukwaba (2003), Onyeizugbo (2003), Pate (2018), Ugoani & Udo (2023) have examined the issues of ethics in the Nigerian state concerning political corruption, ethics governance vis-a-vis national development, and nation building. However, the study of ethical crisis and sustainable development in Nigeria has been given little attention in the literature. This is the gap this article intends to fill. It is designed to examine the development of social services (such as Health, Education, Pipe borne water, Electricity, Good road, etc.), which encourage development. It examines the various mechanisms for control of ethical abuse and their limitations. The questions the paper intends to address are as follows: What are the ethical problems in the Nigerian socio-political system? What are the implications for ethical crises in achieving SDGs in Nigeria? The method of analysis adopted is mainly content analysis. Data for the study were gathered from secondary sources only. As such, library research was used extensively; this included textbooks, newspapers, journals, magazines, internet resource, government and international agencies publications.

The paper is divided into seven sections. The first section introduces the paper. The section two deals with conceptual clarification, section three presents the theoretical framework, and section four examines the ethical problems in relations to socio-political system in Nigeria. Section five deals with the control mechanisms adopted over the years in combating unethical behaviour in Nigeria, section six examines the ethical crisis and the implications for SDGs in Nigeria while section seven concludes and makes policy recommendations.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

The following concepts are defined as used in the paper.

Ethics

The term ethic has several controversial meanings because the term is undefined. Leeds (1975) stated that ethics comprises the perfect model of morality which a person is supposed to follow in his or her daily activities. It is a code or a set of principles by which men live.

Ethical Crisis

Ethical crisis is a situation where individuals' actions or inactions threaten their core values, reputation, and even existence due to misconduct or a failure to uphold ethical standards. It can be in form of fraud, diverting of public resources, pricing-fixing, environmental damage, sexual misconduct, breaching of safety, bullying, cheating, etc.

Development

Development equates quantitative changes of existing structure into differentiated and more advanced structures in relation to substantive issues of quality of human life. Tadoro (1985: 108) explains development as:

a multi-dimensional process, involving the organization and reorientation of the entire economic and social system...an improvement of income and output, radical changes in institutional, social and administrative structures as well as in popular attitudes, customs and beliefs.

Development is the actualization of an implicit potentiality. In other words, it is the process of developing a pattern that ensures growth and development physically, psychologically and

socially. It is a widely participatory process of directed social change in society intended to bring about both social and material advancement for the majority. This is a situation that facilitates the gaining of greater control by the people over their environment (Olewe, 1995: 4). For the purpose of this paper, Tadoro's perspective is adapted as the working definition.

Sustainable Development

It is an approach to both growth and human development with the aim of meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (United Nations General Assembly Report UNGAR, 1987). However, defining sustainable development based on the above definition shows that it has embraced the concept of sustainability, which is a normative concept (a long-term goal). The strategy of balancing the needs of the economy, environment, and society is evident. It explains that the nature, life support, and community need to be sustained while people, economy, and society have to be developed (Awopeju et.al, 2022). The UNGAR's (1987) definition is being adopted in this paper.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper is anchored on the theory of utilitarianism. The proponents of the theory are Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill in their works "*An Introduction to the principles of Morals and Legislations*" and "*On Liberty*." Historically, of the great utilitarian thinkers were deeply concerned with political philosophy and social reform. As regards utilitarians, the main end product is the advancement of well-being. This might seem to suggest a simple approach to political philosophy, evaluate of all political actions, institutions, and arrangements solely based on how well they advance aggregate well-being. To the utilitarians, the rational standards of a man on the whole should be the greatest good of the greatest number (Sabine and Thornson, 1973). The theory advocates that the best adopted mechanism for governance is considered the most ethical and proper choice when a significant number of people are made happy and benefited by it. Utilitarianism believes that an action is right if it results in the happiness of the greatest number of people in society or a group. It is an ethics' consequentialist theory that states that actions are morally right to the extent that they tend to portray the greatest good for the greatest number.

The theory is relevant to the present study because it gives an insight why and when citizens should generally adhere to laws, comply with the consequences of political procedures, and generally engage in patterns of behaviour even when some instances of doing so do maximize (or perhaps even promote) well-being. In other words, if things are properly done in society, a significant number of people will benefit from it. This assertion suggests that development is synonymous with the promotion of well-being of the citizens. When actions or policies are rightly implemented by the government and the citizens comply with the laws of the state, it promotes ethical values and also advances the real development both now and in the future of the Nigerian state.

