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## COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE AND WICKED PROBLEMS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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### Abstract

*Contemporary societies and policy actors confront myriads of intractable and open-ended problems that tend to defy suggested solutions especially as the proffered solutions often appear to be worse than the symptoms. These seemingly unpredictable and difficult challenges are what scholars have christened “wicked problems”. Combining a review of extant literature with personal experience, the researcher posits that governance deficit and corruption are twin problems that define governance in Nigeria. Corruption and deficit governance are wicked problems hampering development management in the country. This study argues that government policy executors and other stakeholders must collaborate and confront these wicked problems frontally to change the ugly narratives of developmental deficit in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** collaboration, governance, wicked, problems

### Introduction

In the last 30 years, demands for good governance and a better life have been pervasive across the globe (Buyse, 2018; Salamon, 2016). At the forefront of those championing these demands are civil society organisations, community-based organisations, voluntary organisations, unions, township associations and non-governmental organizations (Ali and Ghazali, 2020). The agitations are a consequence of what scholars regard as ‘*wicked problems*’ which have neither empirical answers nor definitive solutions (Churchman, 1967; Rittel and Webber, 1973). Wicked problems confronting Nigeria as a nation include an alarming number of out of schoolchildren including *Almajirai* and a high rate of girl child illiteracy. Others are internally displaced persons (IDPs), herders-farmers conflict, inequality, corruption, mass poverty and unemployment, ethnic and religious tensions, threats of secession, terrorism, kidnappings, desertification, erosion, floods and so on (Ali & Ghazali, 2020). The intricate nature of these problems demands collaboration among governance actors. Collaborative governance implies collaboration among public sector actors and stakeholders. It refers to the establishment of rules to govern the behaviour of public sector stakeholders and actors (Zadek, 2008)

The goal of this paper is to explore the conceptual issues concerning collaborative governance and wicked problems as it relates to development in Nigeria. To achieve this goal, the study adopts the hermeneutic and heuristic techniques with the aim of (a) examining the essence and significance of collaborative governance, (b) defining the concept of and clarifying the characteristics of wicked problems, and (c) examining the relationship between collaborative governance and wicked problems.

### Collaborative governance: Nature and imperatives

Governance concerns the structures, processes, rules and traditions through which decision-making power that determines actions is exercised, and so accountabilities are manifested and actualized. Collaborative governance is a multi-actor process involving several stakeholders such as governments, corporations, civil society groups, and labour unions which seeks to

guide the activities of governance actors (Finkelstein, 1995; Rasche, 2010; Rosenau, 1992). Collaborative governance arrangements promote voluntary regulations aimed at providing a level playing field in terms of social, economic and environmental benchmarks (Rasche, 2010). Emerson et al. (2012) posit that collaborative governance is “the processes and structures of public policy decision-making and management that engage people constructively across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/or the public, private and civic spheres in order to carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished” (p.2). Collaborative governance according to Ansell and Gash (2008) “is a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets” (p.544). Zadek (2008) defines collaborative governance as “...arrangements that involve a deliberative multi-stakeholder collaboration in establishing rules of behaviour governing some or all of those involved in their development and potentially a broader community of actors” (p.382). Citizens and governments need to collaborate to ensure better policy formulation, and efficient allocation of resources in order to achieve better outcomes in terms of information, legitimacy, and performance (Lee et al., 2019; Donahue and Zeckhauser, 2011). This collaboration takes the form of consultation, involvement and empowerment.

