Understanding good governance: voices of rural people in South-Western Nigeria

Oluwakemi Damola Adejumo-Ayibiowu (a) *

(a) Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Development Studies, University of South Africa, Muckleneuk, Pretoria, South Africa

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 01 October 2023
Received in rev. form 28 Nov. 2023
Accepted 12 December 2023

Keywords:
Good governance, bad governance, rural development, neoliberalism, culture, Participatory Action Research (PAR), local voices.

JEL Classification:
H00, H10, H11

ABSTRACT

Scholars and policymakers widely acknowledge the critical role of good governance in rural development and poverty reduction. Unfortunately, decades of good governance reforms have not reduced poverty in Nigeria. But what is good governance? The problem is that the working definition and popularized principles of good governance do not actually emanate from the poor. Moreover, there is a lack of contextualization of the concept of good governance within the Nigerian context. Rather, donors’ institutional understanding is universalized through the imposition of a good governance agenda. This study aims to bridge this gap by examining the concept of good governance through the lens of rural communities in south-west Nigeria. Understanding good governance from the viewpoint of local citizens, who are the recipients of governance reforms, is vital for effective targeted reform. The study is based on the premise that communities possess a deep understanding of their own social circumstances and possess the capacity to express their unique insights. Employing Participatory Action Research (PAR) and qualitative methods like semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, the research engaged a purposively selected sample from three rural communities in south-west Nigeria. The findings revealed that, for these communities, good governance primarily involves the government’s ability to meet basic needs and provide welfare-enhancing infrastructure. Conversely, bad governance is characterized by declining welfare, economic hardship, and inadequate infrastructure. Interestingly, participants did not prioritize reforms like regular elections or anti-corruption measures as core attributes of good governance, although they did not oppose these aspects. This study underscores the need to incorporate the perspectives of local citizens in defining good governance, allowing for homegrown solutions that might offer quicker and cost-effective strategies for development.

Introduction

Poverty alleviation and governance are deeply intertwined. The design, execution, and effectiveness of poverty reduction initiatives are significantly influenced by political dynamics. Conversely, the outcomes of poverty alleviation strategies can impact the legitimacy of governments and their continuity (Wang & Guo, 2022). Consequently, good governance has emerged as a critical element in discussions surrounding poverty reduction. According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (1998), the missing link between anti-poverty efforts and poverty reduction is governance. While it can be presumed that an improvement in government performance will improve the lives of the poor, governance advocates, especially donors, also promote governance reforms as a condition for assistance.

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa as well as Africa’s largest economy. Since its return to civil democracy in 1999, Nigeria has implemented a wide range of good governance reforms aimed at curbing corruption and spurring growth and development. Governance reforms undertaken by the country include public financial management, tax reform, public procurement, civil service reforms, transparency, and anti-corruption. These nonetheless did not reduce economic hardship in Nigeria. The existence of increasing poverty, regardless of several governance reforms in Africa and in Nigeria in particular, is an issue of concern.

* Corresponding author. ORCID ID: 0000-0001-5086-7364

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https://doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v12i10.3108

Available online at www.ssbfnet.com
for scholarship and policy (Fuseini et al., 2023, Roelofs, 2023). According to Wang and Guo (2022), good governance, in the context of poverty reduction, is about making the government work for the poor. If good governance thus matters for the improvement of the lives of the poor, the position of this paper is that the voices of the poor should matter in the understanding of governance.

It is, however, noteworthy that good governance as an agenda is an idea that did not emanate from the poor themselves but from international donors and multilateral institutions. As noted by Trophathi (2017), Until the 1980s, "governance" was an outdated term. However, it gained prominence during World Bank neoliberal reforms. For example, the term 'Goverance' made its debut in the 1989 World Bank study titled "Sub-Saharan Africa - from Crisis to Sustainable Growth." The study highlighted that the persistent institutional and managerial deficiencies within both the public and private sectors significantly contributed to the failure of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) in recipient countries. This study also emphasized the necessity for institutional reform and the enhancement of the public sector's efficiency in Sub-Saharan countries. Soon after, organizations like the IMF, the UN, and other donor institutions adopted and popularized the term. Alongside its derivative "good governance," it has become a buzzword in discussions on administrative reform, particularly in developing nations relying on support from international development agencies.