POLITICS, ETHICAL FAILURE AND SOCIO-POLITICAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

Much has been said by scholars in various writings on the ethical crisis and crisis of development in Nigeria. Aman-Ndu (1998: 3) opines those ethical problems among Nigerian political leaders manifest in many ways, such as reckless pursuit of power, electoral fraud, abuse of power, nepotism, corruption and embezzlement, among others. He explains that there is a relationship between the reckless pursuit of power, electoral fraud, abuse of power and corruption, and the underdevelopment of the masses and the nation. Nigeria's political life is characterized by reckless pursuit of power, in which power is sought at all cost and by all means. Ake (1989: 49) argues that the Nigeria historical circumstances has produced elites that cannot function because of the lack of identity or integrity, thus adopting the inherited political repression from colonial rule. As a result of the inherent sense of insecurity in office, the political leaders have placed high premium on power.

Obviously from the foregoing analysis, Nigerian political leaders are so desperate to capture and retain power at all cost. Dudley (1973: 47) notes that “where political leaders take a zero-sum view of politics, there would be an increasing use of coercive methods by the political elites to maintain support and bargaining weight.” Ihonvbere (1995) describes the politicians and political elites of the First Republic as people who did very little to sow the seeds of democracy, accountability and political responsibility. Rather, they promoted violence, intolerance, criminality, corruption, waste, inefficiency, mismanagement, political thuggery and a general lack of vision. In the same vein, he describes politics as warfare. It was normless to the core. All known rules of competition were thrown overboard while thuggery, corruption, intimidation, lies and diversions became the order of the day (Ihonvbere, 1995). Military leaders who took over and wielded mantle of leadership for a long time in the country also demonstrated reckless use of power.

Another ethical failure is the area of corruption and lack of accountability. Corruption relates to the perversion of integrity or state of affairs through bribery, favour or moral depravity. It involves the injection of additional, but improper transaction aimed at changing the normal course of event and altering judgment and position of trust. It occurs when the behaviour of functionaries brings about dishonesty, unfaithfulness or unfulfillment situations (Johnston, 19997). Corruption has become a cliché of political demagoguery and public gossips to petty-traders, clerics as well frequently talk about it. Corruption remains the most talked about malaise in Nigeria even up to the present day despite the existence of many anti-corruption institutions, such as Code of Conduct Bureau (CCB), Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), and Independent Corrupt Practices and other related Offences Commission (ICPC).

Ethical misdemeanor is common among the Nigeria bureaucratic class as it is with political leaders. Ake (2000) reflection of the African situation goes thus:

With minor exception, public servants are not always objectives, administration is often personalized, attitudinal orientations are more often than not diffused rather than specific, particularistic rather than universalistic, ascriptive rather than achievement-focused. Rulers are not always taken seriously sometimes they are applied *ad-hoc* and worse yet, discarded altogether according to convenience. The failing of our public service seems no less than failings of ethics and morality.

The above Ake’s submission regarding the attitudes of the bureaucratic class in Nigeria reveals how ethics has been abused and has been turned into whim and caprices of the officers at the echelon of the public service. Ikoiwak (1986: 86) regrets that during the First Republic of Nigeria, civil service was, to a large extent, free from corruption, but unfortunately it became emersed in corruption during the military era. He attributes the alarming rate at which corruption prevails in the Nigerian society and the civil service to the increase in revenue from oil as well as the multi-functional role of the civil service in the increasing socio-economic development. In the Fourth Republic, the rate of corruption has increased due to lack of effective governance and weak institutional framework. For instance, Price water house Coopers (2015) indicates that corruption could cost Nigeria up to 37% of her Gross Domestic Product by 2030 if not combated. This may be due to lack of effective governance and its institutions. The weak capacity of governmental institutions is traced to inadequate funding, inadequate skilled labour, obsolete practices which are associated with lack of effective governance, thus weakening the citizen’s confidence in governance (Ugoani, 2022).

