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NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT AND PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF MIXED OUTCOMES

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Abstract
This paper examines the impact of New Public Management and public service delivery, a critical assessment of mixed outcomes. Public service delivery remains a key indicator of government effectiveness because it reflects the capacity of the state to provide essential services such as healthcare, education, infrastructure, and social welfare in a manner that is efficient, accessible, and responsive to citizens' needs. Qualitative approach based on an extensive review of relevant scholarly and empirical literature was adopted. The New Public Service (NPS) theory was used as the theoretical framework because of its emphasis on citizen engagement, accountability, and value creation in service delivery. The findings revealed that NPM has made important contributions to public service delivery through performance measurement, decentralization, managerial autonomy, and results-oriented management, which have improved efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and organizational performance in many contexts. However, the paper also found that the outcomes of NPM are mixed and highly dependent on institutional capacity, governance quality, and policy environment. In developing countries, especially weak institutions, poor accountability systems, and limited administrative capacity often constrained the effectiveness of NPM reforms. The paper concludes that although NPM has played an important role in modernizing public administration, it is not sufficient on its own to achieve sustainable and citizen-centered public service delivery. Therefore, it recommends a balanced and integrated reform approach that combines the efficiency strengths of NPM with the participatory and accountability-oriented principles of the New Public Service and related citizen-centered governance.

Keywords: New Public management, public service delivery, efficiency, accountability and Citizen participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Public service delivery remains a central measure of government effectiveness, as it reflects the ability of the state to provide essential services such as healthcare, education, infrastructure, and social welfare in a manner that meets citizens' needs. Modern governments are under increasing pressure to improve not only the efficiency of service delivery but also its quality, accessibility, and responsiveness in a rapidly changing and complex environment (Mansoor & Williams, 2024). The growing demand has exposed weaknesses in traditional public administration systems, which have often been criticized for rigidity, inefficiency, and limited adaptability to contemporary challenges.

In response to these shortcomings, New Public Management (NPM) continues to play a significant role in shaping public sector reforms. Although it originated in earlier decades, contemporary literature shows that many governments still rely on NPM principles such as performance measurement, decentralization, managerial autonomy, and results-oriented management to improve public sector performance (Lapuente & Van de Walle, 2020). These principles are rooted in the idea that adopting private sector practices can enhance efficiency and accountability in public institutions, thereby improving service delivery outcomes.

The relationship between New Public Management and public service delivery is therefore direct and theoretically grounded. The assumption is that reforms such as performance monitoring, competition, and decentralization will lead to improved efficiency, better resource management, and enhanced service quality. However, recent research suggests that this relationship is more complex than initially assumed, as the effectiveness of NPM depends on contextual factors such as institutional capacity, governance structures, and policy environments (Lapuente & Van de Walle, 2020).

Furthermore, emerging literature highlights that public service delivery is evolving beyond the traditional NPM framework toward more collaborative and citizen-centered approaches. Concepts such as public value, co-production, and digital transformation are increasingly recognized as important in improving service outcomes. For example, studies revealed that effective service delivery now depends on broader systems of interaction among public institutions, citizens, and other stakeholders rather than solely on internal efficiency mechanisms (Osborne et al., 2022). Similarly, digital transformation has become a key driver of modern service delivery, though its success depends on governance quality and institutional readiness (Osborne et al., 2022).

Despite these developments, recent empirical evidence indicates that NPM reforms have produced mixed outcomes. While some studies report improvements in efficiency and managerial performance, others highlight challenges such as reduced flexibility, coordination issues, and difficulties in achieving citizen-centered service delivery (Eriksson & Andersson, 2024). These mixed results suggest that the effectiveness of NPM is not uniform across different contexts and sectors . It is against this background that New Public Management emerged as a reform paradigm aimed at improving efficiency and public service delivery. The uncertainty surrounding its effectiveness, particularly in diverse governance contexts, raises important questions about the extent to which NPM reforms can sustainably improve the quality, accessibility, and responsiveness of public services. This study therefore seeks to examine the relationship between New Public Management and public service delivery to better understand the effectiveness of these reforms.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

New Public Management

New Public Management (NPM) has been widely viewed differently by different scholars. According to Hood (1991), NPM refers to a set of administrative doctrines that emphasize efficiency, performance measurement, and improved resource management in the public sector.

