

Equipping Public Servants with Accrual Accounting for Transparency, Accountability and Efficiency – Evidence from Nigeria and Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Objective – This study is based on the social welfare viewpoint of accounting. It examines the benefits of accrual accounting as a replacement for cash accounting as a measure to enhance public service transparency, accountability, and efficiency in the public sectors of Nigeria and Ghana.

Methodology/Technique – This study is based on a sample of 375 respondents from the accounting, auditing and budgeting cadres and legislatures of the public sector in Nigeria. In the Ghana perspective, 25 high-ranking public servants in the accounting, auditing and budgeting cadres were interviewed for the study. Three hundred and twenty-six valid responses representing 87% of the samples in Nigeria and the Ghana context were retrieved for analysed via descriptive statistics.

Findings – Findings indicate that there is a significant association between accrual accounting and transparency, accountability, and efficiency in the public sectors of Nigeria and Ghana.

Novelty – This study has the potential for improving financial reporting in the public sector. It is useful to researchers and academics because its focus on societal accounting is of current interest to accounting professionals and researchers.

Type of Paper: Empirical

Keywords: Accountability; Accrual accounting; Public servants; Efficiency; Transparency.

JEL Classification: H83, M41.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Nigeria and Ghana are involved in the struggle for Public Finance Management (PFM) for improved transparency, accountability and efficiency in the public sector. This is due to the challenges posed by poor PFM that had resulted in the recent global sovereign financial crisis. If care is not taken, these challenges may deteriorate. Oyejide and Soyibo (2001) indicate that the crisis was due to financial malpractices caused by poor

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transparency and accountability. Ologbenla (2007) also argues that these intractable problems had not been adequately resolved by some public servants whose moral attitude was unacceptable and their accountability low (Dandago, 2007).

According to Betley et al., (2012) and Oduro (2003), efforts at reforming the PFM are not effective in general because they were not guided by the requirements of an integrated financial management system. Oduro (2003) supports this by saying that "In Ghana, high inflation rates and the depreciating cedi make assessments of government budgetary performance, based on nominal financial values, meaningless".

Expanding on this, Lee et al., (2013) suggest that both the public and private sectors had been using cash as a basis of accounting until the 16th century. While the government's accounting remains to be based on a cash basis, established private organizations would generally accept accounting principles (GAAP) that incorporate accrual accounting in response to economic pressures. Ironically, the cash basis has not produced the desired result for the public sector. Thus, it is appropriate the respective agencies of the government emulate the practices of the private sector which are regulated to some extent. The government agencies also rely on the performance of the private sector to generate tax revenues hence, they should lead by example in regulating accounting practices with effectiveness, otherwise, there may be a repeat of the global financial crisis.

Both the countries of Nigeria and Ghana use the cash basis of accounting for financial reporting in the public sector but the cash basis has failed as can be seen in the two countries' corruption perception indices. Ghana's Public Expenditure Management (PEM) system, for example, is not yet performance oriented because the many efforts conducted to reform it have failed. A persistent culture of non-performance and non-accountability in the public service could spell disaster, if left unchecked. Although corruption is widely known as a menace, a shortcoming in the fight against corruption is due to the lack of precise tools for identifying the potential sources of corruption in institutions (Jachev & Bowser, 2008).

The International's Transparency Corruption perception index (CPI) (2015) ranks Nigeria as 136th in the list and Ghana as 47th out of 168 countries surveyed. Additionally, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2015) explain that half of all OECD countries somehow, violate their international obligations to crack down bribery with various high profile scandals noted in Nigeria, such as the Nigerian police pension scandal which involves a fraud of over N40 billion and the Nigerian Ports Authority fraud of N85Billion.

The high level of corruption, particularly in Nigeria, continues to be of concern for many reasons including the image problem the country. This is compounded by the fact that poor financial reporting in the public sector is not just about stealing money but about stealing money from citizens whose welfare suffers as a result of corruption. Products which citizens pay for are inappropriate and notoriously expensive making living a difficulty for many. Betley et al., (2012) assert that there are still some key areas that require improvement in the PFM reform of Ghana, especially those pertaining to fiscal discipline. These observations place the transparency and accountability of the government under sharp scrutiny.

