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PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND DISASTER MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA: MYTH OR REALITY?

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Abstract

This paper, Public Administration and Disaster Management in Nigeria: A Myth or Reality? was necessitated by the fact that Nigeria faces frequent natural and human-induced disasters such as floods, epidemics, communal conflicts, and environmental degradation. Despite the existence of numerous government agencies and frameworks for disaster management such as the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), the effectiveness of public administration in mitigating these crises remains questionable. Since Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999, public administration has undergone significant reforms aimed at improving governance, accountability, and service delivery. This work examines the evolution, structures, reforms, challenges, and prospects of public administration in Nigeria between 1999 and 2025. Using scholarly perspectives and policy documents, the paper analyzes how institutional reforms with respect to disaster management achieved expected result and challenge. The analysis found performance failure; and so made recommendations that include strengthening management-based administration, capacity building and training, among others.

Keywords: Public Administration, Disaster management, Nigeria.

Introduction

The contemporary Nigerian state is confronted with an escalating frequency and intensity of disasters that pose existential threats to its population, economy, and development. The nation's risk profile is a complex amalgam of natural hazards, exacerbated by climate change, and human-induced catastrophes rooted in political, social, and economic frailties. From the

devastating annual floods that submerge vast swathes of its territory to the protracted humanitarian crisis spawned by the Boko Haram insurgency, the imperative for an effective public administration-led disaster management system has never been more acute. In response, the Nigerian government, particularly since the return to democracy in 1999, has established a formal, multi-tiered administrative architecture for disaster management. The creation of the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) via Act 12 of 1999 (as amended) signified a deliberate attempt to institutionalize and centralize disaster coordination. This framework, which extends to State Emergency Management Agencies (SEMAs) and Local Emergency Management Committees (LEMCS), represents the state's formal commitment to the protection of its citizens the supposed "reality" of its disaster management capacity. However, the aftermath of every major disaster in the country is invariably characterized by a chorus of public condemnation citing delayed response, inadequate relief, poor coordination, and corruption. This persistent gap between statutory mandate and operational performance fuels a critical scholarly and public discourse: Is the elaborate public administration machinery for disaster management in Nigeria a functioning reality or a hollow myth? This dissertation probes this central question, moving beyond a simplistic binary to explore the complex interplay of factors that define the "troubled reality" of the Nigerian experience.

Despite a sophisticated, legally-backed institutional framework for disaster management, Nigeria's vulnerability to disasters continues to increase, and the human and economic costs of these events remain catastrophic. The core problem is a significant implementation deficit, where well-articulated policies fail to translate into effective, timely, and equitable outcomes. The public administration system, theoretically designed to be the solution, is often perceived as part of the problem. Its operations are allegedly constrained by bureaucratic pathologies, political interference, systemic corruption, and a critical lack of technical capacity. While NEMA and its counterparts exist as administrative entities, their efficacy in mitigating hazards, preparing for emergencies, responding swiftly, and ensuring sustainable recovery is highly contested. This research, therefore, addresses the disjuncture between the institutional architecture of disaster management and its functional performance, seeking to anatomize the elements that constitute its reality and the systemic failures that perpetuate the myth of its effectiveness. This work, therefore, raises some concerns like What are the theoretical underpinnings and statutory provisions of the public administration framework for disaster management in Nigeria? How effective has this framework been in practice? An analysis of specific disaster management cases (e.g., 2012/2022 floods, IDP crisis)? What are the systemic, political, and socio-economic factors that strengthen (reality) or weaken (myth) the public administration of disasters in Nigeria? And To what extent do the observed outcomes of disaster management interventions in Nigeria align with or deviate from the stated policy objectives?

Public Administration In Nigeria from 1999 - Date

Since Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999, public administration has played a critical role in managing disasters arising from natural, environmental, technological, and human-induced causes. According to Adamolekun (2002), democratic governance revitalized Nigeria's public institutions after prolonged military rule, creating opportunities for improved policy coordination and service delivery. Between 1999 and 2025, Nigeria experienced recurring disasters such as flooding, epidemics, oil spills, building collapses, fires, communal conflicts, and insurgency-related humanitarian crises (Adebayo, 2018). The

effectiveness of disaster management during this period has been shaped by administrative reforms, institutional capacity, political leadership, and intergovernmental relations.

