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**CORRUPTION, PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK  
AND SOCIAL WELFARE DELIVERY IN NIGERIA:  
A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS  
TO SOCIAL JUSTICE**

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## ABSTRACT

Corruption remains a significant institutional challenge that weakens social welfare systems and constrains the capacity of professional social workers to promote social justice in Nigeria. Despite sustained anti-corruption initiatives and the expansion of social protection programmes, governance failures continue to limit equitable access to welfare services for vulnerable populations. Although corruption has been widely examined from governance and public administration perspectives, its implications for professional social work and welfare delivery have received comparatively limited scholarly attention. This study examines how institutional corruption shapes professional social work practice and undermines social welfare delivery in Nigeria. The study adopted a qualitative desk research design based on a systematic review and thematic analysis of contemporary peer-reviewed literature, government publications, policy documents, and reports from international organizations. The analysis was guided by an integrated theoretical framework comprising Institutional Theory, Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory, Social Justice Theory, and Good Governance Theory, culminating in the development of the Institutional Social Welfare Effectiveness Framework (ISWEF).

The findings indicate that corruption is embedded within institutional governance through political patronage, bureaucratic inefficiency, elite capture, weak accountability mechanisms, inadequate funding, and fragmented administrative structures. These institutional weaknesses constrain the professional autonomy and ethical responsibilities of social workers, reduce organizational effectiveness, and limit equitable access to welfare programmes for children, women, persons with disabilities, internally displaced persons, older persons, and low-income households. The study further demonstrates that corruption undermines social justice by reinforcing exclusion, inequality, and multidimensional poverty.

The study concludes that improving social welfare delivery requires comprehensive institutional reforms that strengthen governance, accountability, professional social work, and transparent welfare administration. It proposes the Institutional Social Welfare Effectiveness Framework (ISWEF) as a conceptual model for explaining the relationship between institutional governance, corruption, professional social work, and social welfare outcomes.

**Keywords:** Institutional corruption, Professional social work, Social welfare delivery, Institutional governance, Social justice, Accountability.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Social welfare systems constitute one of the principal instruments through which governments promote social justice, reduce poverty, protect vulnerable populations, and foster inclusive development. By providing services such as income support, child protection, healthcare, disability assistance, housing, and community-based interventions, these systems seek to improve citizens' well-being and reduce socioeconomic inequalities. Within this framework, professional social workers serve as frontline practitioners who translate social policy into practical interventions through advocacy, case management, psychosocial support, community organization, and protection of vulnerable groups (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2023; International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2018). Consequently, the effectiveness of social welfare delivery depends not only on policy design and financial resources but also on the quality of institutional governance within welfare systems.

Effective governance remains indispensable for achieving equitable and accountable social welfare administration. Institutions responsible for welfare delivery require transparency, accountability, professional competence, administrative efficiency, and adherence to ethical standards to ensure that public resources reach intended beneficiaries. However, these institutional foundations are frequently undermined by corruption, which weakens public administration, distorts resource allocation, erodes public confidence, and limits access to essential services. Transparency International (2024) defines corruption as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain, while the United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, and United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNDP et al., 2023) demonstrate that corruption undermines the social contract and weakens the

development of peaceful, just, and inclusive institutions. Through practices such as political patronage, procurement fraud, embezzlement, favouritism, and diversion of welfare resources, corruption reduces the effectiveness of social protection programmes and compromises equitable service delivery (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2024; World Bank, 2024).

Nigeria presents a particularly important context for examining these challenges. Although successive governments have expanded social protection initiatives, including the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP), Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT), National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP), and other poverty reduction interventions, programme implementation has frequently been weakened by institutional corruption, administrative fragmentation, political interference, and weak accountability mechanisms (Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Poverty Reduction, 2024; World Bank, 2025). Reports by the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC, 2024) and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC, 2024) identify persistent challenges, including diversion of welfare funds, procurement irregularities, payroll fraud, manipulation of beneficiary databases, and elite capture. These institutional failures diminish programme effectiveness and disproportionately affect vulnerable populations such as children, women, persons with disabilities, internally displaced persons, older persons, and low-income households.