Building on this, Osborne and Gaebler (1992) describe NPM as an entrepreneurial approach to governance that encourages governments to adopt private-sector practices and focus on results rather than processes. More recently, Lapuente and Van de Walle (2020) conceptualize NPM as a collection of management tools such as performance monitoring, decentralization, and competition designed to enhance the quality of public services. Similarly, Khatun (2021) explains that NPM involves the application of business-like practices in public administration to improve efficiency, accountability, and service delivery outcomes. In addition, Osborne et al. (2022) argue that NPM represents a shift from traditional rule-based administration toward performance-driven and outcome-oriented governance systems. Based on the above definitions, this paper defines NPM as a reform paradigm that integrates efficiency, performance measurement, decentralisation, and market-oriented mechanisms to improve public sector performance and service delivery.

Public Service Delivery

Public service delivery has been defined by various contemporary scholars from different perspectives, with emphasis on efficiency, citizen satisfaction, governance, and participation. Shittu (2020) describes public service delivery as the extent to which government services meet or exceed the expectations of citizens, highlighting performance and responsiveness. Similarly, it is the processes and mechanisms through which government agencies provide essential services to citizens, focusing on accessibility, efficiency, and quality. From a governance and sustainability perspective, public service delivery is understood as a structured system through which governments provide key services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure to meet societal needs (Hood, 2023).

Furthermore, Denhardt and Denhardt (2015), within the New Public Service framework, conceptualize public service delivery as a process of serving citizens rather than steering them, emphasizing democratic values, accountability, and citizen engagement. Osborne et al. (2024) extend this view by presenting public service delivery as a value co-creation process in which citizens actively participate in shaping and producing services. In a similar vein, Bovaird and Löffler (2016) see it as an interactive relationship between service providers and users, where quality outcomes are achieved through collaboration and good governance practices.

In addition, Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017) conceive public service delivery as the implementation of public policies through organized systems aimed at producing goods and services that address public needs efficiently and effectively. From a development perspective, Andrews (2013) viewed it as the ability of governments to translate policies into tangible outcomes that improve citizens' welfare, particularly in developing countries. Collectively, these definitions show that public service delivery goes beyond mere provision of services to include efficiency, accountability, citizen participation, and value creation.

Impact of New Public Management on Public Service delivery

The New Public Management (NPM) paradigm has fundamentally reshaped public service delivery by embedding market-oriented principles such as efficiency, competition, and performance measurement within the public sector. Hood (1991) argues that NPM promotes a shift from traditional bureaucratic administration to a results-driven approach characterized by output control and managerial autonomy. This transformation has enhanced operational efficiency and introduced performance benchmarking, which, as noted by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017), has improved service speed, cost-effectiveness, and measurable outcomes in many public institutions. In this regard, NPM has contributed to making public service delivery more performance-oriented and responsive to service users.

However, a deeper analysis reveals inherent tensions within the NPM framework. While it prioritizes efficiency, it often does so at the expense of core public sector values such as equity, accountability, and democratic participation. Denhardt and Denhardt (2015) critique NPM for redefining citizens as customers, thereby narrowing the scope of public engagement and undermining collective decision-making processes. This market-based orientation can lead to unequal service distribution, particularly where profit motives influence service provision. Furthermore, Osborne (2010) highlights that the fragmentation resulting from privatization and outsourcing can weaken coordination among service providers, ultimately reducing coherence and accessibility in service delivery systems.

Critically, the impact of NPM on public service delivery is therefore paradoxical. On one hand, it enhances efficiency and managerial performance; on the other hand, it risks eroding the social and ethical foundations of public administration. This suggests that while NPM offers valuable tools for improving service delivery, its effectiveness is contingent upon balancing efficiency with inclusiveness, accountability, and citizen participation. Consequently, the limitations of NPM have led to the emergence of alternative approaches, such as the New Public Service and Public Service Logic, which seek to address these gaps by re-centering citizens in the service delivery process.

Empirical studies provide substantial evidence on the impact of New Public Management (NPM) on public service delivery, revealing both improvements and limitations. For instance, a study by Pollitt and Dan (2011), which reviewed public management reforms across several European countries, found that NPM reforms led to measurable improvements in efficiency and cost reduction, particularly through performance management systems and decentralization. Similarly, Andrews and Van de Walle (2013) show that performance-based management practices associated with NPM can enhance organizational effectiveness, especially in contexts where institutional capacity is strong. In developing countries, empirical evidence from Nigeria by Ohemeng (2015) indicates that NPM-inspired reforms, such as privatization and commercialization, contributed to improved service delivery in sectors like telecommunications, although outcomes were uneven across other public services.