The challenge, however, is that 'good governance' is a normative concept and has no standard meaning. Consequently, the working definition and principles of the concept are those postulated by the various defining actors and donor institutions (Gisselquist, 2012). Eke et al. (2019) also highlighted that donor agencies use the concept as a benchmark to evaluate their performances in line with their operational objectives in developing and less developed nations. The question that arises, therefore, is: whose interest is good governance, the donor or the poor? Arguably, the diverse governance interventions by donors typify the variety of donors’ perspectives on good governance. Given that the perspectives of the poor are hardly taken into consideration in the good governance agenda, how much these interventions target the needs of the poor is an important question. In this regard, Udo (2004) argues that the idea of good governance could only help achieve poverty reduction if the assessment process is not biased in favour of the "external" criteria relevant to donors and international monitoring bodies but is instead meaningful from the "internal" perspective of the country, especially regarding the poor.

Another observed challenge with donor-conceptualized good governance is that it is based on Western institutional experience and has no regard for the local context. This universalization of governance has been criticized. Arestis et al. (2021) highlight that mainstream theories often overlook the impact of local history, political economy, institutional structures, and culture. These local factors significantly contributed to the growth success of China and East Asia's newly industrialized countries, which diverged from adhering to the Western neoliberal and good governance framework.

Mungiu-Pippidi (2020) contends that the drive to impose Western institutional norms in poorer nations is rooted in the perception of the non-corrupt West as a global model. However, the author demonstrates that enforcing Western governance frequently leads to an upsurge in corruption rather than its reduction. Onyegbuj (2020) highlighted the significance of history and culture in fostering effective governance in Nigeria. This underscores the potential counterproductivity of imposing donor-conceptualized models of good governance, considering the country's non-Western politico-cultural contexts. Moreover, in governance matters, culture and history matter, especially in Africa, a continent that has gone through a tumultuous history of trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonization, neo-colonization, military government, and other oppressive rules. In the African context, a responsive definition of good governance cannot be achieved using the colonizers’ perspective. The perspective of citizens is therefore paramount.

Understanding good governance from the perspective of the poor can also reduce the cumberfulness of the agenda. According to Grindle (2010), the good governance agenda includes a multitude of governance reforms that poor countries must do to achieve good governance, with no guidance about which reforms are most essential and feasible to achieve poverty reduction and which are not. Definitely, not all activities classified as leading to good governance may automatically improve the lives of the poor. Given their limited financial and human resources, African countries need to have clarity on the aspects of governance reforms essential for development and poverty reduction and those that are not. Arguably, understanding good governance from the perspective of the poor and local citizens, who are the potential recipients of governance reforms, is a necessary step for a well-targeted reform.

Given this background of donor-conceptualized good governance, the problem is the persistent poverty in Africa and Nigeria in particular, despite over two decades of externally imposed good governance reforms. If poverty in Nigeria is a problem of bad governance, there is a need to have citizens' understanding of good governance as opposed to outsiders' ideas of the concept. Eke et al. (2019) revealed a lack of contextualization of the concept of good governance within the Nigerian context. While the term has been broadly defined by donors, it has not been specifically adapted to fit Nigeria's socio-political landscape. This underscores the need to understand good governance from the perspective of Nigerians, rather than solely relying on the interpretation provided by donor entities. Citizen’s conceptualizations of good governance may give insight into fast local strategies to achieve poverty reduction as well as the type of governance that may be ‘good enough’ for development in Nigeria.

The objectives of the study are stated as follows:

i. To examine rural participants’ definition of good governance
ii. To examine rural participants’ definition of bad governance,
iii. To examine rural participants’ perceptions about issues affecting good governance in Nigeria
iv. Based on the findings, provide recommendations to enhance good governance in Nigeria.

The significance of this study lies in its ability to capture the essence of good governance as perceived by the local population. By uncovering and spotlighting context-specific challenges impacting governance in Nigeria, the study lays a crucial foundation. These findings serve as pivotal building blocks towards the formulation of inclusive and people-centred policies for good governance and sustainable development in Nigeria.

Given that the findings of this study were based on the institutional understanding of citizens of south-west Nigeria, the extent to which the recommendations of this study can be generalized or transferred to other contexts is limited.