Professional social workers occupy a strategic position within this institutional environment. Beyond providing direct services, they advocate for social justice, protect human rights, facilitate access to welfare programmes, and strengthen community resilience. However, their effectiveness is closely linked to the governance environment in which they operate. Chronic underfunding, bureaucratic inefficien-

cy, inadequate professional recognition, political interference, and corruption frequently constrain their professional autonomy, create ethical dilemmas, and reduce their capacity to deliver client-centred services (Healy, 2022; Agwu et al., 2023). Consequently, improving social welfare outcomes requires attention not only to programme expansion but also to the institutional conditions that shape professional social work practice.

Against this background, this study examines corruption as an institutional barrier to professional social work and effective social welfare delivery in Nigeria. Drawing on Institutional Theory, Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory, Social Justice Theory, and Good Governance Theory, the study develops the Institutional Social Welfare Effectiveness Framework (ISWEF) to explain how governance failures constrain professional practice, weaken institutional performance, and undermine the realization of social justice. By integrating perspectives from governance studies and professional social work, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of institutional reform and welfare governance in developing countries.

### **1.1. Statement of Problem**

Despite sustained anti-corruption initiatives and increasing investment in social protection programmes, social welfare delivery in Nigeria continues to experience significant governance challenges. Institutional corruption, political patronage, weak accountability mechanisms, bureaucratic inefficiency, and fragmented administrative structures have reduced the capacity of welfare institutions to deliver services equitably and efficiently. Consequently, public resources intended for vulnerable populations are frequently diverted or ineffectively managed, limiting access to essential social services and weakening public confidence in government institutions (ICPC, 2024; World Bank, 2025).

While corruption has received considerable scholarly attention within public administration, economics, and political science, comparatively little research has examined its implications for professional social work and welfare governance. Existing studies largely focus on corruption measurement, public financial management, or anti-corruption institutions, with limited consideration of how institutional corruption shapes the everyday practice of social workers and influences the effectiveness of social welfare delivery. This omission is important because professional social workers constitute the primary interface between welfare institutions and vulnerable populations, making their effectiveness highly dependent on institutional integrity and governance quality.

Without addressing the institutional conditions that constrain professional social work, efforts to improve social welfare delivery are unlikely to achieve sustainable outcomes. There is therefore a need for an integrated analysis that explains how corruption affects institutional governance, professional practice, and equitable access to welfare services. This study addresses that gap by examining corruption as an institutional barrier to professional social work and social welfare delivery in Nigeria.

### **1.2. Objectives**

1. Identify the major forms and institutional mechanisms of corruption affecting social welfare delivery in Nigeria.
2. Examine how corruption influences the practice, professional autonomy, and ethical responsibilities of social workers.
3. Assess the implications of corruption for equity, access, and effectiveness in social welfare delivery.

## **2.0 CONCEPTUAL REVIEW**

The conceptual review provides the intellectual foundation for understanding the relationships among

corruption, professional social work, social welfare delivery, and social justice within the Nigerian context. Rather than treating these concepts as isolated variables, this study conceptualizes them as interdependent institutional processes that collectively shape the effectiveness of welfare governance. The review adopts an institutional perspective, arguing that corruption is not merely an ethical failure of individuals but a structural phenomenon embedded in governance systems, organizational cultures, and administrative practices that influence the performance of social welfare institutions. Consequently, the effectiveness of professional social work depends not only on practitioners' competence but also on the institutional environment within which they operate.

Corruption is widely recognized as one of the greatest impediments to effective governance and public service delivery. Transparency International (2024) defines corruption as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain, while the United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, and United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNDP et al., 2023) demonstrate that corruption undermines the social contract and weakens the development of peaceful, just, and inclusive institutions. Through practices such as political patronage, procurement irregularities, embezzlement, favouritism, and diversion of public resources, corruption can weaken the effectiveness of social protection systems and compromise equitable access to public services (OECD, 2024; World Bank, 2024). Within the African social work context, Kreitzer et al. (2023) highlight the historical need to strengthen and contextualize social work education and practice so that the profession can respond more effectively to the continent's distinctive social realities. These institutional and professional challenges reinforce the need for social work to engage critically with governance, institutional accountability, and social justice. Within Nigeria's social welfare

sector, these practices have become institutionalized, weakening accountability, reducing administrative efficiency, and limiting equitable access to welfare services (Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission [ICPC], 2024; World Bank, 2025). The present study therefore conceptualizes corruption as a systemic governance problem that undermines institutional performance rather than simply individual misconduct.

