

Combating Corruption in Nigeria: The Professional Accountants Experience

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Abstract:

Globally, corruption has been identified as one of the major clogs in the wheel of development, especially in developing economies characterized by poor corruption detection and prevention mechanisms. As a result, the subject matter of corruption is receiving increasing attention in recent times. The current Administration in Nigeria came with the mantra of 'change', with a focus on the fight against corruption. While it appears that great successes have been recorded in the recovery of looted funds and prosecution of high profile individuals, corruption, unfortunately, continues to bedevil the Nigerian state. The fight against corruption is prosecuted by various anti-graft agencies of the government with apparent disregard to the fundamental roles of the accounting profession which produces internal auditors, external auditors and directors of finance, without whose acquiescence, corruption may not thrive. This study therefore seeks to assess the relevance of the accounting profession in combating corruption in Nigeria. For this, the study undertook a preliminary survey of the opinions of Abuja-based professional accountants. Descriptive and inferential statistics were employed in the analysis of the responses which revealed that professional accountants are conspicuously ignored by the government in their quest to curb corruption. It was therefore recommended that the Nigerian government should make the roles of professional accountants pivotal in all its anticorruption campaign.

Key Words: Fight Against, Corruption, Professional Accountants, Nigerian Government

1 INTRODUCTION

Globally, corruption has continued to gain attention and remains a relevant discourse. This is because it has been identified as one of the major clogs in the wheel of global development and welfare of citizenry of countries. Corruption widens inequality, aggravates mass poverty, militates against efficient resource planning and allocation, undermines economic growth by discouraging investment and compromises economic efficiency (Mackevicius & Girunas, 2013). Osoba (1996) opines that corruption is a form of global antisocial behavior, however the extent of its prevalence depends on the nature and system of political inclination, legality, and morality of any country. Hence, the debilitating effects of corruption persist in underdeveloped and developing economies typically characterized by weak corruption detection and prevention mechanisms.

introducing policies, reforms and structures designed to address the incidence of corruption in the country. Such policies started by the introduction of War against Indiscipline and Corruption (WAIC) in 1985 and Code of Conduct Bureau of 1990, Advance Fee Fraud & Other Related Offences Decree of 1995 by military governments. However, with the dawn of Nigeria's democracy in 1999 and an obvious need for aggressive confrontation of the increasing cases of corruption, various anti-corruption agencies and structures were established. These agencies include: the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the Independent Corrupt Practices and other related Offences Commission (ICPC), the Code of Conduct Bureau (CCB) The Public Procurement Act, The Nigerian Extractive Industrial Transparency Initiative (NEITI), Bureau for Public Procurement and The Due Process Mechanism and SERVICOM. Other measures include the introduction of Bank Verification Number (BVN), Public Services Reform, Public Procurement Act, Fiscal Responsibility Act, Treasury Single Account (TSA), adoption of International Public Sector Accounting Standard (IPSAS) and the Whistle Blower Policy. Although there are acclaimed successes by these agencies and measures, it is questionable whether they are indeed alleviating the menace of corruption as social and economic indicators continue to provide empirical evidences that corruption continues to bedevil the Nigerian state.

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In Nigeria, a developing economy, successive governments have attempted to combat the monumental corruption perceived to have been encouraged by its predecessors by

According to Oyewole (2007), Nwachukwu (2010), Ogundana, Okere, Ogunleye and Oladapo (2018), corruption has become the bane of the Nigerian society and

seems to have defied various attempts to curb it. The endemic nature of corruption is also buttressed by Nigerian Bureau of Statistics report (2017) that showed that almost a third of Nigerian adults (32.3 percent) who had contact with a public official between June 2015 and May 2016 had to pay, or were requested to pay, a bribe to that public official. The report further stated that the estimated total bribe paid by Nigerians was N400 billion, the equivalent of \$4.6 billion in purchasing power parity (PPP). Furthermore, the prevalence of corruption in Nigeria is reiterated by its dismal Corruption perception Index (CPI) rank of 148th position out 180 countries by the Transparency International report 2017. Hence it can be posited that corruption is a canker that continues to eat deep into the fabrics of the Nigerian state.