Based on these claims, it is necessary to improve PFM and some advocates of better governance (Hughes, 2007; Ouda, 2007; Athukorola & Reld, 2003) are clamouring for accrual accounting as a measure against the traditional cash accounting practices. McPhee (2006) argues that accrual accounting in the public sector is an important element in public sector reforms which are directed to improve the efficiency of government services, and accountability for the use of public resources. In this regard, the current study argues that some of the traditional accounting concepts need additional consideration and modification before it could be applied in the public sector environment.

Literature seems to show a gap where accrual accounting and public servants are concerned. Clearly, the tool to be used as an application to identify potential sources of corruption is not available (Jachev & Bowser, 2008) thus, this calls for concerns among researchers (Babatunde, 2013; Ball & Pflugrath, 2012; Betley et al., 2012; Hughes, 2007).

Moving from cash to accrual accounting is a crucial change that could be problematic although it is a major step in linking efficiency, transparency, and accountability to good governance. For this need to improve, the

Financial Reporting Council Act No. 6 2011, LFN was developed as a means to mandate the application of International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) which requires International Public Sector Accounting Standards (IPSAS) to be included in the accrual basis. In Ghana, Regulation 186 of the Financial Administration Regulation (2004) announced that public accounts and other government accounts shall be prepared on the accrual basis and the specific basis for preparing the accounts shall be determined by the Controller and Accountant-General of Ghana.

Despite the evidence in literature supporting the application of accrual accounting in the public sector, some researchers (Omolehinwa, 2012; Wynne, 2008; Wynne, 2007; McPhee, 2003) caution on its adoption, explaining that the change could incur more costs. This differing argument further validates the need for more research to be conducted as a means of contributing to the existing body of knowledge. In this regard, to provide more insights that will assist in a better understanding of the merit of accrual accounting in the public sector, the current study examines the benefits of accrual accounting as an alternative to cash accounting as a means to enhance transparency, accountability, and efficiency in the public sectors of Nigeria and Ghana. The focus of this study is based on the social welfare viewpoint of accounting which is predicated on the argument that the action of individuals has externality effects on the well-being of other members of the society (Adeyemi, 2005).

1.2. Aim and objective of the study

As mentioned earlier, this study aims to fill the gap in literature. Babatunde (2013), Ball and Pflugrath (2012), and Ouda (2007) have discussed accrual accounting in the broader context of the public sector but they have not conducted an in-depth analysis of its workings in the context of public servants. In the context of this study, focus is given to the public servants. This study is based on an interpretive empirical approach that is suitable for understanding accounting change in the public sector and the outcome of the change is seen as an improvement to earlier studies.

1.3. Research question

This study attempts to satisfy the said aim by attempting to answer the following research question: “What is the extent to which the application of accrual accounting would associate with transparency, accountability and efficiency in the Nigerian and Ghanaian public sector?”

1.4. Significance of the study

This study has the potential to improve the financial reporting practices in the public sector. It should be useful to researchers and academics as the focus is on societal accounting phase, currently of interest to accounting professionals and researchers. The findings should also be useful in showing how gauging the financial performance of the government could benefit investors. Public servants, as employees, should also find the outcome useful as a means of extracting information for remuneration bargaining and job security assessment. Business contract people will also find the outcome useful for assessing the reliability of government businesses as a means to apply caution while maintaining contract tenure and payment. Other business analysts may also use the findings as a means to assess rating agencies, statisticians, trade unions, and stock brokers in decision making. The outcome of this study will also be significant to a society which reacts and interacts with government involving government programs such as food security and education. Finally this study is also of benefit to students in the face of a lack empirical literature available in this area of study.

1.5. Scope of the study

This study focuses on accrual accounting in the public sectors of Nigeria and Ghana. For Nigeria, particular reference is made to the Lagos State of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The focus is on the executive and legislative arms of the government in the state. Lagos state was chosen because it is the most populous city in Nigeria (see Ambode, 2016). Lagos is also the economic, financial, commercial and industrial nerve centre of Nigeria. In Ghana, the focus is Accra and the Ashanti regions of Tema, Kumasi, and Takoradi which are the most populous cities in Ghana,

2. Review of literature

2.1 Theoretical frame work

The stakeholders' theory is used in this study as a critical-diagnostic tool to identify the points at which the stakeholders are to benefit in the spending process of the government which brings about moral constraints on the part of the government spenders. Stakeholders' theory was originally detailed by Edward Freeman in 1984. It explains that there are parties involved in management such as donor agencies, financiers, communities, public agencies, political groups, trade unions and competitors (Heath, 2009). These parties are related to a social contract between citizens and government which confers legitimacy on the citizens. To this end, the citizens organize themselves into strata of the private entity and this constitute stakeholders groups which contribute to the running of their affairs in anticipation of benefits. Hence, it is expected that accrual accounting basis of financial reporting provides the advantages of transparency and accountability to the citizens in their various groupings to meet their expectation from the government.