Professional social work is a practice-based profession and academic discipline committed to promoting social change, social justice, human rights, and sustainable development. According to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2018), the profession seeks to empower individuals, families, and communities through advocacy, psychosocial intervention, policy engagement, community development, and social protection. Professional social workers serve as critical intermediaries between public institutions and vulnerable populations by facilitating access to welfare services, protecting human dignity, and addressing structural inequalities. In Nigeria, however, the profession continues to face challenges arising from inadequate funding, weak professional regulation, political interference, limited institutional recognition, and organizational constraints that reduce practitioners' autonomy and effectiveness (Healy, 2022; Agwu et al., 2023). Corruption further compounds these challenges by creating institutional environments in which ethical practice becomes increasingly difficult.

Social welfare delivery refers to the institutional processes through which governments and social service organizations design, finance, implement, and evaluate programmes intended to improve citizens' well-being and protect vulnerable groups. These programmes include poverty alleviation initiatives, child protection services, disability support, healthcare, social assistance, housing, and community development interventions (International Labour Organization [ILO],

2024; World Bank, 2024). Effective social welfare delivery requires transparent governance, competent institutions, adequate financing, professional capacity, and robust accountability mechanisms. However, weak institutional coordination, fragmented administrative systems, political interference, and corruption frequently reduce programme effectiveness and prevent intended beneficiaries from accessing available services (Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Poverty Reduction, 2024).

Institutional barriers refer to structural and organizational constraints that hinder the effective functioning of public institutions. Such barriers include bureaucratic inefficiency, inadequate funding, overlapping institutional mandates, weak monitoring systems, poor policy coordination, limited technological capacity, political interference, and corruption (Scott, 2014; OECD, 2024). These weaknesses create opportunities for administrative discretion, elite capture, and inefficient resource allocation, thereby reducing the effectiveness of welfare programmes and constraining the work of frontline social workers.

Social justice provides the normative foundation for both professional social work and social welfare policy. It emphasizes fairness, equity, equal opportunity, human dignity, and inclusive access to public resources regardless of gender, age, disability, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status (Rawls, 1971; United Nations, 2024). Within professional social work, social justice extends beyond individual service provision to include advocacy for institutional reforms capable of addressing structural inequalities and protecting vulnerable populations (IFSW, 2018). Corruption fundamentally contradicts these principles because it diverts resources from those most in need, reinforces exclusion, and perpetuates poverty and inequality.

These concepts are closely interconnected. Institutional corruption weakens governance structures, undermines accountability, and constrains professional

social work practice. Weak professional practice, in turn, reduces the effectiveness of social welfare delivery and limits equitable access to services. The cumulative effect is the erosion of social justice, particularly among vulnerable populations. Conversely, strengthening institutional integrity, professional social work, and accountable governance enhances welfare effectiveness and promotes inclusive development. This conceptual relationship underpins the Institutional Social Welfare Effectiveness Framework (ISWEF) developed in this study and provides the basis for the subsequent empirical analysis.

## 2.1. Empirical Review

Contemporary empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that corruption constitutes a major institutional obstacle to effective governance and social welfare delivery. Comparative studies show that countries with lower levels of corruption generally achieve higher standards of public service delivery, stronger institutional performance, and better social development outcomes. Conversely, corruption weakens public institutions by encouraging resource diversion, procurement irregularities, political patronage, and administrative inefficiency, thereby reducing the effectiveness of welfare programmes despite increased public expenditure (World Bank, 2025; OECD, 2024). These findings suggest that institutional quality is a critical determinant of social welfare effectiveness.

Within the African context, governance research indicates that corruption has become deeply embedded in public bureaucracies responsible for healthcare, education, and social protection. Corruption and institutional unaccountability can undermine frontline public service delivery by weakening resource allocation, institutional responsiveness, and professional capacity, with particularly serious implications for vulnerable populations (Agwu et al., 2023).

Although these studies provide important insights

into governance challenges, they devote comparatively limited attention to the implications of corruption for professional social work and frontline welfare administration.

