Good Governance: A Viable Option for Social Justice in Nigeria

Olotu Gbenga
Department of Social Studies, Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo

Abstract

This article argues that good governance is crucial for achieving social justice in Nigeria, where persistent inequality, inadequate service delivery, and weak institutions hinder progress. It explores how principles such as accountability, transparency, the rule of law, and participatory governance can ensure fair access to resources and empower marginalised groups, including women, youth, and persons with disabilities. By drawing on concepts such as the Social Contract and Participatory Governance, the article links effective governance to enhanced trust, legitimacy, and citizen inclusion. It highlights the negative impact of corruption, ethno-religious tensions, and institutional fragility on justice delivery while emphasising the importance of legal reforms, anti-corruption efforts, and inclusive policies. The article also emphasises the importance of governance in enhancing education, healthcare, and infrastructure, advocating for the use of technology to improve efficiency and accessibility. In conclusion, it calls for practical reforms, civic participation, and stronger institutions to build a fairer and more equitable Nigerian society, positioning good governance not just as an administrative goal but as a pathway to social justice.

Keywords: Good Governance, Social Justice, Nigeria, Accountability, Public Service Delivery

Introduction

Governance refers to the process by which authority is exercised in managing a country's social, economic, and political resources. It critically shapes societal development through policy formulation, resource allocation, and institutional functioning (Islam, 2018). In Nigeria, a diverse and resource-rich nation facing significant developmental challenges, governance is pivotal. Its quality directly affects social equity, economic prosperity, and national stability. Historically, Nigeria's governance has struggled with accountability, transparency, and effective leadership, impeding progress toward social justice and inclusive development.

Understanding Nigeria's governance requires context: Since independence in 1960, the country has alternated between civilian and military rule, with governance often undermined by corruption, inefficiency, and political instability. The inherited post-colonial bureaucracy was ill-suited to manage the complex dynamics of a multi-ethnic society, resulting in elitism, ethnic and regional biases, and centralised power that alienates many citizens. The failure to uphold sound governance has manifested in poor service delivery, widespread poverty, and social inequalities, challenging Nigeria's democratic and developmental goals (Omotosho, 2015).

Central to improving governance is the concept of good governance, defined by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1997) as the exercise of political, economic, and administrative authority in a transparent, accountable, participatory, and equitable manner. Good governance embodies principles such as the rule of law, responsiveness, inclusiveness, effectiveness, and efficiency, ensuring that public institutions serve all citizens and foster sustainable development.

Social justice, on the other hand, refers to the equitable distribution of resources, opportunities, and privileges, as it is closely linked to governance (Rawls, 1999; Fraser, 2008). It demands equal access to services such as education, healthcare, and legal protection, empowering marginalised groups to fully participate politically, economically, and socially. In Nigeria, social justice is a critical necessity due to the persistent inequalities and exclusion that exist.

The connection between governance and social justice is stark in Nigeria, where governance failures perpetuate injustice and marginalisation. Colonial legacies established a

centralised governance system that poorly accommodated Nigeria's ethnic diversity. Subsequent regimes, especially military governments, contributed to institutional decay, while civilian administrations have often been plagued by corruption and nepotism (Omotosho, 2015; Ugben & Egobueze, 2021).

Currently, governance challenges impede social justice. Corruption diverts resources from development and essential services (Transparency International, 2023). Public services are inefficient and inequitable, disproportionately disadvantaging rural and marginalised communities. The judiciary, responsible for upholding the rule of law, suffers from inefficiency and bias, limiting access to justice. Governance structures remain top-down and exclusionary, restricting citizen participation and fostering distrust (NDU, 2025).

These deficits produce persistent inequalities, concentrating wealth and development in specific regions and social groups while others remain marginalised. Women, youth, and persons with disabilities face significant barriers despite constitutional provisions for inclusion (Ademuyiwa & Adeniran, 2020). These inequalities fuel social instability, conflict and hinder economic productivity, threatening Nigeria's democratic consolidation and sustainable development.