2.2 Accrual versus cash accounting as tools for transparency, accountability, and efficiency.

Some issues that differentiate accrual accounting from cash accounting are highlighted. Accrual accounting is simpler and easier to understand (Babatunde, 2013; Hughes, 2007; Ouda, 2007). Cash basis financial statements tend to be idiosyncratic and difficult to understand and interpret while accrual financial statements are familiar to a wide range of people including business people, financial journalists and credit rating agencies (Athukorola & Reld, 2003, p.18). Further, accrual information improves understanding of the underlying fiscal position by removing year-to-year variability caused by the timing of cash receipts and payments, mainly capital payments. Financial markets and credit rating agencies are especially interested in the sustainability of financing and expenditure policies. Accrual financial statements provide a richer set of information for analysing the sustainability of fiscal policy and the quality of economic decision-making (Hughes, 2007; Ouda 2007). Athukorola and Reld (2003) state that "IMF considers the accrual basis superior because all resource flows including internal transactions, transactions in-kind and other economic flows, are recorded. This complete recording permits the integration of flows with changes in the balance sheet" (Athukorola & Reld, 2003, p. 17).

Cash accounts, typically, do not differentiate between expenses and acquisitions of non-financial assets such as buildings. Under the accrual basis, acquisitions of non-financial assets are recorded separately. The IMF (2001) explains that separating current and capital transactions is helpful for analysing the economic impacts of fiscal policy. By providing information on the depreciation and asset valuation changes, accrual accounting allows better judgments of the quality of government investments and the sustainability of fiscal policy. Accrual accounting also removes the conflicting treatment of sales of financial equity and physical assets and it allows for performance measurement and reward.

Hughes (2007), Ouda (2007), and Athukorola and Reld (2003) mention that the advantages of accrual accounting statements outweigh those of cash accounting because they include liability disclosures. Governments have significant liabilities other than public debts. A notable example is a future obligation to

pay civil service pensions. These obligations are typically under-funded. But under accrual accounting, the unfunded liability is usually shown on the balance sheet as a liability. Also, additional disclosures are made in additional notes. These include information on contingent liabilities and commitments, unlike cash accounting.

Robinson (2011) and Ouda (2007) mention that information is provided for considering intergenerational fairness which is crucial in fiscal policy because it shows the degree to which the present government is paying the costs of services today instead of shifting costs to other periods. Accrual accounting provides a longer-term perspective for judging the policy impacts. For instance, without accrual accounting decisions on pensions, pension liabilities may not fully consider the implications of the obligations on future budgets. Hence, the problem associated with the suffering of senior citizens with regards to the payment of their pension will be reduced. All arrears are automatically included in accrual statistics.

Accrual accounting provides information for managing liquidity which is crucial to government operations. Cash accounting does not provide adequate information for decision making, because it ignores the aspect of government spending on capital expenditure. Cash flow information is provided on the accrual basis as additional information. It may also be difficult to assess solvency and future flow with the cash basis because of minimal information disclosure. In contrast, accrual accounting is capable of disclosing solvency as it incorporates every little aspect of the government running, financial and otherwise, either in absolute quantitative terms including recognition of goodwill or signs of bad will. For example, there may be bad will that is hidden by cash accounting in the treatment of superannuation benefits of an employee. This is because such costs are not recorded in cash accounting as and when the employee is serving the government but rather until at retirement. In contrast, accrual accounting recognizes the fact that during each year of the employee's career, there is a superannuation cost attached to her employment. This cost is, of course, a non-cash expense which involves no payment at that time, thereby making this no less real. Essentially, the idea is that instead of measuring the expenditure on superannuation benefits, the government, as a whole, measures its annual superannuation costs by counting the gross increase in the total amount of pension entitlements which the government owes its employees.

It is clear that by using accrual accounting, public servants would accurately measure the cost of producing the outputs which they deliver to the public. Similarly, the public would be able to measure their performance towards accountability and transparency as enshrined in accrual accounting. Accrual accounting brings transparency and accountability to the conscience of public servants and the automatic transparency makes governance easier for politicians. Transparency of costs provides politicians and administrative leadership a better basis for prioritizing the use of resources (Robinson, 2011).