Research on social protection systems further shows that corruption undermines programme effectiveness by distorting beneficiary targeting, increasing exclusion errors, and weakening accountability. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2024) reports that countries with transparent administrative systems, integrated beneficiary databases, and effective monitoring mechanisms achieve more equitable welfare outcomes than those characterized by fragmented governance. Similarly, Gentilini et al. (2022) found that digital payment platforms, biometric identification, and electronic beneficiary registries introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly reduced opportunities for corruption and improved programme transparency in several developing countries. Nevertheless, technological reforms alone proved insufficient where institutional governance remained weak.

Evidence from Nigeria reflects similar governance challenges. The World Bank (2025) identifies political interference, inadequate beneficiary verification, weak monitoring systems, and poor institutional coordination as major constraints affecting the implementation of national social protection programmes. Likewise, reports by the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC, 2024) document recurring cases of procurement fraud, diversion of welfare resources, manipulation of beneficiary databases, payroll fraud, and contract irregularities. These findings suggest that corruption has become a structural feature of welfare governance rather than an isolated administrative problem.

Studies focusing on professional social work increasingly recognize institutional governance as a critical determinant of effective practice. Healy (2022) ar-

gues that professional competence alone cannot guarantee effective service delivery where institutions are characterized by weak governance and inadequate organizational support. Similarly, Kreitzer et al. (2023) highlight the historical need to strengthen and contextualize social work education and practice in Africa, arguing that the profession must respond more effectively to the continent's distinctive social realities and move beyond inherited Eurocentric models.

Despite growing international interest in governance and social work, empirical studies directly linking corruption with professional social work remain relatively scarce, particularly within Nigeria. Existing Nigerian research has concentrated primarily on corruption within public finance, electoral politics, or public administration, with comparatively little attention devoted to its implications for frontline welfare professionals and service delivery. Furthermore, most studies analyze governance challenges from single disciplinary perspectives without integrating institutional, professional, and normative explanations.

## 2.2. Synthesis of the Theoretical Framework

The relationship between corruption, professional social work, and social welfare delivery is multidimensional and cannot be adequately explained by a single theoretical perspective. Accordingly, this study integrates **Institutional Theory**, **Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory**, **Social Justice Theory**, and **Good Governance Theory** to provide a comprehensive explanation of how institutional governance influences professional social work practice and social welfare outcomes in Nigeria. The integration of these theories forms the **Institutional Social Welfare Effectiveness Framework (ISWEF)**, which serves as the analytical lens for the study.

**Institutional Theory** explains the structural origins of corruption by arguing that organizational behaviour is shaped by formal rules, governance structures, institutional norms, and regulatory systems (Scott, 2014).

Where institutions are weak, fragmented, or poorly regulated, corruption becomes embedded within administrative processes rather than remaining an isolated act of individual misconduct. In Nigeria's social welfare system, political patronage, bureaucratic inefficiency, weak accountability mechanisms, and inadequate institutional capacity create opportunities for procurement fraud, diversion of welfare resources, manipulation of beneficiary registers, and elite capture, thereby weakening institutional performance and public confidence. Institutional Theory explains why corruption persists.

**Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory** (Lipsky, 1980) demonstrates how these institutional weaknesses affect frontline professionals responsible for implementing welfare programmes. Professional social workers operate within environments characterized by inadequate funding, excessive workloads, staff shortages, bureaucratic constraints, and political interference. These conditions reduce professional autonomy, create ethical dilemmas, and limit practitioners' ability to deliver rights-based and client-centred services. The theory therefore establishes the link between macro-level governance failures and micro-level social work practice.

**Social Justice Theory** provides the normative foundation of the study by emphasizing fairness, equity, inclusion, and equal access to public resources (Rawls, 1971). Since corruption diverts welfare resources from intended beneficiaries and privileges politically connected individuals, it reinforces poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. Consequently, corruption represents not only a governance failure but also a violation of human rights and the ethical principles underpinning professional social work.

**Good Governance Theory** identifies the institutional conditions necessary for effective social welfare administration. The principles of transparency, accountability, participation, responsiveness, rule of law, and

institutional integrity are essential for ensuring that welfare resources are managed efficiently and reach vulnerable populations (OECD, 2024; UNDP, 2024; World Bank, 2024). The theory therefore highlights governance reforms—including digital administration, independent oversight, citizen participation, and professional accountability—as critical mechanisms for improving welfare delivery and reducing opportunities for corruption.