Conceptual Clarification

- i. **Public Administration:** Public administration refers to the machinery and processes through which government policies are formulated, implemented, and evaluated. In Nigeria, public administration operates within a federal system involving federal, state, and local governments, as provided for in the 1999 Constitution (Ayo, 2000). It encompasses ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs) responsible for public service delivery and national development.
- ii. **Disaster Management:** Disaster management involves systematic efforts to prevent, prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters. Scholars such as Coppola (2015) described disaster management as a continuous process involving mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. In Nigeria, disaster management has gradually evolved from an ad hoc relief-based approach to a more structured administrative system (Oladipo, 2014).

Literature and Synopsis of Disaster Management

- i. **Abule-Ado Gas Explosion (Lagos, 2020):** On 15 March 2020, a massive explosion and fire tore through the Abule-Ado area of Festac Town in Lagos State. It started around 9 a.m. and the fire was finally extinguished late that night. The blast was extremely powerful and heard kilometers away. NNPC initially claimed the explosion occurred after a truck hit gas cylinders at a facility near a pipeline. NEMA and other investigations indicated the pipeline itself was under too much pressure (possibly by a laden truck), leaked fuel vapour into the air, and that ignited. Other analyses dispute the presence of a gas plant or cylinders entirely, suggesting instead that vaporized petroleum from a ruptured pipeline caused the explosion. At least 23 people were killed, dozens injured, and hundreds of buildings destroyed including schools and homes. Tens of thousands were displaced; estimated total displacement figures reached hundreds of thousands according to government sources. Firefighters and emergency crews fought the blaze through the day and night until it was finally contained. The Lagos State Government established a ₦2 billion relief fund for victims, including cash support to families who lost loved ones. There were efforts to provide temporary shelter, food, and medical support, though many affected residents later complained that promised broader compensation and reconstruction assistance was slow or insufficient.
- ii. **Ikoyi Building Collapse (Lagos, 2021):** In 2021, a 21-storey luxury residential building under construction in the affluent Ikoyi district of Lagos suddenly collapsed. The disaster occurred without warning, trapping many workers and nearby residents under tons of concrete and steels. Preliminary observations and official probes pointed to structural failure and poor construction practice. Conflicting reports emerged about whether the building was legally permitted or altered beyond approved plans e.g., disputes over whether 15 or 21 floors had been authorized. Broader industry concerns cited poor enforcement of building codes, substandard materials, and regulatory lapses as contributing systemic factors. Rescue teams, including emergency responders and civil defense units, worked days to pull survivors from the rubble. A government investigation panel was established shortly after the collapse to determine what went wrong and to issue recommendations. The tragedy prompted Lagos authorities to

inspect and test nearby buildings, leading to demolition orders for other unsafe structures to avert repeat incidents.