The core problem this study addresses is the persistent inequality, poor service delivery, and lack of people-centred governance, which are linked to injustice and governance failures. Despite reform efforts, Nigeria has yet to fully realise the accountability, transparency, and inclusiveness required for social justice. Addressing governance shortcomings is crucial for equitable development and social cohesion.

By emphasising governance's role in securing justice, empowering citizens, and delivering effective services, this paper contributes to the discourse on Nigeria's development. Its findings aim to guide policymakers, civil society, and development partners toward strengthening governance for fairness, inclusion, and sustainable progress. Ultimately, good governance is indispensable for building a just and equitable society in Nigeria.

Understanding Good Governance

Good governance is a fundamental pillar of sustainable development, democratic consolidation, and equitable public service delivery. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP, 2009) defines it as institutions that are participatory, consensus-oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective, efficient, equitable, and inclusive, all operating under the rule of law. These interconnected principles ensure that public institutions manage affairs and resources responsibly while safeguarding human rights.

Central to good governance is accountability, which requires that public officials be held accountable for their actions and remain responsive to the sources of their authority through mechanisms such as legislative oversight and electoral systems (Mulgan, 2000). Transparency complements accountability by requiring openness in decision-making, budgeting, and procurement processes, allowing stakeholders timely access to reliable information (Transparency International, 2023). The rule of law ensures the impartial enforcement of legal frameworks, particularly fundamental rights, supported by an independent judiciary that is free from political interference (World Bank, 2007). Participation, both direct and indirect, empowers citizens in policymaking and must be genuine and inclusive, ensuring marginalised groups, including women and youth, have a voice (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012).

To evaluate good governance in public administration, scholars employ various indicators. The World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) highlight six dimensions: voice and accountability, political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption (Kaufmann, Kraay & Mastruzzi, 2010). Government effectiveness is reflected in the

quality of public services, the strength and competence of the bureaucracy, and its ability to function independently of political influence, all of which are supported by efficient administration and merit-based recruitment. The control of corruption is critical, as corruption erodes public trust, distorts resource allocation, and disproportionately harms vulnerable populations (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016). Other measures include electoral integrity, institutional responsiveness, fiscal transparency, and citizen engagement, with tools such as performance audits and open data systems further enhancing accountability and transparency (OECD, 2021).

In Nigeria, these principles and indicators reveal a complex governance landscape marked by significant challenges. Despite a constitutional democracy with formal checks and balances, institutional weaknesses, corruption, and limited citizen participation persist. The 2019 Ibrahim Index of African Governance ranked Nigeria 34th out of 54 countries, noting declines in accountability, transparency, and protection of civil rights (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2019). Political patronage and weak enforcement often compromise public institutions (Fagbadebo, 2019). Corruption remains widespread, particularly in public procurement and law enforcement, with Nigeria placed 145th out of 180 countries in Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2023). Although agencies like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) have secured high-profile convictions, systemic corruption endures due to political interference and judicial weaknesses.

Citizen participation is notably constrained, particularly in rural areas where access to civic education and information is limited. Socio-economic inequalities along ethno-religious lines further restrict inclusive governance (Ikelegbe, 2005). However, there are positive developments: civil society organisations and the media serve critical watchdog roles, while digital innovations, such as the Open Treasury Portal, enhance fiscal transparency and accountability.

Together, these insights illustrate the core elements of good governance, the frameworks used to assess it, and Nigeria's ongoing struggle to realise its principles in practice fully.

Understanding Social Justice

Social justice encompasses the equitable and fair distribution of resources, rights, and opportunities within society. Rawls (1999) describes justice as the "first virtue of social institutions," envisioning a just society where inequalities are arranged to benefit the least advantaged and where everyone has fair access to opportunities. Practically, social justice entails dismantling systemic barriers to education, healthcare, and employment, as well as addressing structural inequalities rooted in class, gender, ethnicity, and disability (Sen, 2009). It is closely tied to redistributive justice, ensuring that public goods and services reach marginalised groups, especially in societies burdened by historical exclusion.