Collectively, these theories explain that weak institutional governance creates opportunities for corruption; corruption constrains the autonomy and effectiveness of professional social workers; weakened professional practice reduces the quality, equity, and accessibility of social welfare services; and ineffective welfare delivery ultimately undermines social justice and inclusive development. This integrated perspective constitutes the Institutional Social Welfare Effectiveness Framework (ISWEF) developed in this study. The framework advances existing scholarship by linking institutional governance, professional social work, and social welfare delivery within a single explanatory model. It further demonstrates that strengthening welfare outcomes in Nigeria requires not only anti-corruption measures but also comprehensive institutional reforms that enhance governance quality, professional regulation, ethical leadership, organizational capacity, and accountability. Consequently, the ISWEF provides a robust theoretical foundation for analyzing the institutional barriers to effective social welfare delivery and for guiding evidence-informed policy reforms aimed at promoting social justice.

### 3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative desk research design to examine how corruption influences professional social work practice and social welfare delivery in Nigeria. The approach was considered appropriate because it enables a systematic examination and synthesis of existing knowledge drawn from scholarly

and institutional sources without generating primary data (Johnston, 2014). Secondary materials reviewed included peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government policy documents, annual reports of anti-corruption agencies, publications of international organizations, and official reports relating to governance, corruption, professional social work, and social protection.

Data were selected based on relevance, credibility, recency, and consistency with the study objectives. Priority was given to publications produced between **2020 and 2025**, while foundational theoretical works such as Lipsky (1980), Rawls (1971), and Scott (2014) were retained because of their continuing relevance to the analytical framework. Sources included publications from the World Bank, International Labour Organization (ILO), United Nations agencies, Transparency International, OECD, the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW).

Data were analyzed using thematic analyzes following the procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). The analysis involved familiarization with the literature, systematic coding of recurring ideas, identification of common patterns, development of thematic categories, and interpretation of relationships among themes. Rather than generating statistical findings, the study synthesized qualitative evidence to explain the institutional mechanisms through which corruption affects professional social work and social welfare delivery. To enhance credibility, evidence was triangulated across academic literature, government publications, and reports from international organizations. The analysis was guided by the study objectives and interpreted within the Institutional Social Welfare Effectiveness Framework (ISWEF).

### **3.1. Ethical declaration**

The study relied solely on publicly available documentary sources for this reason; ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, the study adhered to established standards of academic integrity.

### **3.2. Results and Thematic Analysis**

The thematic analysis generated findings that correspond directly with the study objectives by identifying the institutional mechanisms of corruption, examining their influence on professional social work, and assessing their implications for equitable social welfare delivery in Nigeria.

#### **Objective 1: Institutional Mechanisms of Corruption Affecting Social Welfare Delivery**

The review shows that corruption within Nigeria's social welfare system is largely institutional rather than individual. Recurring practices include political patronage, diversion of welfare funds, procurement irregularities, manipulation of beneficiary registers, payroll fraud, bureaucratic inefficiency, and weak accountability mechanisms (ICPC, 2024; World Bank, 2025). These governance failures reduce institutional capacity, weaken transparency, and create opportunities for elite capture of welfare programmes. Fragmented administrative structures, overlapping institutional mandates, and limited monitoring systems further undermine efficient programme implementation, resulting in delayed service delivery and exclusion of deserving beneficiaries.

#### **Objective 2: Influence of Corruption on Professional Social Work Practice**

The findings indicate that corruption significantly constrains the practice, autonomy, and ethical responsibilities of professional social workers. Inadequate funding, political interference, staff shortages, excessive workloads, and weak institutional support reduce practitioners' ability to provide rights-based and client-centred services (Healy, 2022; Agwu et al.,

2023). Social workers frequently encounter ethical dilemmas when institutional pressures conflict with professional values of integrity, equity, and social justice. Political influence over beneficiary selection and administrative decision-making further limits professional discretion and weakens confidence in welfare institutions. These findings demonstrate that effective social work practice depends not only on professional competence but also on the quality of institutional governance.