3. Methods

3.1 Research design

The sampling procedure adopted for the research work is stratified random sampling which is more superior to simple random sampling because it uses an additional method of representativeness. Also, acceptable error estimation of 5% was estimated as a margin of error (Bartlett, Kotlik & Higgins, 2001). This research is a descriptive analysis of events associated with the research focus and so it belongs to the generic family research design type called cross-sectional survey design. Primary data through questionnaire administration were employed for the survey. The population of this study include all public servants in the accounting, auditing and budgeting functions of Nigeria and Ghana. This also includes the members of the State's house of assembly who are in the public account (PAC) and budget and appropriations (BAC) committee in the Lagos state executive government and the legislative arm of government in the State house of assembly. The target population totaled one thousand, five hundred and seventy- seven (1577) respondents who were from the personnel records of Lagos state government as shown in Table 1.

In Ghana, the study population includes public servants in the accounting, auditing, budgeting functions too. These functions rest with the Office of the Controller and Accountant General, the Auditor General of Ghana and the Ministry of Finance in Accra. The sample size is twenty-five (25) respondents.

From the population of 1577 public servants and legislators in Nigeria identified for the survey, only a sample size of 375 respondents responded to the survey. This sample size was determined by using Slovin's formula. According to Unam (2012), the Slovin formula, $n = N / 1 + N(e)^2$ where n is the sample size, N is the population size, and e is the margin of error. In this regard, the sample size for this study was determined as follows:

$$N = \text{Population of 1577}; e = \text{Margin of error of 5\%}; n = 1577 / 1 + N(e)^2$$

$$n = 1577 / 1 + 1577(0.05)^2; n = 319$$

However, Bartlett, Kotlik and Higgins (2001) explain that it is possible for everybody who is given a copy of the questionnaire to choose not to respond and in this regard, it is necessary to accommodate non-response by estimating a response rate in the target audience. This depends on the relationship or experience with the target audience. The expected sample size of 319 was adjusted for expected frequency of 95% or +5% or - 5% or 10% anticipated no return rate. This leads to a worst acceptable rate of return of 85%. The calculated sample of 319 is thus adjusted by 85% resulting in $319 / 0.85$ which equals to 375. In the case of Ghana, convenience sampling was adopted for the face –to-face interview. This sample was considered a good representation of the respondents' population.

3.2 Research instrument

In this study, a five- point Likert scale type of questionnaire was adopted as the research instrument. The questionnaire was designed in a way which enables vital answers to be provided to the research question. The questionnaire contains a set of questions classified into two major sections A and B. Section A features five questions on the bio-data of the respondents including location of the organization and length of service in the public sector. Section B of the questionnaire comprises statements of assertion and open-ended questions. These are designed primarily to provide information for answering the research question.

The applicable five-point Likert scale used in the construction of the questionnaire is outlined and interpreted with points of the degree of agreement as Strongly Agree 5, Agree 4, Undecided 3, Disagree 2 and Strongly Disagree 1. Copies of the questionnaire were distributed to three hundred and seventy-five (375) respondents and a total of 337 were retrieved with 326 noted to be adequate for analysis as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Administration of questionnaire in Lagos State government of Nigeria

Respondents function	Population	Stratified random sample Proportion (%)	Questionnaire copies distributed	Questionnaire copies retrieved	Questionnaire copies utilized
Accountants	1127	71	266	257	250
Auditors	130	8	30	28	28
Budget Officers	306	19	71	44	40
Legislatives in Budget and Appropriation Committee	7	1	4	4	4
Legislatives in Public Account Committee	7	1	4	4	4
Total	1577	100	375	337	326

Source: Field survey 2016

3.3 Research instrument validation

To ensure validity of the instrument used, content validation was conducted to ensure that the instrument measures the variables investigated. The first draft of the questionnaire was given to two Ph.D. students in accounting. Based on their suggestions, improvements were made and the improved copy was then given to a post graduate lecturer who also gave some positive input which was incorporated into the final copy, then used for the study proper. The developed instrument was nonetheless pilot tested on ten public accountants. Their input was used to improve the final copy. A construct validity test was carried out on the data collected for answering the research question. It resulted in a satisfactory Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.662 for the multi-scale items in the questionnaire. This indicates that the data analysed are reliable. Descriptive Statistics was used to analyse the results because the data were narratives. Figures were assigned for analysis purposes only. As the set of data is small, the formulated question is tested with the aid of the IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.