The serious ethical crisis is not limited to the bureaucratic and political classes. The Nigerian populace also shares in this ethical crisis. This situation has made it possible for the ethical lapses being experienced in the country, thus putting the masses at the mercy of the political and bureaucratic elites. Apart from general indiscipline that permeates the whole society, the masses are also tolerant of the ethical lapses of the elites. This allows the culture of indiscipline and corruption to be established in the society. In Nigeria, both the elites and masses readily break the law or exploit situations to the detriment of the country as a whole.

A number of Nigerian citizens engage in smuggling which robs the nation of import duties. Many are also into drug peddling and drug abuse. In recent times, there is high incidence of importation or manufacturing of fake drugs by Nigerians, sometimes in collaboration with some fraudulent foreigners. This has led to the untimely death of many people. There has also been series of impersonation, violent intra-party crisis, high incidence of cultism on our campuses, fake doctrines and religious deceit, etc.

ETHICAL LAPSES AND CONTROL MECHANISMS IN NIGERIA

It must be noted that the great dilemma in the country is that both the government and the general populace are aware of these ethical lapses without being able to find solution to them. While the citizens always lament this situation, government has continued to look for appropriate solutions. This explains why there have been legal and administrative provisions over the years for controlling ethical lapses in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, the need to provide the necessary mechanism for controlling corruption has been recognized for a very long time. An ordinance to establish a criminal code against corruption by public officers was first enacted for part of Lagos and the southern province. This type of solution has been criticized by Nkom (1986: 227-228) who stated that "it is a continuation of the idealistic campaign against corruption which is devoid of any practical solution to the problem, but it is also on a mystified notion about the nature and cause of corruption in Nigeria."

Remarkably, the government of President Shehu Shagari introduced the Ethical Revolution that was expected to guide the behaviour of the citizens and to encourage self-discipline. The revolution was expected to have a long-term decisive impact, to move this nation steadily and permanently in a discernable new direction of self-reliance and dedication to excellent leadership, in discipline, in orderliness, in hard work, in honesty, in morality, in mutual respect and tolerance, along with the submission of our citizenry to God in national affairs and personal pursuit. However, in retrospection of Shagari's Ethical Revolution and Obasanjo Jaji Declaration, little or nothing was achieved towards solving ethical crisis in Nigeria, particularly when leaders were not honest. The Corrupt Practices and Other related Offences Act 2000 of the Federal Republic of Nigeria was devised by President Obasanjo to tackle the problem of corruption. Essentially, the Act established the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), which is meant to investigate cases of corruption against officials and impose punishment on any officials found guilty. However, since its establishment in 2000, of all the numerous cases handled by the ICPC, only very few convictions have been won. In a study carried out by Awopeju (2021), ICPC, as at 2017 had received about 15,000 petition and was able to secure 88 convictions since its existence coupled with the seventeen public officials sent to the Commission by the president. Thus far, only one or two people have been found guilty. The Commission had been politicized and has become a tool in the hands of the bourgeois ruling class for threatening political opponents. Hence, Nigeria's major attempt of combating corruption in the Fourth Republic has suffered a setback as the ICPC, the moral weapon, is being consumed by allegation of corruption. The implication of this is that corruption still thrives in Nigeria.

Ab initio, one of the major factors militating against the success of the Act is its opposition by the political class. When the bill was submitted to the National Assembly for approval, for almost one year the bill was not passed by the National Assembly. Therefore, when it was used against the leadership of the National Assembly in 2002 and 2003, the Assembly quickly presented an amendment to the bill and began to imbue themselves with some impunity (Bello-Imam, 2005).

In order to confront and complement the fight against corruption, the Economic and Finance Crimes Commission (EFCC) was established in 2002. It would appear however that the anti-corruption laws were politically motivated to fulfill a promise and to make Nigerians feel that "a messiah has come to judgement." Since the enactment of the Act, there has been a spate of and heightened tempo of corruption in the country. This implies that in spite of the anti-corruption laws, Nigerians have not shown any improvement in ethical and moral dimensions.

Apart from the mechanisms mentioned above, other institutions that are meant to combat misconduct are the Police, Code of Conduct Tribunal, the Nigerian Financial Intelligence Unit, the Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, Public Complaints Commission, Federal High Court, Federal Ministry of Justice, Bureau of Public Procurement, Special Control Unit against Money Laundering, and Technical Unit on Governance and Anti-corruption Reform. However, these mechanisms or provisions are negligible in addressing the ethical problems or crises in Nigeria. Corroborating this position, Otong (1986: 176) observes that “the impact of these provisions in checking official corruption in the country is very much in doubt because they are subsystems within a corrupt system.” He notes that the impacts of the provisions on officials’ corruption have been negligible. He argues further that the constitutional provisions cannot by themselves solve the problem of corruption in Nigeria.

