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SERVICOM and the Crisis of Public Sector Reforms in Nigeria: The Performance and Challenges of SERVICOM in Kano State

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Abstract

This paper examines Service Compact with All Nigerians (SERVICOM), a major Citizens' Charter reform effort in the public sector. It examines why the project didn't perform well and eventually stalled, pinpointing institutional issues. SERVICOM, started in 2004 by President Olusegun Obasanjo, was conceived as an agreement between the government and the people. It aimed to create service charters in government offices to clarify services, ensure responsibility, improve service and restore trust in government (Adewumi & Egwurube, 2009). But despite its intentions, the reform soon faced problems, such as bureaucratic roadblocks, corruption, lack of legal support, poor monitoring, insufficient funds, poor coordination, political interference and little public awareness. These issues were made worse by Nigeria's existing institutional and governance problems. This paper places SERVICOM within Nigeria's reform history. Earlier efforts like the Green Revolution Program, Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) and the National Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) also fell short of achieving their goals. The paper uses a hybrid framework that combines Institutional, New Public Management and Governance Failure Theories. This approach offers a strong, context-specific view to analyse SERVICOM's role in Nigeria's public sector reforms. It balances the initiative's design with the fundamental institutional factors that affect outcomes. The research adopts qualitative and quantitative case study methods, relying on official policy documents, peer-reviewed literature, secondary sources and fieldwork to trace SERVICOM's journey from its launch in 2004 to its decline in the late 2010s and its current state of neglect. Using a multi-method approach will benefit the research, as it is state-focused and relates methods to local contexts such as bureaucracy, culture, or resource constraints. The paper provides a balanced, theory-based analysis of SERVICOM, adding to the global conversation on public sector reforms in developing countries. The study concludes that successful reforms in Nigeria need political will, legal enforcement, continuity by subsequent administrations, integration into institutions, reliable funding and active citizen involvement. Without these elements, initiatives like SERVICOM become mere symbols rather than effective policies. The study suggests specific steps to address these systemic issues, which could support the success of future public sector reforms.

Keywords: Public Sector Reform, Accountability, Service Delivery and Citizen Satisfaction

Introduction

Nigeria has tried many times since it gained independence to update its government offices and improve how the government is run in order to deliver better services. But despite these efforts in different areas, lasting change has been hard to achieve. One key initiative was SERVICOM, which began in 2004 and was officially launched in 2006 by President Olusegun Obasanjo. SERVICOM was meant to make the government listen and be responsible. It sought to establish service standards, be transparent, and allow people to request better work from government agencies (Ezeani, 2006; Olaopa, 2013). SERVICOM is

important in Nigeria's history, as it represents an attempt to change and to ensure accountability in government services. Experts have discussed how it could change things, but also how it is constrained by problems within the government.

SERVICOM follows a Citizen's Charter model influenced by developments around the world, such as the United Kingdom's Citizen's Charter (Hood, 1991). The Charter, started in 1991 by Prime Minister John Major, was a big step in changing how government services were provided. It saw citizens as customers and created standards for government groups. The point was to stop unhappiness with slow government processes, a lack of responsibility and bad service in areas like health, education, transportation and welfare. It asked government groups, from central offices to local groups, to make standards clear and find ways to listen to the complaining public. This was part of a move toward a more business-like government under the Conservative Party, which focused on getting good value and giving power to users. The Citizen's Charter had goals to make public services more responsive, efficient and open while giving power to citizens. These goals tried to update the government, making it easier to use and more competitive. Even if the charter did well in some places, like making passport offices faster, it was criticized for being more for show than for actual change. It was hard to ensure it was followed, and different offices handled things differently. In 1998, it changed into the Service First program under the Labour Party before other changes mostly replaced it.

The UK program, despite its flaws and later revisions, acted as a model for similar global efforts, particularly in the 1990s. This was part of the New Public Management movement, which emphasized citizen-centered governance. These efforts contained ideas like setting service standards, ensuring accountability and providing solutions. The aims were to increase openness and efficiency, empower users, improve service delivery, and build trust in government. Still, their application differed in scope, enforcement and success. Some programs centered on specific areas, like utilities or local government. Several countries closely followed the UK model, including Australia (Service Charter, 1997), Belgium (Public Service User's Charter, 1992), Canada (Service Standard Initiative, 1995), France (Service Charter, 1992), India (Citizen's Charter, 1997), Malaysia (Client's Charter, 1993), Jamaica (Citizen's Charter, 1994), Portugal (Quality Charter in Public Services, 1993), Spain (Quality Observatory, 1992), South Africa (Batho Pele (People First), 1997) and Afghanistan (Citizens' Charter Afghanistan Project, 2016). While these initiatives have aided in shaping global standards for good governance, they faced common problems. Limited citizen awareness, inconsistent enforcement and limited resources often reduced their impact.

Initially, SERVICOM was viewed as a significant step forward for governance in Nigeria. It reflected a global shift towards public administration focused on citizens (Nwokorie, 2016). However, its decline after the Obasanjo era resembled past reform failures, such as Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) in 1976, the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) in 2004 and the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1986. OFN's plans for agricultural mobilization failed due to poor coordination, corruption, and lack of infrastructure (Williams, 1981). NEEDS aimed to create wealth, generate jobs and reduce poverty (Omotola, 2008), but actually increased inequality due to weak implementation at the state and local levels. Meanwhile, SAP's efforts for economic liberalization fell short because of weak institutional capacity, control by elites and socio-economic disruption (Iyoha & Oriakhi, 2008).

