

Budget padding and the 9th National Assembly

By Sunny Anderson Osiebe

In the last few years, the word 'padding' has gradually crept into Nigeria's budgeting system and in less than five years or thereabout, it has now completely assumed a life of its own. Before the advent of civilian rule, May 29, 1999, Nigerians usually listened to military Heads of States as they regaled and reeled out figures called the "National Budget."

However, by December 1999, Nigerians started hearing a different kind of "budget language" with more emphasis on yet another word- "proposal." This time, the members of the National Assembly take turn in "questioning" and "reviewing" the proposed budget usually presented by the President. The budget processes continued both at the Federal and State levels, but with the stranglehold of governors on state Houses of Assembly, only the National Assembly has a semblance of a budgeting system.

However, on Sunday April 20, 2019, no less a person than the Presidential candidate of the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC), then simply referred to as the 'National leader' of the APC, Senator Bola Ahmed Tinubu called out the then President of the Senate, Bukola Saraki and Speaker of the House of Representatives, Yakubu Dogara, accusing them of padding the national budget with their "pet projects." With Tinubu's accusation contained in a public statement issued by his spokesman, Tunde Rahaman, the concept of "budget padding" suddenly assumed a national status and subsequently became a recurring and even increasing feature in the affairs of the National Assembly. Of course, both Saraki and Dogara have since left as presiding officers of the National Assembly, but it's now obvious that budget padding didn't leave with them.

According to the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), the 2021 and 2022 national budgets were padded with N300 billion and N100 billion respectively!

Confirming to the Senate Committee on Finance, the padding of both the 2021 and 2022 budgets, the Chairman of ICPC, Prof. Bolaji Owasanoye stated that, "N300 billion would have been wasted by the federal government on duplicated projects inserted into the 2021 budget and another N100 billion for the same purpose in the current fiscal year if not tracked and intercepted by

the ICPC.

In fact, in 2021, President Muhammadu Buhari in frustration retorted that that year's budget was "unimplementable." Despite the public outcry that greeted the padding of both 2021 and 2022 budgets, on November 5, 2022, the Executive Secretary of the National Universities Commission (NUC), Prof. Abubakar Rashid, told the joint Senate and House Committee on Tertiary Education and TETFund during budget defence, that N12 billion was inserted by the Ministry of Finance into the Commission's 2023 budget. In his words, "In NUC's budget, we have a problem. We had additional money given to us that we didn't request, but I later went to the Ministry of Finance to find out because our budget was always hovering around N3 billion with about N2 billion for personnel, about N700-N800 million for capital, about N700 million for overhead. But last year, we saw an additional N12 billion given for World Bank projects. The World Bank projects are not processed through this mode."

In the same vein, on November 17, 2022, the Federal Ministry of Defence also revealed to the Senate Committee on Defence that the Federal Ministry of Finance inserted N10.8bn into their budget. The most mind boggling, however, is that of the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management, which equally accused the Federal Ministry of Finance of surreptitiously inserting a whopping N206.1 billion into its 2023 budget. Earlier, on November 1, the Senate Committee on Power also announced that it had discovered N195bn inserted and earmarked as counterpart funding for bilateral and multilateral projects in the ministry of power's 2023 budget proposal, this also was done without the knowledge of the ministry! The list is endless. At the National Assembly, it has been one discovery after another and the situation shows no signs of abating. According to a recent report published by BudgetIT, a non-governmental organization focusing on budget tracking in Nigeria, the 2023 national budget of Nigeria has a total 6462 "insertions" valued at N910.37 billion. More worrisome is that items in the budget are directly linked to the presiding (leaders) officers of the National Assembly.

For example, five suspicious projects are linked to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, namely the "Construction

of Blocks, A, B, C, D, E and F of Femi Gbajabiamila Senior Secondary School, Itire, Lagos with each "Block" costing N200 million each, while an ICT centre in the school is also proposed to cost N250million. For the Deputy President of the Senate, Sen Ovie Omo-Agege, the 2023 budget captures the "provision and installation of all-in-one solar powered street lights in selected communities across (5) LGAs of Delta Central Senatorial District with a contract sum of N200million for each community. Also, there is another provision of N1.5 billion each for the construction of block A and B faculty buildings at the Federal Polytechnic, Orogun, Delta State. There is also another budgetary provision of N1 billion for the construction of Administration block for the Federal Polytechnic, Orogun. For the President of the Senate, Sen. Ahmad Lawan, the 2023 budget also has provision for the "construction of solar-powered borehole for Fulani Settlements in Yobe North Senatorial District at the cost of N150 million, while another N120 million was provided in the budget for the purchase of tricycles for Yobe North Senatorial District. There is yet another N600 million provision for the installation of Solar lights in Yobe North Senatorial District, while N188 million was budgeted for building concrete drainages in Yobe North Senatorial District as well.

With the scary data above, it looks so slim that budget padding will go away soon in spite of the outcry, frustration and disenchantment of the public towards the attitude of the handlers of Nigeria's budgeting system. But, if the government can summon the courage to adopt more transparent budgeting system, all hopes may not be lost. For Nigeria to achieve a more transparent budgeting system that can mitigate the evils of budget padding, I believe that there must be clear law that will govern the budgeting process with transparency and accountability at its core. Also, the application of technology, I believe that the current opaque budgeting system which obviously encourages corruption can be tackled. With technology, the process from conception to application can be laid bare and open even for the participation of the citizenry.

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