IMPLICATIONS OF ETHICAL CRISES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

Despite the fact that Nigeria is blessed with abundant human, natural and material resources, the country remains underdeveloped. Corruption remains one of the ethical problems and a major factor responsible for Nigeria’s underdevelopment. When the other dimensions of the ethical problem in Nigeria are examined, one hardly wonders why the country is not developed. Therefore, this section examines the implications of ethical crisis for sustainable development in Nigeria.

The sustainable development cuts across socio-economic and environmental issues target for development. There are 17 targets of 2030 agenda for sustainable development as announced by United Nation Development Programme (UNDP). They are no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, industry, innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action, life below water, life on land, peace, justice and strong institutions, and partnership for the goals. These are Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that have become unrealizable due to unethical crisis in Nigeria.

For instance, many Nigerians do not have the right attitude to work. This affects work decency and the production which make for economic growth. One of the targets of the sustainable development is decent and economic growth. Ethics crisis has affected this target because there is lack of commitment to work among public servant, just as there is divided loyalty. The sense of punctuality is low among many of the public servants, and the attitude to work is very low. Hence, there is low productivity. Soley (1989) notes that certain expectations are inherent in paid employment. While employees expect adequate remuneration for the work they do, the employer, on the other hand, expects loyalty and commitment to the employing organization. In Nigeria, both government and workers fail to meet their own aspects of the bargains. Nepotism, political-patronage and forms of corruption present a situation whereby round pegs are put into square holes. Many hours are lost to strikes because of inability of government to provide the benefits accruable to workers, until strikes are embarked upon. Money that ought to be spent in prosecuting development efforts are embezzled, diverted and mismanaged. Political and administration officers readily connived with foreigners and contractors to defraud the state and inflict hardship on the masses by denying them of expected services.

Another implication of the ethical crisis for sustainable development is the nation’s perennial inability to conduct free and fair election. Alli & Kwaja (2014: 302) posited that “Nigerian state has not surprisingly been hardly promotive of both democracy and development and that electoral processes have been marred by rigging, violence and money. All the elections conducted during the Fourth Republic suggest that Nigeria’s democracy is still in transition, yet to be consolidated.” The aftermath of this is the election rigging and electoral violence. There is thus a growing fear and uncertainty that the whole democratic experiment may collapse because of ethical crisis such as impunity, greed, corruption, utter disregard for the people, and selfish-interests, which are problems associated with electoral processes. Nigeria is far from democratic consolidation

because of her inability to ensure a sustainable political development. In view of this, Nwankwo (Supra Note 8 cited in Ayoade et al, 2014: 303-304) stated thus:

Genuine democracy is not and cannot be anchored on a political system where the party in power declares that elections are equivalent to war: that it must win at all costs even when popular opinion points to the contrary; where internal democracy (in the political parties) is absent and where selection has replaced the processes of free and fair election. We cannot lay claim to democracy (its consolidation) when elections are manifestly rigged in favour of the party in power or particular candidates; we cannot lay claim to democracy when internal democracy is virtually absent, where candidates with questionable credentials are forcefully imposed on the people; where the people's votes do not count in the choice of their leaders; when the electoral body colludes with the political party in power to rig elections; when democratic pretensions denominate the political violence, fraud, thuggery and recklessness.

The contention of Nwankwo regarding democracy portrays some of the characteristics (such as do-or-die, imposition of candidates on people, vote not count, collusion of the electoral body in rigging of election for the party in power, etc.) associated with an unethical crisis in Nigeria, which may hinder sustainable political development.. All these always lead to crises of legitimacy and of injustice among our leaders. Election rigging has virtually become part of democratic government in Nigeria (Awopeju, 2011; Awopeju, 2009; Animashaun, 2022; Awopeju et al, 2024). Although there has been legislation on corrupt practices in the electoral process through electoral reforms, the frameworks have been, feebly and half-heartedly enforced. The result is that successive regimes in Nigeria have been enmeshed in a legitimacy crisis. The ethical crisis in Nigeria has inflicted several political costs. It accentuates ethnic conflict and violence, undermines the legitimacy of the government, and weakens political institutions. It heightens political repression and coercive force, which prevents the maintenance of political order. This situation has created so much disenchantment in the Nigerian polity that some ethnic nationalities are perpetually calling for their sovereignty, while others are agitating for restructuring and a sovereign national conference, where the national question can be discussed.