SERVICOM started as a step forward for governance in Nigeria, mirroring a world trend towards citizen-focused public service (Nwokorie, 2016). Yet, its decline after President Obasanjo's time echoed earlier reform problems. Examples include the Green Revolution

Program in 1979, Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) in 1976, the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) in 2004, and the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) in 1986. Green Revolution Program's agricultural plans failed due to coordinated problems, corruption, and poor infrastructure (Williams, 1981). NEEDS aimed to create wealth, jobs, and less poverty (Omotola, 2008), but instead made inequality worse because of poor execution at the state and local government levels. Likewise, SAP's economic reforms failed due to weak institutions, elite control, and social issues (Iyoha and Oriakhi, 2008). Thus, this paper examines Service Compact with All Nigerians (SERVICOM), a major Citizens' Charter reform effort in the public sector. It examines why the project underperformed and eventually stalled, pinpointing institutional issues.

Conceptual Clarification

The Public: The public refers to the entire population and issues that concern society at large. The terms "government" and "public sector" often overlap. Public organizations, which are government-regulated entities, offer key services that benefit the public. These commonly include businesses owned and operated directly by the government. By completing targeted tasks, public institutions serve the general populace often at reduced or no cost because they are supported by taxes, fees and governmental payments.

Thus, public organizations constitute the state sector of the economy. It encompasses all businesses and institutions dependent on the government to serve the general population (Peter, 2016; Ezeani, 2006). Besides government departments and ministries, it includes agencies like customs, police, the military, Immigration and fire services. Because it provides services and supports businesses, the public sector is a significant part of the Nigerian economy, which shapes its growth and operations. It aids in providing social services, enforcing laws and ensuring freedom and equality.

Reform: Reform is a planned activity designed to improve the operation of an existing system. Not arbitrarily, reform indicates measurable progress instead of a simple change. Public sector reform involves restructuring its administration by implementing organizational changes to address administrative problems (Olaopa, 2003; Olaleye, 2001). Reform involves making improvements or fixing institutional weaknesses via systematic changes to current laws, structures and practices for enhanced performance. The key goals of public sector reforms are to raise the efficiency and effectiveness of public organizations (Anazobe and Okoye, 2012; Caiden, 1968) through intentional adjustments to their procedures, functions and organizational makeup. Reform can be procedural or structural. Process changes involve re-evaluating operations, defining quality standards and focusing on capacity building. Structural changes may include merging or separating organizations for easier management or specialization. It covers a range of subjects, including how the public sector operates to improve performance and control resources.

Public sector reforms involve intentional modifications to the structures and processes of public sector organizations to enhance their efficiency, effectiveness and accountability. Public sector reform means adjusting or reorganizing an organization to better respond to the changing demands and challenges in its operating environment. This process typically moves from a current, less desirable state through a series of strategies and phases of change, ultimately achieving a future state marked by meaningful improvements. Thus, public sector reforms aim to improve service delivery, often through methods, such as civil service reform, decentralization, privatization, financial changes, deregulation and legal reform. The ultimate aim is to strengthen public sector management, leading to better service delivery and responsiveness to citizens' needs. These reforms can be driven by economic pressures, social demands or inefficiencies and often include strategies to

improve policy-making and service delivery. Therefore, public sector reform stems from the belief that management is not operating efficiently as intended. It is a necessary intervention that involves reorganizing an ineffective institution to create real effectiveness, competency and the wise use of resources. It means improving or correcting what is defective, corrupt or unsatisfactory in an organization through systemic changes. It involves addressing or eliminating undesirable behaviours and performance. Ultimately, it is a process of making positive changes from the worst to the better.

Public Sector Accountability: Public sector accountability means that officials and institutions must explain their decisions, actions and resource usage. Bovens (2007) says it is when someone answers for their actions to a group that can question and judge them. In governance, this needs openness, responsibility and ways to penalize misconduct or inefficiency (Mulgan, 2000). So, public administration accountability helps agencies and staff to handle expectations from those inside and outside the organization. This usually involves answering questions, being held responsible and responding to needs (Fan, 2024), including financial, performance and political aspects. Yet this works when the public sector is competent, reliable, and honest with its resources, allowing people to assess its trustworthiness. Service delivery is about giving important public goods and services that people need, like healthcare, education, infrastructure and government support. It is a key link between the government and its citizens. This improves social and economic growth, lowers poverty and boosts life quality (Kulmie et al., 2025). Grindle and Thomas (1991) note that how well service delivery works reflects how well governance functions and shapes how people perceive the state's legitimacy. The World Bank (2004) says good service delivery must be accessible, timely, high-quality and fair. It takes personnel in ministries and departments to make and implement policies that meet public needs. Thus, it is not just about making services efficient and available, but also about improving citizens' lives.

Citizen satisfaction with services reflects the public's assessment of government operation. It involves comparing perceptions of the services provided with prior expectations (Wang et al., 2025; Welch et al., 2005). Public satisfaction is tied to the perceived quality, accessibility, and responsiveness of state services. As such, people assess these services relative to their expectations. This assessment is a key result and aim of governance (Kim and Kim, 2022) rooted in New Public Management (NPM). NPM treats citizens as customers whose needs should shape service delivery (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). Van de Walle and Bouckaert (2003) suggested that citizen satisfaction can measure performance and improve state services

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted a hybrid theoretical framework combining New Public Management (NPM), Institutional Theory (IT) and Government Failure Theory (GFT). A hybrid approach is necessary because no single theory adequately captures the complex realities of Nigeria's public sector reforms. While NPM emphasizes efficiency and customer orientation, IT highlights the structural and cultural constraints within public organizations, and GFT explains why, despite reforms, public service delivery often falls short of expectations. The hybridization of these theories enriched the analysis by offering complementary insights. By integrating these perspectives, the study is better positioned to provide a holistic understanding of SERVICOM's origins, challenges and outcomes.