Crucially, social justice prioritises equity over mere equality. While equality implies uniform treatment, equity acknowledges differentiated needs and historical disadvantages, necessitating affirmative action and targeted interventions to level the playing field (Fagbadebo, 2019).

There is a profound and reciprocal link between governance and social justice. Good governance creates the institutional framework necessary for realising social justice through inclusive policymaking, equitable budgeting, effective service delivery, and legal protections. Conversely, advancing social justice strengthens governance by fostering social cohesion, political legitimacy, and public trust (Grindle, 2007).

In Nigeria, poor governance has exacerbated social injustice. Inadequate investments in sectors such as education and healthcare have deepened regional disparities, notably in the North-East and rural areas, worsening poverty and intergenerational inequality. Corruption further drains resources

intended for social safety nets, weakening the state's redistributive capacity.

However, good governance can promote social justice by institutionalising participatory budgeting, social audits, and rights-based policies. Nigeria's Social Investment Programmes (NSIPs), including N-Power and Conditional Cash Transfers, exemplify how governance interventions can target multidimensional poverty and inequality despite ongoing implementation challenges (World Bank, 2020).

Ultimately, achieving social justice requires not only distributive policies but also transforming governance structures to be more inclusive, transparent, and accountable. The synergy between governance and social justice is essential for Nigeria's national development, peacebuilding, and democratic resilience.

Good Governance and Securing Justice

Nigeria's justice system operates within a constitutional framework that guarantees the separation of powers, judicial independence, and the protection of fundamental rights, as enshrined in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999). The legal system is pluralistic, blending English common law, customary law, and Islamic law in northern states, with key institutions including the Supreme Court, Court of Appeal, Federal and State High Courts, as well as customary and Sharia courts (Nwosu, 2017). The National Judicial Council oversees judicial appointments and discipline, while the Legal Aid Council of Nigeria (LACoN) provides free legal services to indigent citizens. However, overlapping jurisdictions and system complexity often hinder the timely delivery of justice.

Governance structures are critical in upholding human rights and the rule of law, ensuring the judiciary's independence and institutional accountability. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) promotes human rights protection and dispute mediation but is hampered by limited funding and political interference (Okafor, 2009). The autonomy and transparency of law enforcement agencies directly affect the credibility of justice systems; where political manipulation occurs, the rule of law is undermined.

Despite legal frameworks, the delivery of justice continues to face persistent challenges. Corruption—manifested as bribery and case delays—erodes public confidence, with the judiciary often perceived as one of Nigeria's most corrupt institutions (UNODC, 2019). Courts struggle with inefficiency and backlogs due to structural constraints, inadequate funding, and insufficient personnel. Bias and discrimination based on class, ethnicity, and gender further compromise impartiality, disproportionately disadvantaging women, rural residents, and people experiencing poverty (Ajomo & Okagbue, 1991). Political interference also threatens judicial independence, as exemplified by events such as the 2019 suspension of Chief Justice Walter Onnoghen.

Anti-corruption institutions, such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), have achieved notable convictions, particularly among high-profile officials. Nonetheless, selective enforcement and political patronage often weaken their impact (Transparency International, 2023). Legal reforms, such as the Public Procurement Act (2007) and the Freedom of Information Act (2011), promote transparency; however, their effectiveness depends heavily on sustained political will and institutional integrity. Upholding the rule of law, where no one is above the law, remains a crucial challenge for restoring public trust and social cohesion (Steele, 2023).

Access to justice is central to good governance, requiring both legal protections and effective delivery mechanisms. The Legal Aid Council offers pro bono services but is under-resourced and limited in rural outreach (Choukroune, 2015). Decentralisation efforts such as mobile and customary courts aim to reduce geographic barriers but often suffer from poor infrastructure and local elite influence (Okafor, 2019). Civil society organisations, including the CLEEN Foundation and Access to

Justice Nigeria, enhance legal literacy through grassroots education and paralegal training, empowering citizens with knowledge of their rights.

Bridging the urban-rural justice divide requires integrated reforms, including expanding legal aid, strengthening judicial training, utilising local languages in courts, and leveraging technology such as e-justice platforms. These efforts, grounded in sound governance principles, are crucial for securing justice, enhancing institutional credibility, and ensuring equitable access to legal remedies throughout Nigeria.