4. Results and findings

4.1 Data analysis

From the 326 responses gathered, it appears to represent about 87% of the total output and Table 2 indicates that most respondents or 76.6% are in the accounts job functions and those in the budget, audit and legislature functions constitute about 8.6%, 2.5%, and 12.3% respectively for Nigeria. Most of the respondents have spent above ten years in the public sector as displayed in Table 3. This implies that 58% of the Nigerian respondents have been in public service for more than ten years. All the twenty-five interviewees in Ghana gave their candid responses to the interview questions.

Table 2: Frequency distribution of Respondents per present job function

	Job function	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Accounts	250	76.7	76.7
	Audit	28	8.6	85.3
	Legislature	8	2.5	87.7
	Budget	40	12.3	100.0
	Total	326	100.0	

Source: Field survey 2016

Table 3. Frequency distribution of Respondents according to length of service in the Nigerian public sector

	Length of service	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Less than 5 years	45	13.8	13.8
	5- 10 years	92	28.2	42.0
	Above 10 years	189	58.0	100.0
	Total	326	100.0	

Source: Field survey 2016

The fact that most respondents are accountants, budget officers and auditors who have spent over ten years on the job, and that this study covers some legislators who make the laws adds to the reliability of this study. This is because the result is coming from familiar and knowledgeable people in the area of this research topic.

Table 4: Result of the Descriptive statistics of responses to the questions relating to the research question

S/n	Particulars	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. dev.
1	There is full disclosure of information in accrual accounting	326	1.00	5.00	4.31	1.13
2	Accrual accounting improves international credibility	326	1.00	5.00	4.06	.84
3	Accrual accounting ensures standardization in global financial management	326	1.00	5.00	4.07	1.11
4	Accrual accounting improves efficiency in the public sector	326	1.00	5.00	4.15	.98
5	Accrual accounting improves transparency in the public sector	326	1.00	5.00	3.93	.97
6	Cost efficient process is adopted in accrual accounting	326	1.00	5.00	2.03	1.18
7	Accrual accounting improves accountability	326	1.00	5.00	3.14	1.18
8	Accrual accounting improves international credibility	326	1.00	5.00	4.06	.84

Source: Field survey 2016

4.2 Answer to the research question

From the results depicted in Table 4, it appears that the extent to which the application of accrual accounting would associate with transparency, accountability and efficiency in the public sectors of Nigeria is great, at a mean statistics of 3.93, 3.14 and 3.15 for transparency, accountability and efficiency respectfully. All the respondents in Ghana also share this view.

5. Conclusions, Implications, and Significance

From the results, this study concludes that there is a consensus among public servants regarding the desirability of accrual accounting as a tool to enhance transparency, accountability, and efficiency in the public sectors of Nigeria and Ghana. Overall, this study has achieved its aim in bridging the gap in the literature. It has also provided empirical evidence to support its arguments. Previous studies provided evidence which support the adoption of accrual accounting but they were not empirical and were mainly from developed countries.

This study adds to the body of knowledge available in developing economies. The contribution made is based on the significant empirical evidence realized and in its points of uniqueness and research method. It is comparative to similar studies worldwide. It supports the findings of Babatunde 2013; Jachev and Bowser (2008) and Hughes (2007).

In view of the findings noted in this study, it can be said that transparency, accountability and efficiency in Nigeria and Ghana would improve if accrual accounting is embraced in the public sector. This change may bring relief to pensioners as pension fund scam is expected to reduce. Also, the global community such as credit agencies, would increase their confidence in the public sectors of Nigeria and Ghana. The findings will help to improve the efficiency of public servants. For instance, interviewee 1 had mentioned that the desire for accountability is a critical issue in the public sector while interviewee 5 had argued that public servants should ensure that accrual accounting is implemented in their own interest as life would be easier for all.

Findings from this study show that it is feasible to apply accrual accounting basis to the activities of government entities and this is urgent. There is a need for the public servants in Nigeria and Ghana to pursue accrual accounting reforms which have occurred as a part of the movement to improve the efficiency,

effectiveness, and accountability of the public sector. This study is limited to public servants' opinion only. Future studies could include private sector personnels.

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