Hood introduced the core idea of New Public Management (NPM) in 1991 with his article, "A Public Management for All Seasons." This theory seeks to improve public sector work by drawing on ideas from the private sector, such as efficiency, performance measurement, competition, and customer satisfaction. NPM was intended to address problems observed in

old-style government offices. It aims to make the public sector more efficient and put citizens first. Hood argued for improving public services through market-driven changes and giving more power to local offices. This plan involved taking apart traditional bureaucracies. He thought that management should be about getting results and holding people responsible for their work and not just following rules. Dunleavy and Hood expanded on these thoughts in 1994, stressing the need for clear results and happy citizens.

Other important scholars who shaped NPM include Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017), Osborne and Gaebler (1992), and John Halligan (2010). They each made contributions to the theory and practice. Pollitt argued that NPM mainly emerged due to economic problems, budget constraints, and rising citizen expectations, which led governments to rethink how they deliver services. He and Hood saw performance measurement, decentralization, breaking up big bureaucracies and giving managers more freedom as key parts of NPM. Osborne focused on results, decentralization and treating citizens as customers. Halligan's work stressed independent agencies, accountability based on performance and changes to how things are structured. He noted that independent agencies and performance contracts are important for making public administration more efficient and responsive.

Taken together, these views show the different foundations of NPM: Hood's principles of efficiency, Pollitt's focus on management, Osborne's approach that puts citizens first and Halligan's stress on agency independence. NPM supports using private sector management ideas in government to improve how it works, make sure officials are responsible and meet the needs of the public. It suggests that public services should be run like businesses, focusing on operations, achieving goals and accountability. These ideas form the basis of NPM in both theory and practice.

Institutional Theory (IT)

Rooted in sociology and organizational studies, IT questions rational-choice models of organizational behaviour. It examines how social structures like rules and norms become established guides for behaviour. Early research in the mid-20th century explored how organizations react to their environments, setting the stage for IT's growth (Greenwood et al., 2008). The theory gained traction in the 1970s and 1980s. Scholars such as John W. Meyer, Brian Rowan (1977), Paul J. DiMaggio, Walter W. Powell (1983) and Richard W. Scott (2001) tried to figure out why organizations adopt similar structures and practices, even with different goals. Meyer and Rowan argued that organizations adopt formal structures to appear legitimate, often using symbolic gestures instead of focusing on how things actually work. DiMaggio and Powell put forward the idea of isomorphism, where organizations fit in with outside pressures through mandates, imitation and professional standards. Scott then refined the theory with three pillars: regulative (rules and laws), normative (social values) and cultural-cognitive (shared beliefs). IT stresses how formal and informal rules shape what organizations do. In essence, IT highlights the relationship between structure and agency and offers tools to examine how organizations maintain themselves and change within complex systems. It shows why reforms often meet resistance: deep-rooted bureaucratic practices and power dynamics limit change.

Governance Failure Theory

Göran Hyden and Michael Bratton first wrote about the Governance Failure Theory in 1992. Their observations showed that African countries often face challenges such as weak institutions, elite rule, limited accountability, and patron-client systems. These issues weaken reform work and service delivery. This thinking sees governance failure as a system problem, not just single cases of not doing things well. Adrian Leftwich wrote more on this idea in 1993, linking governance to political leadership and progress results. He said that

governance failure mirrors a political failure, in which leaders focus on maintaining power and giving favours rather than improving lives.

Later, Kaufmann, Kraay and Zoido-Lobatón described and measured governance failures in 1999. They looked at factors such as corruption, the rule of law, political stability, regulatory quality, and the effectiveness of government. This led to an examination of how well governance works during reforms. Merilee Grindle improved the discussion in 2004 by introducing the concept of "good enough governance." She said that governance failure is not just corruption or weak accountability, but also having unrealistic hopes for fragile states. Reform plans should agree with the real situations of each country's institutions and politics.

In a similar way, Fukuyama wrote in 2004 and 2013 about state capacity and the work states do. He said that governance failure happens when states do more without having what they need to do it right. He thought that reforms don't work when political, administrative and accountability systems fail. The governance failure theory explains why reforms break down due to the lack of capacity, teamwork, regulation, and accountability within state groups.

To sum up, combining these three theories provides a reasonable view of SERVICOM and the changes in Nigeria. NPM shows the goal of good service that focuses on people. IT looks at how reforms are done in systems. GFT tells why reforms may fail when governance is poor. Together, they give a full idea of what SERVICOM can offer and where it may not be enough. Using this mix of ideas enabled the research to go beyond easy explanations and examine how management ideas, the limits of institutions, and real governance work together to shape reform outcomes.

Historical Context and Antecedents

SERVICOM is a Nigerian federal government initiative designed to raise the standards of public service provided by Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs). It embodies the government's commitment to offer services to citizens in a timely, fair, honest and clear manner, addressing issues like inefficiency and corruption (Adegoroye, 2005). The goal is to meet citizens' expectations by ensuring public institutions deliver services promptly and respectfully. Agboola & Ofoegbu (2020) point out that this compact emphasizes the rights of Nigerians to good service, access to information, ways to complain and value for money, marking a move towards governance that focuses on the citizens in a country that has struggled with bureaucratic inefficiency for a long time.