- iii. **1998 Jesse Pipeline Explosion (Delta State):** On 18 October 1998, a petroleum pipeline in the Jesse area of Delta State ruptured and exploded, unleashing one of Nigeria's deadliest industrial disasters. The resultant fire burned unchecked for several days before being extinguished with the help of international fire-fighting teams. There are differing accounts: the government blamed pipeline sabotage and people collecting fuel, while others argue that poor pipeline maintenance and corrosion led to the rupture, with fuel vapour ignited by a spark or cigarette. Official and independent estimates vary, but over 1,000 deaths are widely attributed to the blast and ensuing fire. Hundreds more were injured, and many bodies were too badly burned for individual identification, leading to mass burials. Fighting the blaze took several days, including involvement by foreign-specialized teams using nitrogen-rich firefighting foam. Federal authorities visited the site, promised support, and vowed to improve future safety — but long-term remediation, structural safety improvements, and community compensation were uneven or limited. Subsequent discussions and commemorations have focused on pipeline safety reforms and the need for better monitoring, pipeline integrity checks, and community protections.
- iv. **Port Harcourt Stampede (Rivers State, 2022):** On 28 May 2022, a crowd crush (stampede) occurred at a charity food distribution event organized by the Kings Assembly Pentecostal Church at the Port Harcourt Polo Club. Thousands of people had gathered early to receive free food and goods; impatience and poor crowd control led to a surge that resulted in many being trampled. At least 31 people were killed in the stampede and seven others injured. Media reports noted that some attendees had gathered the night before, compounding the risk of overcrowding. Emergency medical services and police responded to treat the injured and restore order. The event was immediately suspended, and state authorities (including the governor) ordered a formal investigation to understand what went wrong. Officials urged better crowd control planning and coordination with security forces for future events, especially where large gatherings and giveaways are foreseen.
- v. **2015 Onitsha Tanker Fire tragedy:** In late May 2015 (often reported as May 31 or early June 1), a petrol-laden tanker lost control and crashed into a highly populated area in Onitsha, a major commercial city in Anambra State, southeastern Nigeria. The accident occurred at the Upper Iweka/Asaba Motor Park, a busy transport hub where many buses, motorcycles, traders and pedestrians gather. The tanker, carrying Premium Motor Spirit (petrol), was descending the Onitsha–Enugu Expressway when it reportedly lost control. It rammed into vehicles and the crowd at the motor park and burst into flames, causing an immediate and massive fire. Many buses, motorcycles and nearby objects were engulfed in the inferno, and victims were burned beyond recognition. The blaze spread rapidly because the area was densely populated and filled with combustible materials and people. The most widely reported cause was that the tanker lost control while descending a slope, likely due to brake failure or loss of braking capability, which prevented the driver from stopping. According to eyewitness accounts and initial reports, the tanker rammed into Asaba Park after the driver could not control it. The area was extremely crowded with passengers, traders, and onlookers, which intensified the tragedy. Burning petrol and crowded conditions made escape difficult, worsening casualties. There were no official long-form technical investigations reported

publicly at the time to conclusively explain all mechanical details, but brake failure and loss of control were the dominant explanations from eyewitnesses and officials. Security forces including police, Federal Road Safety Corps (FRSC) and other agencies were present at the scene to help with rescue and evacuations. According to The Nation Newspaper Many victims were rushed to Toronto Hospital and other medical facilities in Onitsha for treatment or identification. Pathologists were involved in identifying the bodies, many of which were charred beyond recognition. Relatives and community members flocked to hospitals and mortuaries searching for loved ones. Local institutions like the Onitsha traditional council called for prayers and community assistance for victims and survivors. Officials including the Anambra State Governor visited the scene and mourned with victims' families. There were criticisms about the adequacy and speed of response. Some reports suggested fire services faced challenges reaching and quelling the fire because of heavy traffic and limited equipment. Initial official reports recorded at least 69 deaths with several others injured. Later counts in some reports mentioned around 70 deaths as additional victims succumbed to injuries or were identified later. Many victims were burned beyond recognition, making identification difficult for families. Scores of survivors suffered severe burn injuries, requiring intensive care and long-term treatment. Hospitals were quickly overwhelmed with the scale and severity of burns. Apart from human loss, multiple vehicles, including commercial buses and motorcycles, were destroyed. Goods belonging to traders and transport operators were ruined, adding economic hardship to families and the local economy. Civil society and community groups urged better road safety enforcement, improved fire services, and better location planning for motor parks and high-risk areas.

Institutional Framework for Disaster Management in Nigeria

- i. **National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA):** The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) was established in 1999 to coordinate disaster management at the federal level. According to NEMA (2020), the agency is responsible for disaster preparedness, response coordination, relief distribution, and policy advisory functions. Its creation marked a major administrative milestone in Nigeria's post-1999 governance structure.
- ii. **State Emergency Management Agencies (SEMAs):** To decentralize disaster management, state governments established State Emergency Management Agencies (SEMAs). However, scholars note that the performance of SEMAs varies widely due to differences in funding, political will, and technical capacity (Ibrahim & Muhammed, 2017).
- iii. **Other Relevant Institutions:** Other institutions involved in disaster management include the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development (established in 2019), the Nigerian Meteorological Agency (NiMet), the Nigeria Hydrological Services Agency (NIHSA), security agencies, non-governmental organizations, and international development partners (UNDP, 2021).