The questions surrounding the continued use of these establishments, structure and policies, given their discouraging results seems to suggest an obvious need for a strategic repositioning and restructuring of these agencies to ensure their optimal efficiency and effectiveness. Such

strategic decisions require a reevaluation and review of the roles played by all stakeholders that have bearing with corruption management and control. This review became essential as recent studies have continued to decry the absence of strategic involvement of adequate professional accountants in the fight against corruption. This paper aims to investigate the relevance of accounting profession in the anti-corruption campaign in Nigeria public sector by examining the potentials of professional accountants, which if properly harnessed and deployed will positively impact the fight against corruption in Nigeria. To provide empirical perspective to the discourse, a null hypothesis which states that there is no significant association between the level of involvement of professional accountants and the impact of the fight against corruption in Nigeria was tested.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for the study is presented diagrammatically as follows:

The Professional Accountant

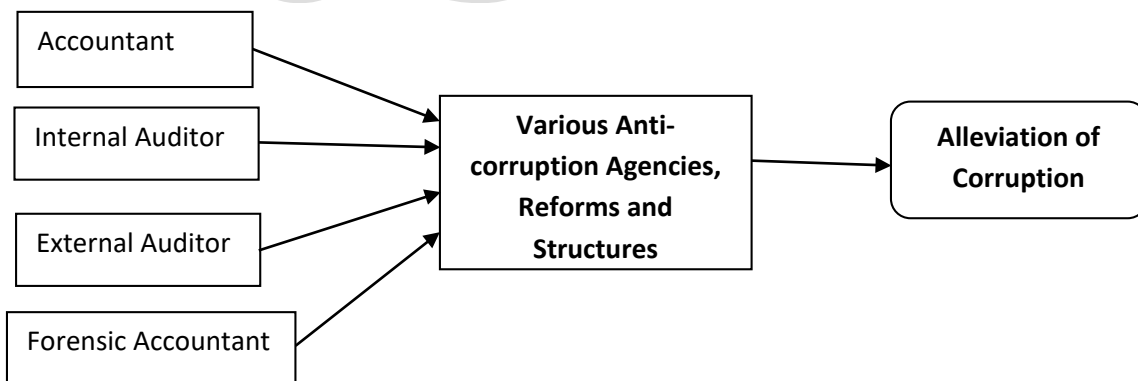


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The Concept of Corruption

A concise and sufficient definition of corruption remains elusive because of its multi-dimensional and disciplinary nature (Dada, 2014). However various scholars have described or defined corruption using different phenomenon, situations, conditions and contexts. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2005) broadly describes corruption as dishonest or illegal behavior, especially of people in authority; it is the act or effect of

making somebody change from moral to immoral standards of behavior. This definition, according to Adedeji, Soyinka and Sunday (2018), linked corruption with two distinct and important variables: authority and morality. It is an act of an official or fiduciary person who unlawfully and wrongfully uses his position or character to procure some benefits for himself or for another person, contrary to the duty and the rights of others (Ruzindana,

Langseth and Gakwandi, 1998). The study further something of value (money, sex or gifts) whether demanded or not, to influence the receiver's action favourably toward the giver.

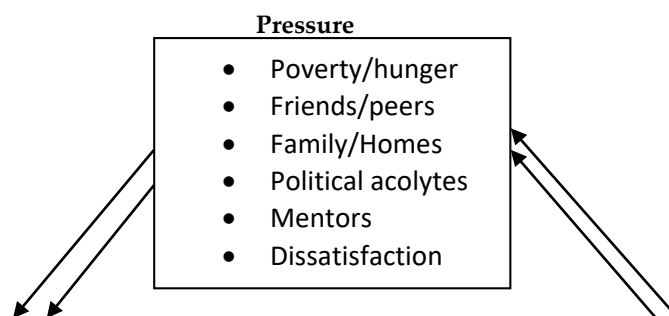
EFCC (2004) defined corruption as: "the non-violent criminal and illicit activity committed with objective of earning wealth illegally either individually or in a group or organized manner thereby violating existing legislation governing the economic activities of government and its administration". Similarly, Transparency International (TI), a leading global anti-corruption watchdog, views corruption as "the abuse of public office for private gains for the benefit of the holder of the office or some third party". Nazari and Aidi (2012) also views corruption from the dimension of public authority and therefore defines corruption as "any form of unethical use of public authority for personal or private advantage". This definition is very narrow as it focuses on corruption in the public sector. El-rufai (2003), explained that corruption covered a wide range of social misconducts such as fraud, extortion, embezzlement, bribery, nepotism, rigging of elections, abuse of public property, influence peddling and sale of expired/defective goods etc. This definition exposed the dimension of social misconduct. In the same vein, Amundsen (1999) sees corruption as everything from the paying of bribes to civil servants in return for some favour and the theft of public purses, to a wide range of dubious economic activities.