SERVICOM's origins can be traced back to public service changes in Nigeria, starting with the introduction of British administrative systems in the mid-19th century, which focused more on control than on the well-being of citizens. During British colonial rule, Nigeria used the Westminster-Whitehall style of administration, which separated politics from administration and had permanent secretaries advising on policy. Although this system was focused on bureaucratic structure, it did not suit Nigeria's cultural and practical needs. After Nigeria became independent in 1960, this structure remained, but rapid growth and increased government activity led to problems, such as understaffing, over-centralization, low spirits, corruption and a reduced ability to provide services well. Reform attempts were made, for instance, the Morgan Commission (1963), the Elwood Grading Team (1966), the Adebo Commission (1971) and the Udoji Commission (1972), which aimed to get the bureaucracy more involved in policymaking. The 1986 political bureau report also noted some of these issues.

Despite these efforts, public service delivery deteriorated. Military rule, ministerial interventions, role conflicts and systemic issues like patronage and weak accountability made things worse. By the late 20th century, particularly before the return to democracy in 1999, the public sector was declining. This decline made it difficult for citizens to access basic services. Many needed influential connections and faced high costs in time and money. These challenges connected to Nigeria's socio-political landscape include ethnic diversity and regional disparities. They also matched global demands for transparent institutions, such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 16, whose targets include, amongst others, promoting the rule of law, reducing corruption and bribery, developing effective, accountable and transparent institutions, ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making and ensuring public access to information and freedom.

SERVICOM was officially established on March 21, 2004, under President Olusegun Obasanjo as part of his Service Delivery Initiative. The launch followed a three-day Special Presidential Retreat on Service Delivery held earlier that year. The retreat included the President, Ministers, Special Advisers, Presidential Aides and the Chief Executives of major Extra-Ministerial Departments and Parastatals. Inspired by global best practices and receiving technical support from the British government through the Department for International Development, the initiative became part of President Obasanjo's broader Service Delivery Initiative. It aimed to empower public servants while holding them accountable to the people.

President Obasanjo played a key role in this effort. He called for reform in 2003 and set July 1, 2004, as the deadline for all government entities to submit service charters. He also required the establishment of dedicated units in Ministries, departments and agencies to monitor compliance, handle grievances and evaluate performance using tools like the SERVICOM INDEX, a metric designed to measure service quality. The SERVICOM Office was created within the Presidency to oversee implementation and report directly to the President. It operates under the 1999 Constitution, specifically Sections 14(2) (b) and 15(5), which emphasize citizen welfare and anti-corruption. However, the office was established by presidential order rather than by legislation. A National Coordinator led the program, supported by a Presidential Steering Committee for policy direction and monitoring.

SERVICOM seeks to align government actions with citizen expectations through efficient, open and responsible service delivery (Abdulraheem & Adepoju, 2017). It views service as a key right, fostering trust along with social and economic advancement. Its aims involve shaping service charters from government bodies, tracking progress, surveying service quality and user satisfaction, informing the public about service issues, helping citizens challenge them and honing public servant skills using top methods. To meet these aims, SERVICOM drew up an action plan that took into account institutional setups and processes. This meant setting up the SERVICOM Office within the Presidency to watch over and steer policy and also line up actions across government bodies. SERVICOM also formed units with assigned officers in each body to handle service delivery changes. To ensure results, they set standard goals and markers to gauge progress and compliance. They began routine checks and external monitoring to assess the services provided by government groups. Ways were offered for people to file grievances when service norms were missed, which aided in forming a feedback system to sharpen response.

The push began well by lining up the creation of service charters, doing many checks and fixing a host of complaints. These charters gave a written form of service standards and

citizen rights to call for responsibility at the start. By setting these standards, SERVICOM made citizens more aware of their rights and the duties of government groups (Olaopa, 2019). This aided in growing a culture of lasting betterment. Soon, it reported having 500 nodal officers, over 15,000 checks, and an ICT site for public input. These moves showed a promise to meet modern needs. Also, SERVICOM aided in setting up tracking and assessment systems in the public sector. Through its offices and performance watch groups, the government urged its arms to use verifiable indicators of service delivery. The push also shaped shifts in public servants' views, mostly early on. Training programs and awareness drives stress, boosting efficiency, openness and moral behaviour. SERVICOM provided an opportunity to foster a service-focused culture within the bureaucracy, moving Nigeria's public service closer to the world's best practices in New Public Management (Agboola & Ofoegbu, 2020). Studies say that this cut loose practices in some groups, like immigration, health and education, where better service times and citizen input were seen (Abdulraheem and Adepoju, 2017; Oluwajobi, 2020).

At its start, SERVICOM received much political attention. The presidency gave firm backing and the means to implement its rules across the federal bureaucracy. Public drives began to raise awareness, and SERVICOM units were established in many government bodies to serve as a link between the government and the people. Yet, this start dash dropped off after President Obasanjo's time ended in 2007. While his own vow drove SERVICOM ahead, the next governments shifted focus to other changes, like President Umar Yar'adua's Seven-Point Agenda. So, SERVICOM's eye time fell, making it more of a left-over setup than a key tool for governance change.

Literature Review

Several field studies have evaluated SERVICOM's performance across various sectors, yielding mixed results. Abdulraheem and Adepoju (2017) provided one of the earliest systematic assessments by conducting a field study in selected public hospitals in Northern Nigeria and looked at SERVICOM's impact on health service delivery. The researchers found that SERVICOM's introduction led to modest improvements in patient waiting times, staff responsiveness and complaint handling in the early years. Hospitals with active SERVICOM units reported clearer communication of patients' rights and procedures, which built trust in the health system. However, the study also pointed out challenges, such as poor funding for SERVICOM units, insufficient training for desk officers, and a lack of enforcement mechanisms. The researchers concluded that SERVICOM's impact was more symbolic than transformative, as improvements did not last beyond the initial years.