Disaster Management in the Early Democratic Period (1999–2010)

The period between 1999 and 2010 focused largely on rebuilding institutions weakened by military rule. Disaster management during this era was largely reactive, with limited emphasis on prevention and mitigation (Olorunfemi, 2011). Public administration responses were characterized by emergency relief efforts following disasters such as pipeline explosions, urban flooding, and communal conflicts. Weak early warning systems,

inadequate funding, and poor inter-agency coordination limited effectiveness (Adebayo, 2018).

Expanding Challenges (2011–2018)

Between 2011 and 2018, disaster management gained increased attention due to major events such as the 2012 nationwide flooding and the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East. According to Ezeudu (2016), these crises exposed the limitations of Nigeria's disaster preparedness and response mechanisms. Public administration responses included stronger collaboration with international humanitarian agencies, improved data utilization from NiMet and NIHSA, and the adoption of disaster risk reduction strategies. Nevertheless, bureaucratic bottlenecks and corruption undermined relief distribution and recovery efforts (Transparency International, 2017).

Humanitarian Governance and Disaster Management (2019–2025)

The establishment of the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development in 2019 marked a new phase in Nigeria's disaster governance. This period emphasized the management of internally displaced persons (IDPs), social protection programmes, and climate change adaptation (FGN, 2020). From 2020 to 2025, Nigeria faced compounded disasters including the COVID-19 pandemic, intensified flooding, and food insecurity. According to the World Bank (2022), climate change significantly increased disaster frequency and severity, placing additional strain on public administration.

Challenges to Disaster Management

Despite reforms, disaster management in Nigeria continues to face significant administrative challenges. These include inadequate funding, weak local government participation, political interference, limited professional training, and poor data management (Oladipo, 2014; Ibrahim and Muhammed, 2017). These issues have constrained the ability of public administration to shift from reactive to preventive disaster management.

The Prospects

Notwithstanding these challenges, Nigeria has recorded notable achievements in disaster management. These include the institutionalization of disaster management agencies, improved early warning systems, increased international cooperation, and greater public awareness of disaster risks (UNDP, 2021). Looking beyond 2025, scholars advocate for digital governance, community-based disaster management, and stronger integration of climate resilience into public administration (Coppola, 2015). In all, from 1999 to 2025, public administration has remained central to disaster management in Nigeria. Democratic governance enabled institutional development and policy reforms, but implementation gaps persist. Strengthening administrative capacity, accountability, intergovernmental coordination, and preventive planning is essential for effective disaster management in Nigeria.

The Challenges of Public Administration in Nigeria

Throughout 1999–2025, Nigeria's public administration has faced persistent challenges. These challenges have constrained the ability of public administration to effectively drive development. The few notable ones are here underlisted.

- i. **Corruption:** Corruption is a major challenge affecting public administration and disaster management in Nigeria. Funds meant for disaster preparedness, emergency response, and rehabilitation are often misappropriated or diverted by public officials. Transparency International (2017) observes that corruption weakens public institutions