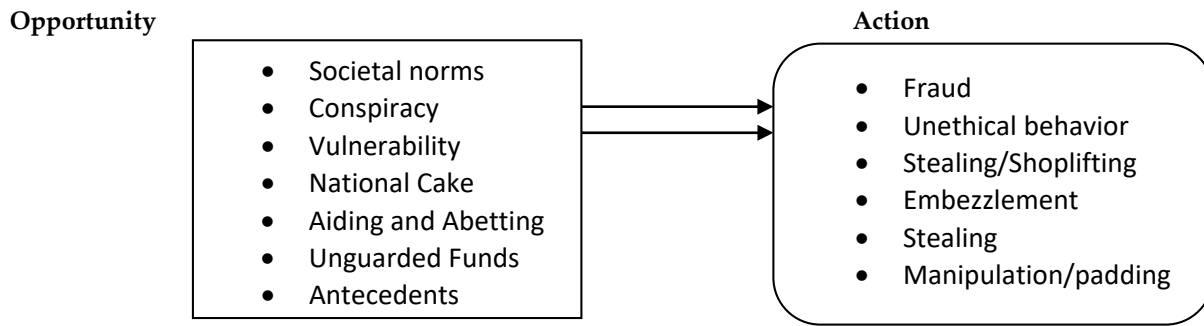
It is obvious from these definitions that corruption and financial crimes are perpetuated by those who are entrusted with the responsibility of taking care of funds or related resources. It can also be deduced from the definitions of corruption above that it is the act of

elucidated that, it is the giving and receiving of influencing an individual or group of persons with money or valuables to gain an unfair advantage. This may include bribery, nepotism, theft, mutilation or outright removal of valuable or documents, among others. Thus, both the giver and the receiver are equally corrupt and should be treated as such. Annan (2004) enumerated the negative effects of corruption on society to include its ability to: undermine democracy and the rule of law, lead to violation of human rights, distort the market, erode the quality of life and allow organized crime, terrorism and insecurity to flourish. John (2013) also argues that corruption undermines the virtue of the citizen and eventually destroys it.

Corruption expresses itself in various forms such as bribery and extortion, fraud and embezzlement; illegal use of public assets for private gains, over and under invoicing; payment for goods not supplied or services not rendered, under-payment of taxes and duties on exports and imports through false invoicing or other declarations, purchase of goods at inflated prices; misappropriation of assets; court decisions awarding monetary damages well in excess of any injury suffered, removal of documents or even whole case files, nepotism and patronage. Deflem (1995) elucidated that there are two types of corruption: monetary and bureaucratic. The scope of this study covers basically monetary corruption such as bribery, fraud, embezzlement and money laundering.

According to the modified Kpakpin corruption model below, corruption involves the interaction of three factors: pressure, opportunity and action.





Source: Rotimi, Obasaju, Lawal and Iseolorunkanmi (2013)

The Professional Accountant

The practice of accounting involves measuring and disclosing or providing assurance about financial information which support stakeholders in making decision on resource allocation or wealth creation. Hence, the accountant is privy to all economic information in every organization and has access to highly privileged and confidential information. A professional accountant, according to IFAC, is "a person who has experience in the field of accounting, achieved through formal education and practical experience and who: demonstrates and maintains competence; complies with a code of ethics; is held to a high professional standard; and, subject to enforcement by a professional accountancy organization or other regulatory mechanism." (IFAC, 2011). Additionally, a professional accountant is a trained individual who practices accounting either in the public or private sector and is also a member of any legally recognized professional accounting body.