However, empirical findings also highlight significant drawbacks. A study by Christensen and Lægreid (2007) demonstrates that NPM reforms often lead to administrative fragmentation, which can reduce coordination and negatively affect service integration. Likewise, research by Batley and Larbi (2004) on developing countries shows that while NPM can improve efficiency, it may also exacerbate inequalities in access to services due to market-oriented reforms. Furthermore, Mimba, Van Helden, and Tillema (2007) found that performance measurement systems in developing countries often fail to achieve intended results due to weak institutional frameworks and lack of accountability mechanisms. These empirical insights suggest that although NPM has the potential to enhance efficiency and performance in public service delivery, its success is highly context-dependent and may produce unintended consequences if not carefully implemented.

Theoretical Review

The New Public Service (NPS) theory was introduced by Robert B. Denhardt and Janet V. Denhardt in 2000 and later expanded in their 2003 book *The New Public Service: Serving, Not Steering*. At its core, the theory challenges the idea that citizens should simply receive services from government without involvement. Instead, it sees citizens as active partners in governance who deserve to be part of decision-making processes. It also suggests that "public interest" is not something government officials decide on their own, but something that is shaped through open discussions, cooperation, and shared democratic values. In this view, public administrators are not meant to act like business managers who control or direct society; rather, they are expected to serve the public, support participation, and help citizens play a meaningful role in governance. The theory further stresses that values like participation, fairness, and accountability are more important than efficiency alone, arguing that good governance happens when government, citizens, and civil society work together to solve public problems.

The New Public Service (NPS) theory is useful for understanding New Public Management and Public Service Delivery: A Critical Assessment of Mixed Outcomes because it offers a citizen-focused way of evaluating how public services are delivered. While New Public Management emphasizes efficiency, performance targets, and market-like reforms in government, the NPS approach shifts attention to democratic values such as participation, accountability, and citizen involvement in governance. In applying this theory to the paper, it helps to explain why the outcomes of New Public Management reforms are often mixed. On one hand, there may be improvements in efficiency and service speed, but on the other hand, there can be reduced citizen participation, weaker public trust, and unequal access to services. From the NPS perspective, these challenges arise because public administration should not be treated like a business, but as a democratic space where citizens are active participants rather than passive recipients. Therefore, the theory is applied in this paper to critically assess whether public service delivery reforms truly serve the interests of citizens or whether they prioritize efficiency at the expense of inclusiveness, fairness, and democratic engagement.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopted a qualitative research approach based on a systematic review and critical analysis of existing literature on New Public Management (NPM) and public service delivery. The qualitative method was considered appropriate because the paper focused on examining ideas, arguments, theories, and empirical findings from previous scholarly works to understand the mixed outcomes of NPM reforms in different governance contexts.The paper relied mainly on secondary sources of data. Relevant materials were obtained from academic journals, textbooks, government publications, policy reports, and institutional documents relating to public administration, governance, and public sector reforms. Scholarly materials were sourced from recognized academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus-indexed journals, ResearchGate, and other credible online repositories. Attention was given to contemporary studies on NPM reforms, efficiency, accountability, citizen participation, decentralization, and public service delivery.

In analyzing the data, the paper adopted a descriptive and analytical method. Existing literature and empirical studies were carefully reviewed, compared, and interpreted to identify the major contributions, strengths, and limitations of NPM in relation to public service delivery. The paper also examined the extent to which NPM reforms have improved efficiency, accountability, and service quality, while equally assessing criticisms relating to inequality, fragmentation, and reduced citizen participation. Through this approach, the paper was able to identify areas where NPM reforms have succeeded and areas where challenges persist, particularly in developing countries with weak institutional frameworks.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that the impact of New Public Management (NPM) on public service delivery is complex, multidimensional, and context- dependent. On one hand, the evidence shows that NPM has contributed positively regarding improving efficiency, performance, and managerial effectiveness in the public sector. The adoption of performance measurement systems, decentralization, and results-oriented management has enabled governments to enhance productivity, reduce costs, and improve service outcomes. This aligns with the arguments of Hood (1991) and Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017), who emphasize that NPM promotes output control and efficiency in service delivery. Empirical evidence from Pollitt and Dan (2011) , Andrews and Van de Walle (2013), further supports this position, demonstrating that NPM reforms can significantly improve organizational effectiveness, particularly in environments with strong institutional capacity.