- and reduces their effectiveness in service delivery. In disaster management, corruption leads to poor-quality relief materials, inflated contracts, and delays in providing assistance to affected communities. This situation increases the hardship faced by disaster victims and erodes public confidence in government institutions.
- ii. **Political Interference:** Political interference poses a serious problem in public administration and disaster management. Political office holders frequently influence administrative decisions such as staff appointments, allocation of disaster relief materials, and implementation of emergency policies. According to Adebayo (2018), political considerations often take precedence over professionalism and competence. During disaster situations, relief efforts may be politicized, resulting in unequal distribution of resources and neglect of communities that are most in need.
 - iii. **Lack of Accountability:** Lack of accountability remains a persistent challenge in public administration and disaster management. Weak monitoring and evaluation mechanisms make it difficult to ensure that public funds and relief materials are properly utilized. Adamolekun (2002) argues that ineffective accountability systems encourage misuse of resources and administrative inefficiency. In disaster management, poor accountability leads to lack of transparency, duplication of efforts, and failure to assess and improve response strategies.
 - iv. **Lack of Technical Know-How:** The absence of adequate technical knowledge and skills limits the effectiveness of public administration and disaster management in Nigeria. Disaster management requires expertise in risk assessment, early warning systems, emergency response, and recovery planning. However, many public institutions lack well-trained personnel. Ezeani (2014) notes that insufficient training and limited exposure to modern disaster management techniques result in poor planning, slow response to emergencies, and weak implementation of disaster risk reduction strategies.

Nigerian Government Reforms on Disaster Management

Nigeria has brought many reforms aimed to strengthen coordination, improve early warning systems, enhance emergency response capacity and involve communities in disaster preparedness. Here are some notable government reforms in Nigeria on disaster management, which have attempted to mitigate the situation to a better condition.

- i. **Anticipatory Action Framework for Floods (2025):** The Nigerian government shifted from a reactive response to proactive disaster preparedness by adopting the Anticipatory Action Framework for floods. This policy enables pre-defined triggers based on forecasts, so resources and early action can be mobilized before flood impacts peak, saving lives and reducing economic losses (ReliefWeb, 2025).
- ii. **NEMA Strategic Plan (2025–2029):** The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) launched a five-year strategic plan (2025–2029) designed to enhance Nigeria's capacity for proactive disaster risk management, strengthen institutional coordination, and align national disaster response with global best practices. This plan underscores improving operational efficiency, evidence-based planning, and inter-agency collaboration for hazard resilience (NEMA, 2025).
- iii. **National Disaster Risk Reduction Strategy (2025–2030):** In 2025, the government unveiled a National Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) Strategy (2025–2030) to mainstream resilience across sectors such as water resources, health, education, and infrastructure and to emphasize early warning systems and risk-informed planning in national development decisions (Shettima/departure remarks, 2025).

- iv. **National Disaster Risk Financing Framework:** Nigeria is developing a National Disaster Risk Financing Framework to ensure stable and timely funding for disaster prevention and preparedness, moving away from crisis-driven funding after events occur. This reform also aims to deepen partnerships with private sector, development partners, and research institutions to support disaster risk reduction across all levels of governance (Shettima/Vice-Presidential remarks, 2025).
- v. **Community Empowerment for Disaster Safety:** The federal government emphasized empowering local and flood-prone communities to manage their safety by strengthening local emergency management agencies (SEMA/LEMA), expanding early warning systems, and encouraging community-level planning and resilience building. This reform supports disaster risk reduction capacity at grassroots levels (Federal Government Press Release, 2025).
- vi. **Integration of Disaster Risk Reduction into Sectoral Planning:** Government leaders have started integrating disaster risk reduction (DRR) into wider sectoral development policies, including agriculture, infrastructure, health, and education. The initiative also boosts early warning systems and prioritizes resilience investments that prevent disasters rather than only respond to them (Nigeria Moves to Mainstream DRR, 2025).

Disaster Management in Nigeria: A Myth Rather than Reality

Disaster management refers to the organized process of preventing preparing for, responding to, and recovering from disasters in order to minimize their impacts on society. In Nigeria, disaster management is theoretically well structured through institutions such as the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA). However, the persistent occurrence of disasters and the weak response mechanisms suggest that disaster management in Nigeria exists in theory than in practical reality.