The Professional Accountant and Corruption

The link between the professional accountants and corruption is premised on the ability of the accountant to

effectively utilize an understanding of business information and financial reporting systems, accounting and auditing standards and procedures, evidence gathering and investigative techniques, and litigation processes and procedures to eliminate or at least minimize the factors involved in the corruption model (opportunity, pressure and action). Dada (2014) argued that the accountants as the first set of gatekeepers are saddled with the responsibility of instituting transparency and accountability in any organization by ensuring that transactions are valid, at arm’s-length, captured and properly recorded according to established standards. The study also posited that the professional accountant has the duty to protect the public interest, and is bound by vigorous codes of professional and personal ethics calling for the highest levels of integrity and objectivity.

The Accounting profession has a tripod dimensional role in the alleviation of corruption. These dimensions are preventive, detective, and punitive in nature.

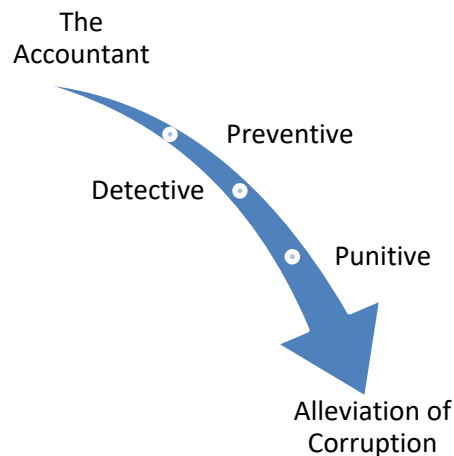


Figure 2: Role of the Accountant in Fighting Corruption

The Preventive Role

The preventive role of the professional accountant is targeted towards the elimination or minimization of the opportunity factor. It is characterized by the development and institutionalization of financial reporting standards, corporate governance structures and internal control mechanisms in line with global best practices. This role is particularly pursued by the substantial improvements and continual review of accounting and auditing standards in the area of quality of financial information, control systems and compliance making it more difficult for managers of organizations to act contrary to the expectations of stakeholders (Oladipupo, 2015). The knowledge and insistence of the utilization and compliance of such standards and controls by the professional accountant minimizes the risk of fraud and other corrupt practices.

The Detective Role

The detective role of professional accountants, with particular reference to the forensic accountants and auditors, involves a series of interrelated and complex concepts and processes usually carried out by forensic accountants and auditors. The role weakens the strength of pressure and further serves as deterrence for the commission of any corrupt practice. The accountant's responsibility is to design and implement audit procedures of sufficient scope and depth to detect material deficiencies in the financial statements—essentially, without regard to the source or origin of the deficiency. The profession requires that adequate, appropriate and reasonable efforts be made to detect material misstatements or misrepresentations in financial statements. Professional accountants are increasingly playing more proactive risk reduction roles by designing and performing extended procedures as part of statutory audit, acting as advisers to audit committees, fraud deterrence engagements, and assisting in investment analyst research. While the preventive controls are designed to keep fraud and corrupt practices from occurring, detective measures uncover such after they occur.

The Punitive Role

Studies have revealed that one of the best ways to prevent corrupt practices is to enforce both preventive as well as strong enough punitive measures. In fulfilling this role, forensic accountants are expected to precisely document the sort of proof required for successful criminal indictment; have the ability to work in a complex litigation and regulatory environment; and with reasonable accuracy, reconstruct missing, destroyed, or deceptive accounting records. The accountant provides litigation support and testifies when needed as expert witnesses in judicial proceedings, thus supporting the relevant anti-corruption

agencies in effecting punitive measures on culpable personalities effectively. Activities of accountants in this regards are, therefore, targeted towards ensuring that those involved in corrupt practices are prosecuted and possibly meted with appropriate punishment that would serve as deterrence to others.