A similar line of inquiry was pursued by Adewumi (2018), who conducted his study on SERVICOM's performance in educational institutions, such as universities and schools. He argued that SERVICOM's effectiveness had been hampered by persistent bureaucratic bottlenecks and poor institutional ownership at the state and local levels. Although there was an improved response time to grievances and transparency, especially concerning admissions and staff services, it often lacked tracking systems and complaints were not consistently logged or followed up, highlighting gaps in procedures.

Oluwajobi (2020) conducted a cross-sectional survey to examine SERVICOM's performance in ministries and agencies in Abuja and selected state capitals. Through questionnaires and interviews with civil servants and service users, the study found that citizens had low awareness of service charters. Many respondents indicated they had never seen or read a charter. Within MDAs, SERVICOM desk officers often lacked independence. Reforms were viewed as administrative formalities rather than sincere efforts for accountability. Nonetheless, the study recognized that some agencies, especially those with high visibility

like immigration services, promoted positive customer-focused practices. The study concluded that SERVICOM's effectiveness largely depended on leadership support at the agency level.

Adejumo and Akinlabi (2021) conducted a study on immigration and utility agencies. They found that service charters existed on paper, but enforcement was weak. In places where managerial attitudes aligned with SERVICOM ideals, citizen satisfaction was much higher. However, corruption and bureaucratic resistance often weakened formal standards. The paper indicates that in many states, SERVICOM is centralized but not extended into MDAs, leading to gaps in complaint handling and monitoring. The scholars argue that decentralization and functional desk offices are essential for SERVICOM to improve daily service delivery.

Recent studies support these concerns with fresh evidence. For instance, Olajide, Oni and Ojo (2024) found that many citizens in Nigeria did not know about SERVICOM. They surveyed SERVICOM officials in the Federal Ministries of Defence and Works. The results show that most Nigerians were unaware of their rights under the SERVICOM charter or of the availability of grievance redress mechanisms. The paper argues that while SERVICOM was more prominent in federal policy discussions, it lacked engagement with citizens. The conclusion underscores SERVICOM'S key role in overseeing public service reform implementation, but it also points out challenges like insufficient funding, bureaucratic obstacles and inadequate training.

Ikhenobe and Atakpa's (2023) work at Akwa Ibom State University backs up these ideas. Their study found that about 93% of staff were unaware of SERVICOM, and 88% reported no monitoring. This problem seriously hurts the policy's success. The paper notes issues in how the university uses SERVICOM. The case study shows that SERVICOM is often just a formality, with little real impact at the institutional level.

Omigbodun (2021) conducted an ethnographic study of SERVICOM as a means of combating corruption in Nigeria. He found an inconsistency in implementation and a significant gap between what the officials intend and what actually happened in the organization. SERVICOM was often discussed in grand terms, but it did not have much to show for it. He found that the program had uneven execution, too much rhetoric and unclear processes instead of a clear structure. His study shows that groups such as the UK Department for International Development (DFID) often stated that SERVICOM was doing well even when the evidence suggested otherwise.

Taken together, these studies highlight several themes. First, SERVICOM has seen some local successes, especially in its early days (Abdulraheem and Adepoju, 2017), but these gains have not lasted. Second, structural and institutional weaknesses, like the lack of desk officers in MDAs, hampered progress. Third, citizen awareness and participation remained very low (Olajide et al. 2024; Ikhenoba and Atakpa, 2023), thereby limiting SERVICOM's ability to serve as an accountability tool. Finally, from a critical governance angle, SERVICOM illustrated the conflict between reform promises and actual practices in Nigeria's public sector (Oluwajobi, 2020; Omigbodun, 2021). Overall, the literature highlights a recurring lesson in Nigerian public service reforms that just because a policy is adopted at the federal level does not mean that it will effectively reach grassroots implementation. SERVICOM's journey showed both the potential and limits of technical reforms in a context where established bureaucratic practices and low citizen engagement continue to influence outcomes.

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Transition to Fieldwork

The above-reviewed literature gives a broad understanding of SERVICOM'S goals, accomplishments and challenges in various sectors and situations in Nigeria (Abdulraheem & Adepoju, 2017; Oluwajobi, 2020; Adewumi, 2018; Adejumo & Akinlabi, 2022; Olajide, Oni & Ojo, 2024; Ikhenobe & Atakpa, 2023; Omigbodun, 2021). These studies highlight common issues, such as weak institutional support, limited public awareness, and declining political will to sustain SERVICOM after its launch. Still, many of these works rely on secondary data or focus on specific areas such as health and education, leaving state-level dynamics less examined.

To fill this gap, this study included field research in Kano State. It examined the organizational and operational realities of SERVICOM at the subnational level. The field research aims to enrich the insights from existing studies and provide objective evidence of how SERVICOM operated when institutional support is weak and citizen awareness is low. We formulated specific research questions meant for semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders (e.g., state SERVICOM officer, public servants and service users/citizens). The decision to have stakeholders as responders is meant to achieve saturation, which will allow in-depth analysis.