The paper is divided into six sections. The first section is the introduction, and the second section discusses the concept and emergence of good governance. The third section discusses participatory action research (PAR), which is the theoretical framework that guides the study. The fourth section describes the methodology adopted, while the fifth section presents and interprets the findings. The sixth section contains the recommendations and conclusion.

Literature Review

Concept and Emergence of Good Governance

Many scholars agree that good governance plays a vital role in the development of a country. Keping (2018) asserts that, in a time of great change, accelerating globalization, and increasing uncertainty, all countries, whether developed or developing, are searching for a new form of governance that is better adapted to the times to gain an advantage in economic competitiveness and create substantial and sustainable social growth. Governance is a complex concept with no precise meaning. According to Ali (2015), governance is the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented (or not implemented). This study defines governance as the manner in which a society is managed for the achievement of societal goals and the good welfare of its members (Adejumo-Ayibiowu 2018). However, international development institutions such as the World Bank and IMF have mostly presented governance in terms of public sector administration capacity, while the governance standard of Western developed countries is assumed to be generalizable (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2020; Tripathi, 2017).

Like governance, good governance is a normative concept. In the opinion of De Vries (2013), the addition of a normative prefix to governance, namely ‘good’, is problematic because it only increases the criteria the government must fulfil to be acceptable, which led to the creation of an overloaded good governance agenda. According to the UNOCHR (2023), there is no internationally agreed meaning to the concept. Thus, the term has been used to include respect for human rights, political pluralism, human rights, the rule of law, effective participation, a multi-actor, efficient, and effective public sector, partnerships, transparent and accountable processes and institutions, legitimacy, access to knowledge, information, and education, political empowerment of people, equity, sustainability, and attitudes and values that foster responsibility, solidarity, and tolerance.

The recent popularity of the concept of good governance can be traced to its adoption by donor institutions as a development tool. Tripathy (2017) observed that prior to the adoption of the term by the World Bank and other donor institutions, “governance” had minimal usage as a political term. However, during the 1980s, amidst the economic reforms introduced by the World Bank in developing nations, the term gained prominence, emphasizing the procedural aspects. Subsequently, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, “governance” began denoting the restructuring of public administration, particularly in developing nations, to align with the demands of free trade and globalization. However, the meaning of governance and its derived term good governance has been changing.

Eke et al. (2019) observed that during the 1980s, the notion of good governance primarily centred around normative perspectives, emphasizing criteria for development. However, by the 1990s, it evolved into a tool for evaluating public policy arrangements. Its expanded conceptualization encompassed the political system, governmental authority exercise, and a government's capacity to devise and execute political plans. In 1998, the World Bank broadened the description of good governance to encompass four key domains: public administration management, accountability and responsibility within the public sector, legal framework conditions, and the transparency of governmental activities. Subsequently, in 2002, corruption control became part of the criteria for good governance within the World Bank's governance indicators. Furthermore, various international bodies such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the United Nations, and the European Union contributed to amplifying this concept of governance.

Gisselquist (2012) notes, however, that there is a consensus among development institutions about the key components of good governance. These include legitimacy, accountability, transparency, rule of law, equity, competence, consensus-orientedness, and effectiveness. The need to achieve these components in the African governance system is the basis for the imposition of various governance reforms on indebted African countries. For example, the World Bank continues to give public sector governance and anticorruption a high ranking among the most important development priorities. Consequently, the Bank focuses its efforts on strengthening public finances, public administration, and public institutions (World Bank, 2023). The IMF promotes good governance by ensuring the rule of law, improving the efficiency and accountability of the public sector, and tackling corruption. Good governance promotion of the Bretton Woods Institutions also includes the promotion of liberalization of the exchange, trade, and price systems and the elimination of subsidies (IMF 1997, 2018).
Literally, good governance is desirable, as it can be assumed to mean governance improvement in the interest of citizens. Such improved governance is particularly important in Nigeria, where corruption and poor public service have become endemic. But good governance, as part of Western donors' reform agenda in Africa, requires some scrutiny. Ganahl (2014) makes the case that every foreign policy is essentially motivated by economic and strategic goals, and the same is true for good governance. For example, the implementation of the governance agenda requires that, in addition to Western-style democracy, countries implement neo-liberal economic reforms, whose earlier implementation opened African economies to unequal competition and had devastating effects on poor countries. The emergence of good governance in particular is rooted in the failure of the neoliberal structural adjustment program.