2.2 Review of Related Studies

Several studies (Adegbe & Fakile, 2012; Dada, Owolabi, & Okwu, 2013; Modugu & Anyaduba, 2013; Gbegi & Adebisi, 2014; Enofe, Ekpulu, & Ajala (2015) Oyedokun, Akinwumi & Asaolu, 2018; Sorunke, 2018) found that the accounting profession in Nigeria had a significant effect on the reduction of corruption in Nigeria. Specifically, Adedeji, Soyinka and Sunday (2018) findings revealed the efficacy of the accounting control measures deployed by the accountant to inhibit corruption in the public sectors. Conversely, the study by Dada (2014) and Akhidime & Uagbale-Ekatak (2014) revealed the absence of a significant relationship between forensic accounting and corruption. It is noteworthy to mention however that these studies concentrated on the role of forensic accounting.

Beyond the shores of Nigeria, Malagueno, Albrecht, Ainge and Stephens (2010) investigated the relationship between the perception of corruption and the perceived level of accounting and audit quality in 57 countries and found that there is a negative relationship between the two. In other words, better accounting and auditing leads to the reduction of corruption. A similar conclusion was deduced by Owolabi (2011) following a study conducted in 13 Anglo-African countries. The study had examined the relationship between corruption and the environment of accounting and auditing.

Further studies that reiterated the importance of accounting include the research by Everett, Neu and Rahaman (2007). The study examined the role of accounting in the global fight against corruption and posited that that accounting and auditing systems have an important role in any organization with accounting as an information system, and auditing as a monitoring or check on the accuracy of the accounting information system, provide an enormous potential for establishing accountability and detection of corrupt activities. Lipset and Lenz (2000) and Mcshare and Nilsson (2013) also emphasized the indispensable role of accountants in corruption control when their study revealed that the level of corruption could be reduced by improving the quality of their accounting and auditing. The studies had examined the association between the Big 4 market share, perceived accounting quality and the perception of corruption in a country.

Ghaffoori (2016) study on the Kurdistan region found a positive relationship between the accounting system and corruption. Furthermore, Ghaffoori submitted that an efficient accounting system is regarded as one of the effective anti-corruption strategies.

There appears to be a general consensus that accountants have a role to play in combating corrupt practices. The empirical findings of most of the reviewed studies are accentuated by the result of the study by Transparency International (2017). The research reiterated the key roles that accountants play in detecting, preventing and deterring corruption by emphasizing the importance of sound auditing and accounting processes in combating corruption.

This study is underpinned by Jain (2010) theory on corruption. The theory posits that corruption thrives on the existence of three central elements, namely: The possession of discretionary power; secondly, associated economic rents; and thirdly, a weak regulatory system that offers a low probability of detection and/or penalty for the wrongdoing". The first two elements are taken as given in Jain's proposition. While the discretionary power arises from the latitude vested on ruling authority to loosely take decisions and enact laws, the associated economic rents arise from the enormous economic and social benefits accruable to the individuals in position of power. Jain posited that the professional accountants' mitigation in corrupt practices is at the third element, that is, strengthening regulations to make it more difficult for corruption to be perpetrated without detection and to provide undisputable evidence of its occurrence where it inadvertently occurs. The theory proposed that any effective anti-corruption drive must be targeted at improving the regulatory system which will in turn increase Jain's 'probability of detection', consequently reducing the level of corruption. The accounting profession Research Hypothesis:

There is no significant association between the level of involvement of professional accountants and the impact of government anti-corruption campaign.

is on the third element of corruption, the detection and penalty for wrongdoing. The theory further explicated that any increase in Jain's "probability of detection" will result in decrease in the level of corruption. Therefore, as activities targeted to improve probability of detection are adequately deployed (such as improved accounting and auditing standards, mandatory and more independent audit), countries should experience less corruption.