However, the findings also indicate that these improvements are not universally experienced across all contexts. In developing countries, including Nigeria, the impact of NPM appears uneven. While reforms such as privatization and commercialization have improved service delivery in specific sectors like telecommunications (Ohemeng, 2015), other sectors continue to face challenges due to weak institutional frameworks and governance constraints. This suggests that the success of NPM is highly dependent on contextual factors such as administrative capacity, regulatory quality, and political stability.

Furthermore, the study highlights significant limitations associated with NPM. One major finding is that the emphasis on efficiency and market-based mechanisms often undermines key public sector values such as equity, accountability, and citizen participation. As noted by Denhardt and Denhardt (2015), redefining citizens as customers reduces opportunities for democratic engagement and weakens the participatory nature of governance. Additionally, empirical evidence from Christensen and Lagreid (2007) shows that NPM reforms can lead to fragmentation of public services, thereby reducing coordination and negatively affecting service integration. This fragmentation is further compounded by outsourcing and privatization, which may create disparities in service access and quality (Batley & Larbi, 2004).

Another important finding is that performance measurement systems, although central to NPM, do not always produce the intended outcomes. In many developing countries, weak accountability structures and limited technical capacity hinder the effective implementation of these systems (Mimba et al., 2007). This undermines the ability of NPM reforms to deliver sustainable improvements in public service delivery.

The findings suggest that the impact of NPM on public service delivery is paradoxical. While it enhances efficiency and managerial performance, it simultaneously introduces challenges related to equity, coordination, and citizen engagement. This explains why contemporary literature increasingly advocates complementary approaches such as the New Public Service and Public Service Logic, which emphasize collaboration, public value, and citizen participation. Therefore, the effectiveness of NPM in improving public service delivery depends on achieving a balance between efficiency-driven reforms and the broader social and democratic objectives of governance.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper finds that New Public Management (NPM) has had both positive and limiting effects on public service delivery. On the positive side, it has helped improve efficiency, strengthen performance management, and enhance accountability through reforms such as decentralization, performance measurement, and results-based administration. These changes have led to better productivity and improved service delivery in some well-structured systems. However, the paper also shows that the success of NPM is uneven, especially in developing countries like Nigeria, where weak institutions, limited capacity, and governance challenges reduce its effectiveness. In some sectors, improvements are visible, while others still experience inefficiency and poor service delivery. More importantly, the paper highlights that NPM’s strong focus on efficiency and market principles often comes at the expense of key public values like equity, citizen participation, and inclusiveness. Treating citizens more like customers than active participants also weaken democratic engagement and limits fairness in service delivery. Finally, the paper concludes that while NPM has contributed to modernizing public administration, it cannot on its own guarantee effective and sustainable service delivery. A more balanced and citizen-focused approach is needed to achieve better and more inclusive outcomes.

Based on the findings of this paper, the following recommendations are made:

i. Governments should combine NPM principles with alternative approaches such as the New Public Service and Public Service Logic. This will ensure a balance between efficiency and democratic values such as participation, accountability, and inclusiveness.
ii. Effective implementation of NPM reforms requires strong institutions. Governments, particularly in developing countries, should invest in capacity building, administrative reforms, and governance structures to support sustainable service delivery.
iii. Public service delivery should move beyond a customer-oriented approach to a citizen-centered model and governments should create platforms for citizen engagement, co-production, and feedback to improve service quality and responsiveness.
iv. To address fragmentation caused by privatization and outsourcing, governments should strengthen coordination mechanisms among public and private service providers to ensure coherence and accessibility in service delivery.
v. Performance management systems should be adapted to local contexts and supported by strong accountability mechanisms. Emphasis should be placed not only on efficiency but also on equity, service quality, and citizen satisfaction.
vi. Policies should be designed to ensure that market-based reforms do not create disparities in access to services. Governments must prioritize inclusive service delivery, especially for vulnerable and marginalized populations.

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