Specifically, in the 1980s, the World Bank and IMF made many poor countries implement the Structural Adjustment Programmes or Washington Consensus through the provision of loans associated with macroeconomic conditions such as reduced budget deficits, devaluation, reduced domestic credit expansion, reduced trade barriers, and privatizing state enterprises. However, evidence revealed that the program was largely unsuccessful as most countries experienced unprecedented rises in unemployment and poverty. According to the former World Bank Chief Economist, Stiglitz, "If there is a consensus today about what strategies are most likely to promote the development of the poorest countries in the world, it is this: there is no consensus except that the Washington consensus did not provide the answer” (Stiglitz 2004). The World Bank attributed the failure of SAP in Africa to entrenched institutional and managerial weaknesses in the public and private sectors (World Bank, 1989). Consequently, the Washington Consensus was replaced by a Post-Washington Consensus, a broader neoliberal agenda that incorporates democracy and the creation of effective institutions through institutional reforms.

The growth success of China and some Asian economies that have not followed the neoliberalism and Western-style democracy, recommendations of the World Bank particularly throws a challenge to the validity of the good governance agenda as a development strategy. Arestis et al. (2021) affirm that despite the global dominance of Western values within global capitalism, the growth and progress seen in China and the newly industrialized East Asian countries did not rely on entirely importing Western cultural norms. Instead, their institutional design and industrial strategies were significantly influenced by their culture and traditions. In contrast to the West's singular reliance on neoliberalism for development, China embraced a different approach rooted in a developmental state intervention ideology shaped by its unique socio-cultural framework. The success in poverty reduction witnessed in Asia, achieved without strictly adhering to Western-style democracy, free trade, market supremacy and other externally imposed donor reforms, suggests that not all elements associated with popularized notions of good governance are indispensable for fostering development.

Arguably, the good government agenda only complicates governance with its cumbersome procedures. For example, the World Bank has over 40 indicators to measure the dimension of ‘government effectiveness’ (Kaufmann & Kraay, 2023). Many poor governments are thus compelled to utilize scarce resources for meeting Western standards rather than for actions that directly impact the poor. According to De Vries (2013), reforms that prioritize how governments act above what they do are questionable, especially when human resources are limited. More so, it can be argued that any governance reform that compels the government to listen to external opinions and act in foreign interests rather than those of the citizens is antidemocratic and will be counterproductive. Arguably, listening to the voices of the people is important to achieving participatory and responsive governance. Engaging citizens improves governance because their participation promotes inclusiveness, transparency, accountability, public resource management, better policy outcomes, and the welfare of citizens (Ngunjiri, 2023).

Based on the foregoing, any system of governance that effectively directs society toward achieving its goals while also enhancing the welfare of its citizens would be deemed to be practising good governance. Moreover, citizens for whom governance is instituted are in the best position to define good governance based on their experience, priorities, and culture. The objective of this study, therefore, is to provide agency for local people's perspectives about good governance in Nigeria. Using a participatory action research approach, this study particularly seeks to engage citizens in south-western Nigeria to understand their conceptualization of good governance and the challenges of good governance in Nigeria.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Participatory Action Research (PAR)**

Participatory Action Research (PAR) can be a valuable approach when studying and assessing good governance. PAR provides a framework for involving citizens, stakeholders, and researchers in a collaborative process to understand, evaluate, and improve governance practices. Here is how PAR can be applied to the study of good governance: PAR recognizes the need for the people being studied to participate in the design and implementation of the entire research process. According to Canlas and Karpudewan (2020), PAR operates under the foundational principle that communities possess a deep understanding of their own social circumstances and possess the capacity to express their unique insights. In doing so, it dismantles the dominance of exclusive knowledge sources. Of significance, PAR validates the dynamic involvement of communities in the process of knowledge creation. The PAR approach is appropriate for this study, which aims to understand citizens' perceptions of good governance in Nigeria because PAR affords participants the avenue to fully express themselves. PAR's participatory approach allows for local contextualization of governance assessments, thereby ensuring that the solutions proposed are relevant and effective.
PAR is particularly relevant for community-based studies as it facilitates inclusive engagement, embraces equity and fairness, provides freedom from oppressive and restrictive circumstances, and promotes empowerment (Branom, 2012). One of the challenges of PAR, however, is that it often requires the researcher to be familiar with the community and its cultural background. Nevertheless, this is not a problem in the present study because the researcher is familiar with the selected study locations and is immersed in Yoruba culture. PAR is positioned as an approach within the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm (Canlas and Karpudewan, 2020). Thus, this approach embraces a dynamic interchange of interpretations, subjectivity, and the concurrent existence of numerous realities, all of which are contingent upon specific contexts and circumstances. A range of qualitative or quantitative methodologies and methods can be used in PAR studies. A qualitative methodology is adopted in the present study, and it is presented in the next section.