### **Objective 3: Implications for Equity, Access, and Social Welfare Effectiveness**

The analysis further demonstrates that corruption has profound consequences for social welfare outcomes. Diversion of public resources and politically influenced allocation of welfare benefits reduce equitable access to services for vulnerable groups, including children, women, persons with disabilities, internally displaced persons, older persons, and low-income households (UNICEF, 2024; UNDP, 2024). Institutional corruption also erodes public trust, weakens organizational legitimacy, and limits citizen participation in welfare programmes. As a result, poverty, inequality, and social exclusion are reinforced despite continued investment in social protection initiatives.

Overall, the findings support the Institutional Social Welfare Effectiveness Framework (ISWEF), which explains that weak governance institutions create opportunities for corruption; corruption constrains professional social work; weakened professional practice reduces the effectiveness of social welfare delivery; and ineffective welfare systems ultimately undermine social justice. The evidence therefore suggests that improving welfare outcomes requires comprehensive institutional reforms that strengthen transparency, accountability, professional regulation, digital governance, and ethical leadership alongside sustained investment in professional social work.

## **4.0 DISCUSSION**

The findings demonstrate that corruption is a systemic institutional challenge that significantly undermines professional social work and the effectiveness of social welfare delivery in Nigeria. Rather than occurring as isolated acts of individual misconduct, corruption is embedded within governance structures through political patronage, bureaucratic inefficiency, weak accountability mechanisms, and administrative fragmentation. This finding supports Institutional Theory, which argues that organizational behaviour is shaped primarily by institutional rules, governance arrangements, and regulatory systems rather than by individual actions alone (Scott, 2014). Consequently, weak institutions create opportunities for corruption that reduce the efficiency, transparency, and credibility of social welfare programmes.

Consistent with the first objective, the study identified political patronage, diversion of welfare funds, procurement fraud, manipulation of beneficiary registers, payroll irregularities, and weak monitoring systems as the principal institutional mechanisms through which corruption affects welfare delivery. These practices distort resource allocation, weaken programme implementation, and reduce institutional capacity to provide equitable services. The findings corroborate contemporary evidence that governance quality is a critical determinant of social protection effectiveness in developing countries (OECD, 2024; World Bank, 2024). They also reinforce the argument that sustainable welfare reforms require institutional restructuring rather than isolated anti-corruption interventions.

Regarding the second objective, the findings reveal that corruption substantially constrains the practice, autonomy, and ethical responsibilities of professional social workers. Inadequate funding, political interference, excessive workloads, poor remuneration, and weak institutional support limit practitioners' ability to provide rights-based and client-centred ser-

vices. These institutional constraints expose social workers to ethical dilemmas and reduce professional discretion, thereby supporting the assumptions of Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory (Lipsky, 1980). The findings therefore suggest that strengthening professional social work requires improvements in governance structures alongside enhanced professional education, regulation, and institutional support.

In relation to the third objective, the study establishes that corruption has profound implications for equity, access, and effectiveness in social welfare delivery. The diversion of public resources and politically influenced beneficiary selection reduce access to welfare services among vulnerable populations, including children, women, persons with disabilities, older persons, internally displaced persons, and poor households. These findings align with Social Justice Theory, which emphasizes fairness and equitable distribution of public resources (Rawls, 1971). Corruption therefore represents not only an administrative failure but also a violation of human rights and social justice because it reinforces poverty, inequality, and social exclusion.

Overall, the findings validate the Institutional Social Welfare Effectiveness Framework (ISWEF) developed in this study. The framework demonstrates that weak institutional governance creates opportunities for corruption; corruption constrains professional social work practice; weakened professional practice reduces the effectiveness of social welfare delivery; and ineffective welfare systems ultimately undermine social justice and inclusive development. The study therefore concludes that improving welfare outcomes in Nigeria requires integrated reforms that strengthen governance quality, institutional accountability, professional regulation, digital administration, ethical leadership, and citizen participation.

#### **4.1. Implications for Professional Social Work**

The findings have important implications for professional social work practice, education, policy, and institutional development. First, the study demonstrates that effective social work practice depends not only on practitioners' competence but also on the quality of institutional governance. Professional social workers therefore need supportive organizational environments characterized by transparency, accountability, adequate funding, and professional independence to deliver ethical and rights-based services.