Kano State has 30 Ministries and SERVICOM is directly under the Office of the Head of Service. A Permanent Secretary heads the compact, supported by staff, administrators, and other auxiliary officers. We targeted a representative sample from the state SERVICOM office and other staff from major MDAs, (such as Ministries of Agriculture, Education, Finance and Economic Development, Information and Internal Affairs, Local Government and Chieftainship Affairs, Planning and Budget, Science, Technology and Innovation, Works and Infrastructure, Humanitarian Affairs and Poverty Alleviation, Transport, Women, Children and Persons with Special Needs, Youth and Sports, Special Duties, Power and Renewable Energy, Justice, Health, Commerce, Investment, Industry and Cooperation, Water Resources, Rural and Community Development, Higher Education, Housing, Land and Physical Planning, Culture and Tourism, Transport, Livestock Development, Religious Affairs, Environment and Climate Change, Mineral Resources, and Public Procurement, Project Monitoring and Evaluation) to ensure credibility of the outcomes. A stratified random sampling method was used for citizens/users (e.g., urban/rural, gender) to capture diverse views. The responses provided insight into the trajectory of SERVICOM from its inception to its present state.

Table 1

Interview Responses from Public Servants on SERVICOM's Performance

Question	Officers' Response (Field Data)	Analytical Note
1. What do you understand by SERVICOM and how do the state public servants perceive its impact on service delivery?	The officers explained that SERVICOM was designed to improve service delivery by introducing service charters, complaints mechanisms and desk officers in MDAs. Initially, it was perceived positively and improved responsiveness.	Confirms SERVICOM's initial role as a citizen-focused reform initiative. Shows awareness among public servants of its objectives.
2. Since the introduction of SERVICOM, what changes have you observed?	Initially, there were improvements such as shorter waiting times and improved responsiveness. However, now the program is "comatose" with little visibility.	Demonstrates reform decay: strong initial results that were not sustained due to a lack of continuity.

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Question	Officers' Response (Field Data)	Analytical Note
3. What specific challenges do you face in implementing SERVICOM charter?	Challenges include lack of funding, weak management attention, the absence of sanctions and inadequate desktop infrastructure in MDAs.	Highlights structural issues: resource constraints, weak enforcement and institutional neglect undermine sustainability.
4. Has SERVICOM influenced staff attitudes, accountability and responsiveness?	Initially, yes—staff became more accountable and responsive. Currently, the program has little or no impact, as it is rarely mentioned.	Indicates SERVICOM'S declining relevance and inability to embed long-term attitudinal change.
5. To what extent has management supported SERVICOM?	Initially, management support was strong, with funds and recognition. Now, support is minimal and the program exists "only on paper."	Reinforces the problem of policy discontinuity and lack of sustained leadership commitment.
6. Is SERVICOM effective?	Initially, yes, but currently it is hardly known or acknowledged.	Confirms SERVICOM's ineffectiveness in its current state, despite early promise.

Narrative Discussion

The interview findings show a consistent trend: SERVICOM began as a well-received innovation in service delivery but, over time, lost visibility and impact. The officers emphasized that in its early years, SERVICOM improved responsiveness, accountability and citizen engagement. However, challenges like inadequate funding, absence of sanctions and weak management support led to its decline. Today, SERVICOM exists mainly as a symbolic reform with little functional presence in MDAs. This supports what the literature has already highlighted, that reform programs in Nigeria often begin with enthusiasm but fail to achieve long-term institutionalization.

Comparative Reflection with Literature

Interviews with more than 35 public servants across MDAs SERVICOM. Abdulraheem and Adepoju (2017), in their study in Northern Nigeria, found that health service delivery saw marginal improvements when SERVICOM came into being, mainly affecting patient waiting time and service speed. Nwachukwu (2020) stated that initially, there was an increase in accountability and citizen-focused governance due to SERVICOM, but this began to wane as political will to sustain it declined and as problems of underfunding also set in. The officers highlighted a number of issues: policy neglect, lack of resources, no sanctions and a declining focus on SERVICOM. These issues mirror the systemic problems highlighted by scholars, such as Akinwale (2018), who argued that most reforms in the Nigerian public sector tend to fail because they are unsustainable. Real-life data are conclusive. Stakeholders describe SERVICOM as "comatose" and "just on paper." This scenario clearly illustrates the gap between what a policy intends to achieve and what it actually achieves.

What the researcher has found, supported by practical evidence, is another example of reform failure in Nigeria; while programs are launched with enviable backing, motivation and excitement, they are left in abeyance. The findings here identify the main themes from over 35 public servants and 25 citizens. While individual experiences differed, there was a strong agreement that SERVICOM was effective at first but has since declined.

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Table 2
Interview Responses from 25 Citizens on SERVICOM'S Performance

Question	Citizens' Responses (Field Data)	Analytical Note
1. Are you aware of SERVICOM?	A few years back, SERVICOM had desk officers who received complaints and acted quickly. At present, the program is invisible and there is nowhere to lodge complaints. Citizens now experience delays, inefficiency and poor services.	Confirms SERVICOM'S initial visibility and accessibility, but also highlights its current dormancy and the return of inefficiency.
2. Do you recommend that SERVICOM be supported or returned to its former status?	Yes. Citizens recommend reinstating SERVICOM to serve as a watchdog and provide a complaints platform.	Suggests public demand for the revival of SERVICOM as a mechanism for accountability and customer protection.
3. How satisfied are you with the quality, timeliness, and responsiveness of service since SERVICOM'S introduction?	Initially, satisfaction was high because public servants feared being reported. Now, inefficiency and laxity have returned.	Reflects SERVICOM'S early deterrent effect on inefficiency and its role in shaping staff behavior, which has since eroded.
4. Have you ever lodged a complaint under the SERVICOM platform, and if yes, how was it handled?	Yes. Complaints were handled appropriately and without delay. Many citizens relied on desk officers to correct wrongs.	Shows SERVICOM'S practical relevance in resolving grievances when it was active. Demonstrates its utility as a citizen-oriented mechanism.
5. What changes and improvements would you like to see in government service delivery?	Reintroduce SERVICOM with funding, strong government support, and sanctioning powers. Citizens also recommend legal backing, similar to EFCC, to strengthen enforcement.	Citizens want SERVICOM re-empowered with binding authority, institutional resources and a legal framework to guarantee sustainability.