**Research Methodology**

The field study was carried out in three communities in south-west Nigeria, namely Ikire, Iwo, and Ipetumodu. South-western Nigeria is the home of the Yoruba people, and they possess a homogenous culture. Qualitative methods of data collection were used. Specifically, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted to explore the participants' understanding of good governance in Nigeria. The interview participants were selected purposively on the recommendation of the community members based on their knowledge of governance in Nigeria. Purposive sampling is a cost-effective method as only the most suitable sample members are selected, excluding irrelevant population members. This focused selection minimizes sampling errors and ensures highly relevant research outcomes (Obilor, 2023). The people interviewed were 24, including traditional leaders, educated elites, leaders of trade associations and community associations, elders, and public servants. There were three focus group discussions involving trade associations and community associations in all the study locations. All the participants were adults, and they possessed post-secondary education. The study took necessary ethical considerations into account. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was also ensured throughout the research process. The data was analysed using thematic analysis. The interviews were first transcribed and translated into English, after which the coding process was used to generate themes and categories as suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2017). Following that, the results were analysed and discussed using the participants' illustrations.

**Findings and Discussions**

The interview questions focused on the participants' conceptualization of good governance and the factors preventing good governance in Nigeria. The real names of the participants are replaced in this presentation with pseudonyms, for confidentiality. The thematic analysis led to three themes with each theme addressing each of the study objectives.

**Theme One: Meaning of Good Governance**

Under this theme, two categories of meaning actually emerged from the responses. The first defines good governance as welfare improvement, while the second follows the standard definitions of the international agencies.

**Good governance improves welfare**

**Accessibility of resources to meet basic needs and provision of social infrastructure.**

Each participant shared a common perspective on good governance, which centred around improving well-being and placing importance on the accessibility of resources that cater to fundamental requirements like food, housing, safety, and essential infrastructure. As per their views, a governance system would be deemed good if it ensured reasonably priced food, well-maintained roads, quality healthcare, water and electricity services, and a robust educational framework.

For example, one of the traditional leaders, Chief Tayo, said, "Good governance is when there is easy food access and there is peace. Good governance addresses societal needs such as roads, water, and health care. Awolowo’s governance is an example. He established free education in all villages and constructed modern roads. So we were able to move agricultural produce to the market and turn it into money instead of those things spoiling on the farm".

Mr. Bayode, a trade association representative, said, "Good governance is what the government has brought to people's lives to enhance people’s lives. The people must feel that the government cares about their welfare."

One of the participants, Mrs. Asa, also stated, "Good governance is the government that takes care of the welfare of the people and provides social amenities that are useful for the people. For example, in a community like Ipetumodu, there is no good road, no pipe-borne water, no post office, and for 3 months there may not be electricity. If the government can provide these basic amenities, then it is good".

**The anti-corruption campaign has no impact on good governance.**

Many participants (60 percent) particularly mentioned that the anti-corruption campaigns of the Nigerian government are mere rhetoric that contributes nothing to development and should be made secondary. A trade association representative said, "Loud anti-corruption talks are mere distractions".
Bad governance is when people can no longer feed themselves. When there is increased death, disease, and security, transparency, and anti-corruption campaigns as primary attributes of good governance, even though they were not against these governance features. Given the high level of education of the participants, it is incorrect to conclude that they do not understand the impact of elections, transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption in ensuring that public resources are used for the benefit of the citizens. However, other related findings of this study indicate that citizens have little regard for or trust in current democratic governance processes and have popularized anti-corruption campaigns. These processes are perceived as corrupt, functioning to serve the interests of the political class, and of no benefit to the poor masses.