Second, the findings suggest that social workers should expand their professional roles beyond traditional casework to include institutional advocacy, policy engagement, governance monitoring, and accountability initiatives. By participating in programme monitoring, documenting institutional barriers, and advocating transparent welfare administration, social workers can contribute to reducing corruption and improving service delivery.

Third, social work education in Nigeria should strengthen training in governance, public policy, institutional ethics, anti-corruption strategies, digital welfare administration, and evidence-based policy practice. Such curriculum reforms will better prepare graduates to function effectively within increasingly complex public institutions.

Finally, the study underscores the need for stronger professional regulation and greater involvement of social workers in the formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of social protection policies. Strengthening the institutional status of the profession through improved legislation, continuous professional development, ethical leadership, and collaboration with government and civil society will enhance both professional effectiveness and the achievement of social justice.

## 4.2. Policy Recommendations

The findings indicate that improving social welfare delivery in Nigeria requires institutional reforms that address the governance conditions enabling corruption while strengthening professional social work. Based on the study objectives and the Institutional Social Welfare Effectiveness Framework (ISWEF), the following recommendations are proposed.

First, governments at the federal, state, and local levels should strengthen governance within social welfare institutions by promoting transparency, accountability, and merit-based administration. Clear institutional mandates, effective monitoring systems, and regular performance audits should be institutionalized to reduce opportunities for corruption and improve organizational effectiveness. Independent oversight bodies should also be empowered to monitor programme implementation and ensure compliance with established regulations.

Second, social welfare administration should be fully digitized through integrated beneficiary databases, biometric verification, electronic payment platforms, and digital case management systems. These measures will reduce administrative discretion, eliminate ghost beneficiaries, improve beneficiary targeting, and enhance financial accountability.

Third, professional social work should be strengthened through effective implementation of regulatory frameworks governing the profession. Government should improve recruitment, remuneration, working conditions, and continuous professional development while ensuring that qualified social workers actively participate in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of social welfare programmes. Universities should also revise social work curricula to incorporate governance, anti-corruption strategies, digital welfare management, public policy, and institutional ethics.

Fourth, social welfare programmes should be protect-

ed from political interference. Beneficiary selection should be based on transparent socioeconomic criteria rather than political affiliation or patronage. Community representatives, professional social workers, and civil society organizations should participate in programme monitoring to enhance accountability and public confidence.

Finally, anti-corruption agencies, development partners, and civil society organizations should strengthen collaboration with welfare institutions to promote integrity, ethical leadership, citizen participation, and evidence-based policymaking. These reforms will enhance equitable access to social services, strengthen institutional legitimacy, improve professional social work practice, and contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDGs 1, 10, and 16.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

This study examined how corruption shapes professional social work practice and undermines social welfare delivery in Nigeria using a qualitative desk research approach. The evidence demonstrates that corruption is not simply the result of individual misconduct but a systemic institutional problem rooted in weak governance, political patronage, bureaucratic inefficiency, fragmented administration, and inadequate accountability mechanisms. These institutional weaknesses reduce the effectiveness of social welfare programmes, constrain professional social workers, and limit equitable access to services for vulnerable populations.

The study further establishes that corruption undermines the ethical foundations of professional social work by restricting practitioners' autonomy, creating ethical dilemmas, and weakening their capacity to promote human dignity, social justice, and inclusive development. Consequently, strengthening professional social work requires more than improving individual competencies; it also demands stronger

institutions that uphold transparency, accountability, and the rule of law.

A major contribution of this study is the development of the Institutional Social Welfare Effectiveness Framework (ISWEF), which demonstrates that institutional governance, professional social work, and social welfare outcomes are mutually reinforcing. The framework shows that weak institutions encourage corruption; corruption constrains professional practice; weakened professional practice reduces welfare effectiveness; and ineffective welfare delivery ultimately undermines social justice.

The study concludes that sustainable improvements in Nigeria's social welfare system require comprehensive institutional reforms that strengthen governance quality, digital administration, professional regulation, ethical leadership, and citizen participation. By integrating governance reforms with the strengthening of professional social work, Nigeria can improve the effectiveness, equity, and accountability of social welfare delivery while advancing inclusive development and social justice.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare. Please ensure every paper has this just before the reference list.

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