3 Methodology

To provide empirical insight to the study, a survey research design was employed. The whole essence of the survey was to find out existence of relationship between accountants roles and alleviation of corruption in Nigeria. The population surveyed comprised of practicing professional Accountants, professional Accountants in the employment of anti-corruption agencies and Accounting lecturers within Abuja. A sample of 100 people was selected to which questionnaires were administered of which 95 were duly filled and returned. The choice of the sample size and location is based on convenience and accessibility to the respondents. To improve the reliability and accuracy of responses, the staff of accounting firms that have recently served as external auditors to various government ministries, departments and parastatals were targeted. Furthermore, senior academicians who had been involved in the training of senior and middle level accounting staff of public sector organizations in related topic were also captured. The third target category was the professional accountants employed in anti-corruption agencies.

The research hypothesis was tested using Chi-square technique with statistical package for social science (SPSS 21.0). To obtain deeper inference from the opinion survey, the data was subjected to statistical iteration to derive transformed data which enabled further statistical analysis.

Case Processing Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Accountant level * Corruption	95	100.0%	0	0.0%	95	100.0%

Accountant level * Corruption Cross tabulation

Count		Corruption		Total
		Low impact	High impact	
Accountant level	Deficient	64	13	77
	Sufficient	18	0	18
Total		82	13	95

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3.521 ^a	1	.061		
Continuity Correction ^b	2.236	1	.135		
Likelihood Ratio	5.926	1	.015		
Fisher's Exact Test				.120	.053
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.484	1	.062		
N of Valid Cases	95				

a. 1 cells (25.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 2.46.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

The corresponding p-value of the test statistic is $p = 0.061$ which is greater than $\alpha = 0.05$, hence the null hypothesis is not rejected. The result therefore reveals the absence of sufficient evidence to support the existence of an association between the level of involvement of

professional accountants and the impact of government anti-corruption campaigns. Based on the findings, the study posits that professional accountants do not play any significant role in the anti-corruption war in Nigeria.

Besides the chi-square test results, summary of responses from the questionnaire is presented in Table 1

TABLE 1: Summary of responses to questionnaire

S/N	Question	SA	A	U	D	SD
1	The process of becoming a professional accountant in Nigeria adequately prepares the accountant to fight corruption	50%	10%	-	20%	20%
2	Nigerian professional accountant have adequate knowledge of the scope and content of IPSAS	25%	37%	4%	21%	13%
3	All professional accountants have the required skill for provision of expert witness in litigation support services	10%	41%	7%	24%	18%
4	Accounting Ethics has been sufficiently adopted by Professional Accountants	18%	21%	14%	23%	24%
5	In Nigeria, most professional accountant are motivated by the public interest	10%	23%	5%	46%	16%
6	Sufficient numbers of professional accounts are employed in the public sector	4%	18%	-	34%	44%

7	The Nigerian government is ensuring that professional accountants play a major and positive role in tackling corruption, along with other key actors	12%	23%	15%	29%	21%
8	Professionalism and education are at the core of the government fight against corruption.	14%	21%	13%	18%	34%
9	Compliance with public sector accounting standards can enhance corruption control in the public sector and will ensure fiscal transparency and accountability in Nigeria	50%	30%	-	10%	10%
10	The proportion of professional accountants in public sector will have a direct correlation with the alleviation of corruption.	35%	29%	5%	17%	14%

(SA - Strongly Agreed; A – Agreed; U – Undecided; D – Disagree; SD - Strongly Disagree)

An analysis of the responses to questions 1, 2 and 3 showed that 60%, 64% and 51% of the respondents affirmed that professional accountants possessed the requisite skills needed for effective and successful corruption control. The role of the human angle of the potentiality of a professional accountant is depicted by questions 4 and 5 which reveal that a large percent of the respondents, 47% and 62% of the sample size agree that the professional accountants in Nigeria are deficient in ethical behavior and do not have the public interest as the core motivating factor in the practice of accounting

The dismal level of the utilization of professional accountants by Nigerian government in its fight against analysis. The derived index of agreement is presented in Table 2.

corruption is revealed by the percentage of respondents that disagreed in questions 6, 7 and 8. These show that a large percent of the respondents reported that professional accountants are not sufficiently engaged in the anti-corruption war in Nigeria.

The favourable responses rate of 80% and 64% to questions 9 and 10 affirms the positive role which professional accountants could play in combating the menace of corruption in Nigeria.