Good Governance and Empowerment of Citizens

Good governance is instrumental in empowering citizens across economic, political, and social dimensions, fostering inclusive policies, equitable resource distribution, and active participation. This multifaceted empowerment is vital for sustainable development and democratic resilience in Nigeria.

Economically, governance ensures that policies and programmes effectively address poverty and unemployment, enhancing citizens' capacities to contribute to growth. The National Social Investment Programmes (NSIPs), introduced in 2016, exemplify such efforts by targeting low-income groups, youth, and women through initiatives like N-Power, Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT), TraderMoni, and the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP) (World Bank, 2020). Despite some progress, challenges persist in targeting accuracy, political patronage, and programme sustainability. The 2021 National Bureau of Statistics report highlights enduring regional disparities, with the North-East and North-West regions bearing the highest poverty burdens (NBS, 2023). Good governance is essential for fostering inclusive economic growth. It involves creating an enabling environment through transparent policies, accountable institutions, and the rule of law. Supporting entrepreneurship and innovation, particularly in underserved communities, is key to reducing poverty and inequality (SMEDAN, 2020). Transparent budgeting and fiscal decentralisation further facilitate equitable economic participation.

Politically, empowerment involves enabling citizens to influence decision-making, participate in governance, and hold leaders accountable for their actions. Governance advances this through electoral reforms and civic education. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has introduced innovations such as the Bi-Modal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and electronic result transmission to bolster electoral integrity and trust. However, issues like vote-buying, electoral violence, and disenfranchisement continue to undermine democratic processes. NGOs such as YIAGA Africa and the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) have enhanced civic awareness, particularly among young people and rural voters. Legislative reforms, such as the Not Too Young to Run Act (2018), lower the age barriers to political office, encouraging youth participation. However, patriarchal norms, elite domination, and insecurity hinder broader political inclusion, underscoring the need for governance to promote more inclusive legislative consultations, budgeting, and local planning (Mohammed & Oruonye, 2022).

Socially, empowerment entails dismantling systemic barriers to education, healthcare, and information access, thereby enabling individuals to lead autonomous and productive lives. Nigeria's Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act (2004) mandates free primary and junior secondary education. Yet, the country still has over 10 million out-of-school children, disproportionately in northern regions affected by insecurity and early marriage (UNESCO, 2022). Healthcare access has improved slightly through programmes like the Basic Health Care Provision Fund (BHCPF) and the National Health Insurance Authority (NHIA) Act (2022). However, rural areas continue to face significant maternal mortality and service gaps (WHO, 2021). Digital technologies and the

Freedom of Information Act (2011) promote information access, yet digital divides, censorship, and misinformation limit empowerment in marginalised communities.

Furthermore, good governance frameworks aim to address the historical exclusion of women, youth, and persons with disabilities (PWDs). Women hold only 3.6% of seats in the 9th National Assembly despite nearly half the population being female (IPU, 2021). National policies, such as the Gender Policy (2006) and the pending Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill, aim to improve women's education and financial access, as well as enhance their political representation (Enworo & Njemanze, 2022; Agaigbe & Akuraga, 2024). Youth empowerment, as outlined in the National Youth Policy (2019–2023), promotes skills, civic participation, and innovation; however, funding and implementation gaps persist. The Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities Act (2018) and the National Commission for Persons with Disabilities represent steps toward disability inclusion, though stigma and enforcement challenges endure (Lang & Upah, 2008). A rights-based governance approach that institutionalises affirmative action, inclusive budgeting, and participatory monitoring is vital to mainstreaming the concerns of marginalised populations.

Collectively, these economic, political, and social facets of citizen empowerment, anchored in good governance, are essential for inclusive national development and the deepening of democracy in Nigeria.

Effective Delivery of Public Services

Effective public service delivery is a cornerstone of good governance, ensuring that citizens have access to essential services, including healthcare, education, and infrastructure. The World Bank (2004) emphasises that institutional integrity, clear policy frameworks, and efficient resource allocation are vital for service quality, accessibility, and affordability.