- i. **Weak Implementation of Disaster Management policies:** Nigeria has developed several frameworks to guide disaster management Framework (NDMF) and the National Disaster Response Plan. However, their implementation remains weak due to bureaucratic inefficiency and lack of political commitment (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2010).
- ii. **Poor Preparedness and Early Warning Systems:** Effective disaster management depends on preparedness and early warning mechanisms. Agencies such as Nigerian Meteorological Agency (NiMet) regularly issue warning about potential floods and extreme weather conditions. Despite this, such warnings are rarely translated into concrete preventive measures by authorities or local communities (Oladokun and Proverbs, 2016). For instance, seasoned flooding continues to affect states like Benue, Kogi and Bayelsa, leading to displacement, destruction of homes, and loss of agricultural livelihoods.
- iii. **Inadequate Funding and Resources:** Another factor that supports the argument that disaster management in Nigeria is largely a myth is the insufficient funding of emergency agencies' and related agencies often face logistical challenges such as lack of rescue equipment, inadequate training and poor transportation infrastructure for emergency response (Adebimpe and Adebimpe, 2010).
- iv. **Corruption and Mismanagement of Relief Materials:** Corruption and poor accountability also undermine disaster management efforts. Relief materials intended for disaster victims are sometimes diverted or mismanaged, preventing them from reaching those targeted at. Such practices weaken public trust and make disaster response appear ineffective (Ojo, 2011).

- v. **Lack of Community Participation:** Modern disaster management emphasizes community-based risk reduction, where local communities actively participate in planning and preparedness activities. In Nigeria, however, disaster management strategies are often top-down, with minimal involvement of grassroots stakeholders (Adeoye & Adebayo, 2009). Without local participation, disaster prevention and preparedness strategies fail to address the specific vulnerable of communities.

Solutions and Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following solutions are proposed:

- i. **Strengthening Merit-Based Administration:** Recruitment, promotion, and postings in the civil service should be strictly based on merit and competence. Adamolekun (2002) emphasizes that professionalism is essential for administrative effectiveness. Independent civil service commissions should be empowered to operate without political interference.
- ii. **Anti-Corruption Institutional Reforms:** Anti-corruption agencies such as EFCC and ICPC should be granted greater operational independence. Transparency International (2017) recommends stronger enforcement mechanisms and judicial reforms to ensure timely prosecution of corruption cases.
- iii. **Capacity Building and Training:** Continuous professional development should be institutionalized. According to Ezeani (2014), regular training in public financial management, digital governance, and policy analysis will enhance administrative competence.
- iv. **Strengthening Intergovernmental Relations:** Fiscal federalism should be deepened to empower state and local governments. Olowu (2011) argues that decentralization improves service delivery and accountability when combined with strong oversight mechanisms.
- v. **Expanding Digital Governance:** E-governance platforms should be expanded to cover personnel management, procurement, and service delivery. Dunleavy et al. (2006) note that digital-era governance reduces corruption and enhances citizen engagement when properly implemented.
- vi. **Ensuring Policy Continuity:** Frequent policy reversals undermine administrative effectiveness. Adebayo (2018) recommends institutionalizing long-term national development plans insulated from partisan politics. In public administration and disaster management, continuity is particularly critical because disasters are recurring, cumulative and often unpredictable.

Conclusion

Although Nigeria has established institutions, legal frameworks and policies for disaster management, the persistent occurrence of disasters, poor preparedness, inadequate funding, corruption and weak community involvement suggest that disaster management often exist only in principle rather than in practice. For disaster management to become a reality in Nigeria, there must be stronger implementations of policies, increased funding, improved transparency, and greater community participation in disaster risk reduction efforts. Nigeria's disaster management system is largely reactive rather than proactive. Government intervention typically occur after disasters have already caused significant damage, focusing on temporary relief rather than long-term risk reduction. This reactive approach contradicts global best practices such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, which emphasizes prevention, preparedness, and resilience building (UNDRR, 2015). This study has

examined public administration in Nigeria from 1999 to 2025, highlighting its evolution under democratic governance, major reforms, persistent challenges, findings, and solutions. While the period witnessed significant institutional and policy reforms, deep-rooted structural and cultural problems limited their impact. For Nigeria to achieve effective governance and development, public administration must prioritize professionalism, accountability, capacity building, and policy continuity to come out from its mythical dominance.

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