To obtain deeper inference from the opinion survey presented in Table 1, the data is subjected to statistical iteration to derive transformed data for further statistical

Table 2: Index of Agreement

SN	Question Item	Index of Agreement	Rank
1	The process of becoming a professional accountant in Nigeria adequately prepares the accountant to fight corruption	1.5000	4
2	Nigerian professional accountant have adequate knowledge of the scope and content of IPSAS	1.8788	2
3	All professional accountants have the required skill for provision of expert witness in litigation support services	1.2143	5
4	Accounting Ethics has been sufficiently adopted by Professional Accountants	0.8298	6
5	In Nigeria, most professional accountant are motivated by the public interest	0.5324	9
6	Sufficient numbers of professional accounts are employed in the public sector	0.2821	10
7	The Nigerian government is ensuring that professional accountants play a major and positive role in tackling corruption, along with other key actors	0.7000	7

8	Professionalism and education are at the core of the government fight against corruption.	0.6731	8
9	Compliance with public sector accounting standards can enhance corruption control in the public sector and will ensure fiscal transparency and accountability in Nigeria	4.0000	1
10	The proportion of professional accountants in public sector will have a direct correlation with the alleviation of corruption.	2.0645	2

The respondents' levels of agreement or disagreement indicate differences in their perceptions of the role of accountants in combating corruption. To unravel the seeming differences or convergence in opinions, their responses were analysed by showing a first-level index of agreement with the suggestion that there is a consensus question about the role of accountants in preventing corruption. The index does not include equivocal (that is, 'not sure') responses which vary from item to item. Herbert and Wallace (1996) defined "an index of agreement as the ratio of total agreeing responses (that is 5s and 4s) over the total disagreeing responses (that is, 1s and 2s)

In summary, the findings from the extant literature revealed that the professional accountant possesses a high potential to alleviate corruption. Due to the rigorous professional training and the high ethical standards of the professional bodies, the professional accountants are poised to combat corruption where they are adequately involved in the war fare. Furthermore, the empirical evidence provides indication that the professional accountants are not adequately involved by the Nigerian government in its prosecution of anti-corruption war. The results of our findings therefore point to the fact that anti-corruption war in Nigeria lacks the necessary professionalism attributable to professional accountants, which among other reasons, has contributed to the abysmal performance of Nigerian government in its combat against corruption. The outcome of the study therefore corroborates the evidence of a strong correlation between adoption of the global accountancy profession's ethical, education, and investigation and discipline requirements, and more favourable scores on international measures of corruption as provided by Transparency International report (2017).

4 Conclusion

The paper examined the roles of professional accountants in combating corruption in Nigeria gleaned from existing literatures on the subject matter and supported by survey analysis to provide empirical evidence to the discourse. While the literature review provides credence to the incontrovertible positive roles professional accountants could play in alleviating corruption, the empirical evidence gives indications that professional accountants in Nigeria

are grossly relegated to the background in the pursuit of anti-corruption agenda of the government. It can therefore be concluded that the unfortunate disregard of accounting profession as pivotal to anti-corruption crusade by the ruling authorities has to a large extent contributed towards the perennial corruption experienced in Nigeria.

5 Recommendations:

The following recommendations are made for the study:

1. It is a well-known fact that where corporate governance architecture is strong, the role played by accountants in tackling corruption is amplified. It is therefore recommended that the Nigerian government should intentionally establish international standard corporate governance structures in its operating units as an avenue to make the work of the professional accountants count in checkmating corruption.
2. The accounting professional bodies in Nigeria should strengthen their Code of Ethics to make corrupt practices among its members a stern offense in Nigeria so that a well-meaning government would hinge anti-corruption programmes on the profession.
3. Governments should carefully review extant laws and regulations guiding accounting and auditing in ministries, agencies and parastatals. Evidence shows that most of these laws were adopted from the colonial master; the fact is that Nigeria today exhibit totally different characteristics that the laws propounded by the colonial master could not have pre-empted.
4. Government should desist from deployment of unqualified persons to accounting and auditing functions as these individuals apparently serve as key instruments for aiding and abetting corrupt practices.

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