In Nigeria, public services are primarily delivered through federal, state, and local governments. However, disparities in service quality and reach persist, particularly between urban and rural areas. Affordability remains a significant concern, especially in healthcare and education. Despite policies such as the Free Maternal and Child Health Programme (FMCH) and Universal Basic Education (UBE), hidden fees and inadequate funding often render essential services unaffordable for people with low incomes (Uzochukwu et al., 2015).

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has emerged as a transformative tool for enhancing public service delivery. E-governance, digital platforms, and data systems can streamline processes, reduce corruption, and increase access to services. In Nigeria, initiatives such as the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS) have reduced payroll fraud in the federal civil service (Musa, 2022). The National Identity Management Commission (NIMC) introduced digital ID enrolment systems to improve access to social services. In health, platforms like District Health Information Software (DHIS2) are used to collect and analyse service delivery data, informing policy decisions and improving accountability (NPHCDA, 2020). Similarly, e-learning platforms and digital classrooms were scaled up during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure continuity in education. However, digital divides remain a challenge. Access to electricity, internet, and digital literacy are significantly lower in rural and underserved communities, limiting the impact of ICT-driven reforms (GSMA, 2020).

Several entrenched bottlenecks hinder effective public service delivery in Nigeria:

Bureaucratic inefficiency: The Nigerian civil service is often characterised by over-centralisation, weak coordination, and procedural delays. Red tape stifles innovation and reduces responsiveness to local needs (Ugben & Egobueze, 2021).

Corruption and mismanagement: Embezzlement and procurement fraud divert funds meant for service provision. The Health Sector Corruption Report (SERAP, 2020) revealed

widespread misallocation of funds, inflated contracts, and ghost workers in public hospitals.

Funding gaps: Many public services suffer from chronic underfunding. In 2022, education and health received only 7.2% and 5.1% of the national budget, respectively—far below the 26% and 15% benchmarks recommended by UNESCO and WHO (WHO, 2021). Inconsistent budget releases and poor fiscal planning further compound these gaps.

Capacity constraints: Many public sector institutions lack skilled personnel, adequate infrastructure, and modern tools for efficient service provision. Teacher and healthcare worker shortages, particularly in rural areas, severely impact service quality.

Despite these challenges, specific initiatives demonstrate the potential of strategic governance:

Health: Anambra State's integrated Primary Health Care (PHC) governance model consolidated vertical health programmes under one administrative framework, leading to improved immunisation coverage (UNICEF Nigeria, 2021).

Education: Edo State's Basic Education Sector Transformation (EdoBEST) programme introduced technology-enabled teaching, teacher training, and monitoring, reaching over 300,000 pupils within three years (World Bank, 2021).

Infrastructure: Kaduna State's Urban Renewal Programme implemented transparent procurement and digital monitoring systems to track progress in roads, hospitals, and schools, increasing public confidence and donor support

These examples highlight the importance of strategic planning, effective leadership, and citizen-focused governance in achieving tangible improvements in public service outcomes.

Recommendations

In light of the persistent challenges facing governance, accountability, and inclusive development in Nigeria, the following recommendations are proposed to foster institutional resilience, social equity, and sustainable progress

- Strengthen institutions through reforms that promote transparency and accountability.
- Decentralise governance and promote participatory policymaking.
- Enforce anti-corruption laws independently and consistently.
- Prioritise equitable service delivery in education, healthcare, and infrastructure.
- Institutionalise affirmative action for marginalised populations.

Conclusion

Good governance is essential for achieving social justice in Nigeria. Persistent issues such as corruption and exclusionary practices hinder equitable development and erode public trust. However, adherence to principles like transparency, accountability, rule of law, and inclusive participation can address systemic injustices. Evidence from local and international contexts demonstrates that people-centred governance enhances service delivery, protects rights, and empowers citizens. Therefore, sustained political commitment, institutional reforms, and active citizen engagement are crucial to transforming governance into a catalyst for justice and national unity.

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