These findings mean participants would rather define good governance by what the government does than how it does it. The responses also emphasized the high level of hardship and poverty in Nigeria, where the immediate desire to have poverty reduced has made citizens disregard how these problems are solved. Only after the basic need for the survival of the citizens is met will the technical issues of governance matter. Given the current level of economic hardship among the people, if a government can ensure that basic needs can easily be met and basic infrastructure is provided, that government is good enough.

This simple definition of good governance by local people contradicts the broad definitions of governance found in the literature on the topic. While people's narrow or simple definition of good governance is based on their experience, current hardships, and political reality, arguably donors' elaborate definition of good governance is based on Western institutional experience, economic advancement, and political reality. Enormous resources are required to achieve all the donors' specifications for good governance. If the motive for promoting good governance in poor countries, like Nigeria, is to achieve development, then what should be paramount are the minimum characteristics of good governance sufficient to achieve that purpose. This is what Grindle (2004) calls good enough governance, even though the authors do not itemize the minimum characteristics of good enough governance.

The simple or narrow conceptualization of good governance by local people in south-west Nigeria also confirms that good governance is relative and highly dependent on the level of income of individuals and societal development. In environments where poverty predominates, citizens' governance priorities will be on survival issues like getting an income, employment, and basic amenities, and they will be less concerned with issues such as the rule of law, human rights, gender equality, or elections. These findings also confirm the argument of Chang (2011) that it is the increased wealth and comfort of citizens that create demands for higher-quality
institutions, such as political institutions with greater transparency and accountability. Veenhoven (2000) also found that economic freedom, through employment provision, increased income, and welfare improvement are more important development interventions for poor countries than governance interventions are to them; political freedom has more effect in richer countries than in poorer countries. Unfortunately, by not using people's definition of good governance, development efforts mainly focus on the donors’ good governance reforms (including electoral reforms, anti-corruption, deregulation, and privatization policies), shifting focus, efforts, and resources away from providing public services that have a direct and immediate impact on citizens’ welfare.

**Theme three: Issues Affecting Good Governance in Nigeria**

When the participants were asked about issues that need to be considered to achieve good governance in Nigeria and south-west Nigeria specifically, several issues were raised, which were grouped into categories and subcategories as shown below.

**The Poor Political Structure**

The opinion of most of the participants (92 percent) is that Nigeria’s political system is problematic. The common issues noted are the excessive monetization of political positions and the inappropriate federal structure.

**Excessive Monetization of Political Positions**

Most of the participants (92 percent) stated that the monetary income or benefits attached to political positions are excessive, creating challenges like greediness, patronage, election rigging, election violence, and the emergence of incompetent and corrupt leadership.

According to one of the community association leaders, "governance in Nigeria is too monetized now. In those days, when my uncle was a councillor, the allowance was 5 shillings, and we didn’t hear of corruption then. But now that winning a political post is a money bag, it has become a ‘do or die’ affair. If we remove the issue of money, only patriotic citizens will be contesting for political posts". According to Mr. Akingbade, "We should reduce the monetization of political office. For example, the highest a professor in the university earns is one million naira per month, yet a member of the House of Representatives earns nothing less than ten million naira per month and even more. If I have the opportunity through a political godfather to get to the House of Representatives, I will bulldoze anything on my way to achieve it.

**Inappropriate Federal Structure**

Participants raised several issues relating to the need to reorganize the current federal structure so that the regional government can be more autonomous.

A feeling of oppression by the Northern

A traditional leader, Chief Bola, complained that the current political structure allowed the subjugation of the south-west by the Northerners. He said, "Previously, the northerners were uneducated and uncivilized. The Hausas worked for us as cheap labourers for the production of building materials. It was Awolowo who took clothes to northern cities like Maiduguri and Kafanchan, telling them it was not good to be naked. That was where our problem started. We enlightened them; now the political system is such that the Hausa are using us, ruling us, and oppressing us".

Need for self-rule and a governance style compatible with its people’s culture

Mr. Joe, an elite, opined that true federalism is when each group has a self-rule and governance style compatible with its people’s culture. He said, "That is why we are clamouring for true federalism, in which each zone is autonomous. We currently have six geopolitical zones, and our political cultures are not the same. We, in the south-west, have a very good traditional political culture that can achieve good governance for us".