In addition, the current education structure that is supposed to be a useful tool for transmitting all-around wisdom expected to bring positive change, has failed due to ethical crisis. Ike & Onyia (2024) stated that it has failed because education has moved from its primary purpose as the basis of a cultured society to the space for competitive commercial enterprise. Besides, the Nigerian education sector is riddled with unethical crises such as selling of marks, cultism, and examination malpractices. All these ethical misdemeanors make the education sector unworkable, thus making education one of the deluded SDGs in Nigeria.

Furthermore, corruption, which is one of the ethical crises, is a serious bane of sustainable development goals. In other words, the ethical crisis and the crisis of development rocking Nigeria are centred on corruption. The effect of corruption prevents the significant realization of the SDGs. It preserves the manifestation of closed politics, such as preventing development, suppressing political opposition, generating increased resentment and violence, as well as perpetuating and widening social and economic division. These situations therefore have led to societal strain and prevention of cohesion, prevention of proper adjustment of policy, and diversion of public resources, gains prioritization in the short term over long-term benefits, neglect of environmental degradation, contributing to conditions of private affluence and public squalor.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the issue of ethical crisis vis-à-vis sustainable development in Nigeria. The paper reveals that ethical crises or failures inherent in Nigeria are corruption, politics as warfare, reckless pursuit of power, lack of accountability, personalization of administration,

diffusion of attitudinal orientations, electoral fraud, etc. The finding further reveals that ethical crisis portends a number of implications for sustainable development in Nigeria. These include; divided loyalty, which affects work decency, low productivity, inability to conduct free and fair elections, corruption etc, which make the actual realization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) difficult to achieve. Applying utilitarianism theory to the findings of the study, the findings disagree with the thrust of the theory which states that the main end product is the advancement of well-being of the citizens.

Therefore, the paper concluded that sustainable development, economic stability and political stability still remain elusive in the system due to unethical values exhibited by the Nigerian citizens. It is important to note that sustainable development is possible only when ethical values are built on the foundation of real development. Based on this assertion, the following recommendations are suggested.

One, there is a need for well-meaning Nigerians to champion enduring reforms in the country to begin to focus on and mobilize the civil society towards a new ethical agenda. The current trend is tolerant of and encourages corruption. Reforms that ensure that the society serves as the custodian of national ethics, and that both leaders and followers can be sanctioned for similar offences. Two, for the SDGs' potentials to be actualized, ethical behaviour should be promoted by individuals and the government so that they can internalize the value of integrity. Good ethical behaviour requires public education and campaigns so that citizens can be aware of the values and unethical behaviour contrary to Nigeria's development. Three, Nigeria needs a visionary and honest leader to transform the vision of the SDGs into reality. Apart from this, the leader must be able to lead by example. In other words, he should promote the ethical values in society by himself first, then the followers should emulate the gesture by following the examples exhibited by the leader. Four, ethical regimes should be strengthened to deter ethical breaches or crises. The laws that uphold ethical behaviour should be strengthened. This will deter unethical behaviours among the citizens and it will instill fear into the citizens. Five, there is a need to redefine the purpose and nature of the Nigerian state. The nature of the Nigerian state has created serious lapses that encourage unethical crises and a situation where nothing works. Making the system works requires adoption of strong institutions to achieve desired results. Therefore, in building strong national and regional institutions the Nigeria's anti-corruption agencies should be empowered and insulated from political influence. Six, coupled with the redefining of the Nigerian state, there should be an encouragement of increased institutional collaboration between law enforcement agencies and anti-corruption agencies in order to deter the unethical behaviour in Nigeria. Seven, Nigerian citizens should exhibit the culture of hard work and the culture of "omoluabi" (culture of a good citizen). Hard work is one of the requirements for achieving SDGs. The goals need human efforts for their actualization.

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