### **Wicked Problems: Definition and characteristics**

In the early 1970s, Rittel and Webber identified an emerging new concern relating to social policies such as poverty reduction, environmental quality and model cities calling for a new problem-solving approach. The concerns are what Churchman (1967) called wicked problems. The term ‘wicked problems’ refer to resistant, complex and recurring issues that are precisely not describable and have competing and different conditions (Rittel and Webber 1973). Churchman (1967) defines wicked problems as “a class of social system problems which are ill formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing”. Ten primary characteristics of wicked problems identified in extant literature are:

1. There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem, i.e. even the definition and scope of the problem are contested (that is Wicked problems are difficult to define)
2. Wicked problems have no ‘stopping rule’, i.e. no definitive solution.
3. Solutions to wicked problems are not true-or-false, but good-or-bad in the eyes of stakeholders.
4. There is no immediate or ultimate test for solutions to a wicked problem.
5. Every (attempted) solution to a wicked problem is a ‘one-shot operation’; the results cannot be readily undone, and there is no opportunity to learn by trial-and-error (may not be reversible or forgettable).
6. Wicked problems do not have a clear set of potential solutions, nor is there a well-described set of permissible operations to be incorporated into the plan.
7. Every wicked problem is essentially unique.
8. Every wicked problem may be a symptom of another problem.
9. The existence of a discrepancy representing a wicked problem implies that there are multiple explanations for the wicked problem
10. The planner (policymaker) has no ‘right to be wrong’— (there is no public tolerance of initiatives or experiments that fail) (Peters, 2017; Rittel & Webber, 1973).

Summarizing these problems, Christensen (2009) contends that first, the problem may not be understood unless a solution is created, probably because every potential solution reveals new aspects of the problem and requires adjustment to the *potential* solution. This explains the difficulties in defining the problems, which essentially stem from the interdependencies, multiple causes and internally conflicting goals. Secondly, there are no preventive rules. Given that there are no objective definitions of the problem, there are also no ideal solutions, implying that the problem-solving process does not end when there is an optimal solution, but when resources such as time or money are consumed. Thirdly, solutions are neither right nor wrong, but good/bad (enough) or better/worse. Therefore, the quality of the solution cannot be objective but has a valuative implication. Fourthly, 'wicked problems' are essentially unique. While we can learn how to approach them, one cannot transcribe solutions between two problems (Rittel and Webber 1973, p.164). Fifth, every solution has consequences. Solutions have to be tried out in order to learn about the problem but every solution is costly and has lasting consequences. Lastly, while a sum of solutions might be thought of, another set of potential solutions might never appear. Creativity and judgement are thus the leading principles on what decisions are to be selected and implemented.

### **The wicked problems of corruption and governance deficit in Nigeria**

Corruption is so rampant in Nigeria that it has assumed the status of the norm or ideal to the end that those not engaged in it are seen as blockheads, dummies, odd and out of touch with reality. The practice of corruption and the discussions on corruption in Nigeria both have a long history. Stories of corrupt practices are regular features in most Nigerian homes, public places and social arenas. As soon as two or more Nigerians gather, the conversation often veers towards the question of leadership failure and corruption. In his heroic commentary on politics in Nigeria, titled "*The Trouble with Nigeria*", Achebe (1983) observes, "Whenever two Nigerians meet, their conversation will sooner or later slide into a litany of our national deficiencies". No doubt, corruption will top the list of such inadequacies. Akin to the problem of corruption in Nigeria is the malaise of 'leadership failure' or 'governance deficit'. Corruption and governance deficit (also known as leadership failure) in Nigeria have always dominated discussions in the country at different fora in communities and the academic arena. This could probably be because of its pervasive nature. According to Amadi (2017), corruption and attempts to tackle it have tended to define governance in Nigeria since its existence as a nation-state. Osibanjo (2018) decried leadership failure as one of the major problems besetting Nigeria. In view of these lamentations, one is tempted to wonder why corruption has become so endemic in Nigeria. Rather than reducing, it is on the increase. The answer is not far-fetched, these 'wicked problems' are essentially unique because while we can learn how to approach them, one cannot transcribe solutions of one wicked problem to another (Rittel and Webber, 1973).