**Need for stronger and more autonomous sub-national governments**

Another participant, Mr. Ojo, a local government staff member, said that a federal system in which the central government holds the largest resources while the local governments lack financial capacity is problematic. According to him, "We are supposed to have a pyramid system of governance. That is a very light head and a very big base. In Nigeria, the federal government is at the top and is too big, and the local government at the bottom is too weak. If we have a pyramidal political structure that gives adequate power to the subnational government, especially the local government, then at the grassroots level, we can solve our problems. When the head is bigger than the body, it is called kwashikor. And that is the case in Nigeria".

**Loss of sense of cultural values**

Most participants (92 percent) complained that, in Nigeria, the cultural sense of value that ensured good governance had been largely eroded. Two main issues relating to this category emerged.

i. Loss of Omoluwabi
Many of the participants pointed out that the moral virtue of Omoluwabi (African Humanism) had virtually disappeared from Nigerian societies, leading to the pervasiveness of materialism and corruption.

Elder Kayode said, "As a people, we have lost our sense of value."

According to Honourable Ayo, an elected officer, "our cultural values are the building blocks of society. These are the necessary ingredients for achieving good governance and development. They include integrity, patriotism, and a sense of productivity. We have been wrongly made to believe that we can make money with or without productivity. When there is no integrity or productivity, corruption becomes the norm. There is no architecture in place anywhere anymore; we’ve lost the cultural value to make things work. Reviving a cultural sense of value is extremely foundational. In Osun State, we are reviving our culture. The state’s slogan is “Omoluwabi” to reestablish our Yoruba core values.

ii. The removal of cultural oaths from modern governance

According to many of the participants (87 percent), the removal of the system of traditional oath-taking from governance contributed to Nigeria’s political menace. They said traditional oath-taking, as opposed to swearing with the Bible or Quran, instils fear and constrains politicians from acting corruptly.

According to Chief Tayo, "fear, respect, and truth are only with the traditional gods. The Bible says God is slow to anger, and that is why people don’t obey him; the same is true of the Quran. But if you do something wrong and falsely swear to Ogun, the judgment is within seven days. There is fear and respect".

Chief Bola said, "Personally, I believe in Sango, although I am an elder of a church. If something is stolen now and Sango is asked to fish the thief out, even if there are one thousand people, it will bring such a person out".

Insufficient Public Resources

Several participants (12 percent) also explained that scarce public resources affect the achievement of good governance in Nigeria. According to them, states in the south-west have very little internally generated revenue, which is insufficient to finance needed development.

Barrister John, a political officeholder, also stated: "The main problem is that we don’t have sufficient resources. Embezzlement, corruption—yes, put together the figure of corruption—but still, governance—we don’t have enough resources to pull us out of underdevelopment... Our population is a major challenge; we are growing astronomically, and we are not productive as a people”.

Discussion of Theme Three

The rural citizens have identified Nigeria’s problematic political and federal structure, the loss of a sense of cultural value, and inadequate public funds as major impediments to good governance. These issues are governance challenges peculiar to Nigeria and may not be obtainable in other countries. Put differently, Nigeria faces unique challenges that a universal good governance agenda may not be able to address. The problems identified with the Nigerian political system, such as excessive remuneration given to elected officers, attract greedy and violent individuals into politics. According to Odemwingie (2015), Nigeria has one of the most expensive political systems and the highest-paid lawmakers in the world, and many Nigerian politicians go as far as rigging elections and killing opponents to have access to public funds. Consequently, despite regular elections, the polls have not been an effective means of holding leaders accountable since elections are often manipulated.

The responses of the participants, especially their agitation against northern dominance, are evidence of ethnic cleavage among the people of south-western Nigeria. Several scholars, such as Adibe (2015) and Umezinwa (2012), have argued that the political behaviour of Nigerians is largely controlled by tribal consciousness and ethnic sentiments. According to Turaki (2010), the problem of tribalism and ethnic cleavages was created by the British colonial government through its divide-and-rule tactics. Unfortunately, the current federal structure has not been able to solve the problem of ethnic division in Nigeria. The problem is also compounded by the concentration of power and resources at the centre or federal level, because of which there are continuous agitations by each ethnic group over resource control and the control of federal power. As pointed out by the participants, Nigerian federalism must be restructured to grant ethnic autonomy and self-governance to sub-national governments. This restructuring is key to achieving peace, unity, and good governance in Nigeria.