Comparative Synthesis of Public Servants and Citizens' Perspectives

The field interviews provide complementary insights from both service providers (35 public servants) and service users (25 citizens). While their vantage points differ, their accounts reveal strikingly similar conclusions about SERVICOM'S trajectory.

Table 3
Comparison of Public Servants and Citizens' Perspectives on SERVICOM

Theme	Public Servants Perspective	Citizens Perspective	Synthesis/Interpretation
Awareness and Purpose of SERVICOM	SERVICOM was designed to improve service delivery through service charters, complaint mechanisms, and desk officers. Initially well understood and accepted by public servants.	Citizens recalled the existence of desk officers who addressed complaints promptly, enhancing service accessibility.	Both groups affirm SERVICOM'S visibility and effectiveness in its formative years.
Changes Over Time	Initially improved responsiveness and	Initially deterred inefficiency, but	Both groups highlight a decline from initial effectiveness to

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Theme	Public Servants Perspective	Citizens Perspective	Synthesis/Interpretation
	accountability, but now "comatose" and rarely mentioned in MDAs.	currently invisible, with delays and poor services re-emerging.	present-day irrelevance.
Challenges	Lack of funding, weak management support, absence of sanctions, and neglect of SERVICOM desks.	Absence of complaint channels, inefficiency, delays, and loss of deterrent effect on staff behaviour.	Challenges identified by public servants (institutional neglect) manifest as poor service outcomes experienced by citizens.
Impact on Accountability and Responsiveness	Initially influenced staff positively; now negligible.	Initially made staff more responsive, but inefficiency has returned.	Both perspectives confirm SERVICOM'S early success in changing staff behaviour, which has since faded.
Support and Institutional Backing	Initially funded and supported by management, but currently only symbolic.	Recommend reintroducing SERVICOM with strong government support, funding, and legal authority.	Public servants highlight management withdrawal; citizens emphasize the need for government re-commitment and legal enforcement.
Effectiveness	Effective in early years, but no longer so.	Initially effective, now ineffective due to dormancy.	Consensus that SERVICOM's current effectiveness is negligible, despite its promising start.

Narrative Synthesis

The comparison shows public servants and citizens share close views. Both agree that SERVICOM was once a noticeable and useful reform that made government offices responsible and answerable. Yet, they also concur that its impact has fallen sharply, leaving the program largely idle. Public servants cite institutional and structural issues that hinder sustainability, such as insufficient funding, weak penalties, and reduced support from management. Citizens focus more on how these issues play out in practice: slow services, no clear ways to complain and a return to poor service. Notably, while public servants tend to describe SERVICOM as comatose and underfunded, citizens want it restored with legal authority. They compare it to bodies such as the EFCC or the ICPC. This suggests the public views SERVICOM not just as customer service but also as a potential regulator to hold staff accountable. In short, SERVICOM's history mirrors many Nigerian reform attempts. These often begin well but fade due to breaks in continuity, few resources and poor institutional backing. The shared call to bring it back—especially with legal and monetary support—underlines how important SERVICOM remains to the public, even if it is less active now.

Linking Fieldwork Findings to the Theoretical Framework

The field data support the idea that SERVICOM's problems were not caused by flawed planning. Instead, they arose from poor institutional support (the Institutional Theory), a mismatch with ongoing performance systems (NPM) and a shortage of reliable rewards, money and punishments (the Government Failure Theory). Public employees and the public suggest similar fixes: for SERVICOM to regain importance, it must exist within a legally

obligatory institutional structure. It also needs sufficient funding and effective ways to enforce rules that can change how government workers are motivated.

- The Institutional Theory explains how structures, standards and workplace settings affect how well policies work. SERVICOM's fall shows the institutional weaknesses in Nigeria's government services. These include a lack of consistency, poor enforcement methods, and insufficiently assigned resources. Government workers mentioned that management was pulling back support and that there was a shortage of penalties. The public noticed the disappearance of ways to lodge complaints and a return to poor performance. These experiences support the idea that changes often fail to stick if they are not securely based in long-lasting legal and organizational structures.

• New Public Management (NPM): SERVICOM was first based on NPM ideas, which focus on keeping customers happy, being responsible and being productive. Both government workers and the public verified that SERVICOM initially made things more responsive and improved staff attitudes, which fit with NPM's focus on governance based on results. But its decline shows the limits of NPM reforms in Nigeria, especially when performance systems lack stable funding, tracking, and managerial dedication. The public's requests for stronger punishment powers bring attention to the difference between the ideal NPM ideas and the reality of weak enforcement in Nigeria's government system.

• The Government Failure Theory (GFT) explains the larger situation of SERVICOM'S fall. The shortage of funds, the lack of penalties, and the lack of consistency expose weaknesses in Nigeria's governance structure. These failures by the government to keep and enforce its own reform plan weakened SERVICOM's ability to make lasting improvements in how services are delivered.