### **The nexus between collaborative governance and wicked problems**

A host of problems such as climate change, refugees, terrorism, kidnapping, digital warfare, ageing populations and loss of biodiversity confront contemporary societies, policy actors and public institutions (Termeer et al., 2019). One disturbing nature of the problems that beset societies, public policy operators and institutions is the extent of their wickedness (Kirschke, et al., 2019; Noordegraaf et al., 2019), signifying a combination of ambiguity, diversity and knottiness (Head and Alford, 2015). According to Burns et al. (2013), Rittel and Webber use the concept wicked 'to depict a "virulent" (as distinct from "innocuous")', or "malignant" or "difficult" problem rather than imply unethical or undesirable evils. Churchman (1967) used the term *wicked* to depict the *devilish nature* of the problem, where the proposed *solution* repeatedly turns out to be more mischievous than the *form*. The



problems involve competing interests with a multiplicity of stakeholders jostling for supremacy (Ali and Ghazali, 2020). According to Termeer et al. (2019), “many policy studies have argued that these problems are particularly challenging as they transcend the borders of traditional policy domains, involve a wide variety of actors across different scale levels and resist the attempts to solve them”. The essentially unique (Rittel and Webber, 1973) unpredictable and complex nature of these problems suggests that no single government can confront these problems all alone. The irreconcilable nature of their *wickedness* (Head and Alford, 2015) and the inability of any single government to address the problems dictate the necessity for collaboration between policymakers and a network of public sector actors. Xian (2013) succinctly puts it this way “the collective or ‘social’ nature of working with wicked problems and adaptation strategies requires a ‘holistic and process-oriented approach’ that is ‘adaptive, participatory and transdisciplinary”.

The earliest literature on the wicked problem recommends a multiple-stakeholder approach to exploring the relevant concerns, interests, and diversities in value perception and policy responses (Head, 2019). They advocate alternative policy and governance methods, incorporating deliberation among stakeholders, conflict management, and adaptable and responsive policies and limits in terms of jurisdiction and policy coverage (Termeer, et al., 2019). The different governance approaches suggested as possible ways of handling the wicked problems include network governance (Van Bueren et al., 2003), collaborative governance (Roberts, 2000), adaptive governance (Gunderson and Light, 2006) or interactive governance (Torfing et al., 2012). Nevertheless, some scholars have averred that these alternative approaches are not capable of addressing wicked problems. Rittel and Webber (1973) describe attempts at using these measures to tackle the wicked problem as impracticable. Other scholars argue that relying on single reasonability is a futile exercise that portends ineffectiveness. Rather, a combination of different governance capabilities including reflexivity, responsiveness, resilience, revitalization and rescaling (Termeer et al., 2015; Termeer et al., 2016), clumsy (Hartmann, 2012) and messy institutions (Ney and Verweij, 2015) are suggested as instruments for tackling wicked problems. This paper strongly believes that consultation among the various actors in government and the involvement of stakeholders can fast-track the resolution of the problems as this model involve a combination of a diversity of experience.

## **Conclusion**

Good governance implies genuine and serious political efforts aimed at moving amorphous problems in a more structured manner, to reduce inter-actor differences, while supporting inter-organizational policy formulation and execution (Turnbull and Hoppe, 2019). Collaborative governance focuses on the consideration of problems from several outlooks, designing programmes that recognize complexity and uncertainty, improving policy, appraisal of capabilities and strengthening the collaborative capabilities of the policy network (Head, 2019). The alarming rate of out-of-school children including *Almajirai*, high rate of girl child illiteracy, herders-farmers conflict, inequality, mass poverty and unemployment, ethnic and religious tensions, threats of secession, terrorism, kidnappings, desertification, erosion, floods and so on confronting the Nigerian nation are consequences of corruption and governance deficit which are identified as wicked problems in this paper. Collaborative governance involves the establishment of rules to govern the behaviour of a network of policy actors working together to proffer solutions to societal problems. Unless public sector actors and stakeholders collaborate to tackle the knotty problems of corruption and governance deficit, the Nigerian economy may remain underdeveloped.



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