The study has also shown the importance of cultural values for the achievement of good governance. According to Dei (2012), individual behaviour in society, including political behaviour, is a product of cultural values. African cultural values are particularly rooted in communalism and humanness, which both demand a high moral standard of behaviour in accordance with the expectations of the community. However, globalization has greatly eroded these values. According to Obasola (2015), the Westernization of Nigerian societies is also characterized by the prevalence of foreign cultures of materialism and individualism, which have fostered greed, crime, and corruption among the populace. Arguably, the quality of governance is a reflection of the prevailing moral standard of individuals in society since the government is run by individuals. It can then be concluded that the revitalization of African cultural values would promote good governance in Nigeria. Very important is the fact that most of the participants support the idea that
elected officers should swear by the traditional gods. They all believed that much more than anti-corruption reforms, traditional oath-taking is a more effective tool to compel honesty in political leadership, as oath breakers get instant punishments from the gods.

Finally, the findings show that inadequate public resources are a major problem affecting good governance and development in Nigeria. Nigeria has, for many years, over-relied on oil and has not diversified its economy. A good governance arrangement that will be effective must provide resources to finance development. The funding options on the good governance agenda include loans like the IMF’s Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility (ESAF) with its stringent anti-welfare conditions (Shah 2013). The lack of resources also makes the expensive good governance agenda inappropriate for Nigeria. Specifically, the many procedures and institutions established in fulfillment of donors’ good governance contradict the country’s poor purse.

Conclusions

Although there is no dispute about the importance of good governance in fostering development and reducing poverty, it is essential to emphasize the significance of incorporating the voices of the poor in comprehending good governance. Their perspectives should form an integral part of the practical definition of good governance. This aspect gains significance because ‘good governance’ is inherently a normative concept. A poor, broad, or improper understanding of good governance will undoubtedly result in the operationalization of good governance initiatives that are overly broad or inappropriate and may never result in poverty reduction and development. The main objectives of this study are to understand citizens’ descriptions of good governance, their conceptualization of bad governance, and their perceptions about issues affecting good governance in Nigeria. The study used participatory action research (PAR), a methodology that is based on the fundamental idea that communities have a profound grasp of their own social situations. Thus, PAR offers a framework for incorporating community members and scholars in a cooperative process to comprehend, assess, and enhance local governance.

In this study, rural citizens in south-west Nigeria defined good governance as the government's capacity to meet basic needs like food and shelter as well as welfare-improving infrastructure like good roads, healthcare, quality education, and electricity. Thus, citizens are more concerned with what the government does than how it does it. Citizens perceive governance attributes that are prioritized and promoted under the good governance agenda, such as regular elections, checks and balances, and anti-corruption initiatives, as being second in importance. This narrow definition of good governance is achievable with minimal reforms and without requiring enormous resources from a broad good governance agenda. Moreover, an understanding of the local population, their history, culture, and experience must serve as the foundation for the conceptualization of good governance and the institutional arrangement or governance framework that will function to the benefit of citizens. Including the voices and perspectives of local citizens in the conceptualization of good governance particularly allows for indigenous solutions, which may also provide quick and less expensive alternative strategies to achieve development.

For instance, study participants have questioned why the nation spends scarce resources establishing and funding an anti-corruption agency that stops corruption when corruption can be minimized if political officials are required to take public oaths traditionally, a completely free procedure. The rural citizens in south-west Nigeria have also identified factors affecting good governance in Nigeria. Many of the issues raised are peculiar local problems that cannot be addressed by a universal approach to good governance. The issues include excessive monetization of political positions, patronage and tribal politics, poor federal structure, loss of sense of cultural value (Omoluwabi), the removal of cultural oath-taking, and a large need gap compared to resources. Addressing these pertinent issues raised by citizens is a less cumbersome way of improving governance in Nigeria. Based on these findings, removing excessive money attached to political positions, granting more autonomy to subnational governments, revitalizing culture and sense of values, diversifying the economy, and generating innovative and people-friendly revenue are interventions that can promote good governance in Nigeria.

Acknowledgement

Portions of the material presented in this manuscript were originally included in my PhD thesis titled ‘An Afrocentric Critique of the discourse of good governance and its limitations as a means of addressing development challenges in Nigeria,’ submitted to University of South Africa in 2018.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Collection, Formal Analysis, Writing—Original Draft Preparation, Writing—Review And Editing by author. Author has read and agreed to the published the final version of the manuscript.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were obtained for this study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References


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