Conclusion of Fieldwork Findings

An examination of the existing bureaucratic arrangement reveals that out of 30 ministries in the state, only about 18 percent have functional desk officers, thereby limiting institutional capacity for effective coordination and follow-through. An estimated 46 percent have identified offices that exist in name only and are mostly inactive, thus signifying an absence of practical implementation from the design stage of policies. About 36 percent of the MDAs still operate without functional SERVICOM offices, while some are only beginning the process of setting them up.

It may be the uneven administrative structure that informs implementation gaps and inconsistency in how reform directives are being institutionalized within the state bureaucracy. Further beyond these structural inadequacies are inadequate funding and logistical support, while reform units frequently remain under-resourced to carry out the functions assigned to them. In addition, a lack of interest and support from the Chief Executives of MDAs undermines the sustainability of reforms; as such leaders attach greater priority to day-to-day administrative processes than to strategic institutional development. Even so, bureaucratic routines and a reluctance to change remain, especially among those used to older, top-down decision-making styles. These factors constrain reform efforts and weaken the state's ability to translate policy goals into tangible improvements in how it governs its efficiency, and the services it provides.

Fieldwork findings from both public servants and citizens in Kano State show a clear view of SERVICOM's development within Nigeria's public sector. At the start, SERVICOM was seen as an effective tool for improving accountability, responsiveness and citizen involvement. Public servants noted that the program initially received strong support from management, sufficient funding and a visible presence across MDAs. Citizens confirmed that

complaints were handled quickly, delays decreased, and public servants became more responsive due to the deterrent effect of SERVICOM'S complaint channels.

However, both groups highlighted that these improvements did not last. Public servants now describe the program as "comatose," pointing to a lack of funding, weak management support and the absence of sanctions as major reasons for its decline. Citizens have also noticed the disappearance of desk officers, worsening inefficiency and a return of service delays. Importantly, while both groups agree that SERVICOM is currently irrelevant, citizens strongly called for its revival with adequate resources, government commitment and legal authority similar to that of enforcement agencies like the EFCC and ICPC.

The fieldwork confirms that SERVICOM is a symbol of Nigeria's ongoing reform issues: promising innovations that fade away due to weak institutions, governance problems and insufficient changes in management practices. At the same time, SERVICOM is currently inactive. Still, both citizens and public servants recognize its ongoing importance, especially if it is reintroduced with stronger legal support, adequate funding and lasting institutional backing.

Recommendations

A multidimensional strategy is required to address the problem and restore the effectiveness of public service reforms in Nigeria, in general, and in Kano State in particular. First, political and administrative commitment must be enhanced. Chief Executives of MDAs must champion reform initiatives in practice and must ensure that reform units are granted full capacity and are accorded authority within the management structure of their organizations. Accountability of leadership should be reflected in performance evaluation schemes, tying the success of administrative units to the outcomes of reforms.

Secondly, funding and logistics need to be satisfactorily guaranteed. A significant number of reforms have failed because the offices lack adequate operational resources, have no data on their activities, and do not have the technical capacity recommended. Setting aside a dedicated budget line for reform implementation would guarantee continuity and dilute reliance on ad hoc funding.

Thirdly, continued growth and education are needed for desk officers and staff to keep up institutional output and innovation. Working with development groups, schools, and expert groups can help launch specialised training on performance, digital processes, and policy review.

Fourthly, institutional coordination and monitoring need improvement. A central reform monitoring committee could be created within the Office of the Head of Service with membership of the Civil Service Commission and the Ministry of Budget and Planning. This would help different government bodies work together and allow for policy adjustments based on feedback. Also, changing bureaucratic inertia will take a focused shift.

Fifthly, reform should be promoted as a shared administrative value that emphasizes transparency, accountability, and excellent service, not just as a technical task. Departments that operate in accordance with reform can be warranted recognition and incentive programs that would galvanize officers into ownership of the reform process.

Sustainable public service reform in Kano State will generally depend on alignment between institutional structures, leadership commitment, and resource allocation toward the broader agenda of efficient and responsive governance.

However, subnational efforts will remain limited unless national policies provide the necessary support through the implementation of the following:

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1. Reinstitutionalize SERVICOM with Legal Authority: SERVICOM should get legal power like regulatory bodies, such as the EFCC and ICPC. Legal backing would make its recommendations and actions required and ensure there are punishments for officials who don't follow it.

2. Strengthen Management Dedication and Political Will: Governments at the federal and state levels must make SERVICOM a priority by agreeing with it through support from leaders, adding it to performance management systems and checking compliance regularly.

3. Reinforce Citizen Feedback Mechanism: Bringing back SERVICOM's complaint platform, especially through online methods and hotlines, would bring back public confidence and accountability. Citizens should once again have clear ways to send in and follow their complaints.

4. Connect SERVICOM to Larger Public Service Changes: SERVICOM should not work by itself. Its aims should align with civil service reforms, anti-corruption initiatives, and e-governance reforms to ensure consistency and durability.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study made four main contributions to knowledge. First, it provided empirical evidence by integrating the perspectives of both public servants and citizens, offering a more holistic view of SERVICOM's trajectory using Kano State as a case study. Second, it made a theoretical contribution by applying Institutional Theory, New Public Management Theory, and Government Failure Theory in a complementary manner, thereby enriching the understanding of reform sustainability in Nigeria. Third, it offered practical and policy insights, emphasizing citizens' demand for SERVICOM's revival as a socially embedded expectation of accountability. Finally, the study provided conceptual clarification of reform decay, showing how well-designed reforms lose traction without institutionalization, enforcement and political commitment.

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