



Quell this Fire, Please! Addressing Key Operational Challenges Facing the Nigeria Fire Service

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Abstract

Fire disasters are increasingly posing a major threat to public safety in Nigeria, with the economic costs of these infernos further weakening the nation's already fragile economy. To better understand the dynamics of the challenges facing the Nigeria fire service (NFS), a qualitative phenomenological study was conducted through indepth interviews, capturing the lived experiences of fifteen experienced firefighters in relation to a fire incident they have previously managed. The paper offers empirical evidence detailing how fire service effectiveness can be improved at the micro, meso and macro levels. The paper concludes that tailored reforms are crucially needed within the NFS.

Keywords Nigeria fire service · Fire disasters · Training · Operational challenges · Civic responsibility

Introduction

The number of major fire incidents continues to rise across major states in Nigeria, with reports of at least one major fire disaster making mainstream news on a daily basis (Tolofari, 2010a, b). The frequency of these devastating fire incidents in residential buildings, petrol stations, commercial buildings, mechanic workshops, shopping malls and open markets has grown in recent years, and the wreckages caused

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by these incidents continue to pose a significant threat to the nation's already fragile economy (Punch, 2020; Agbola & Falola, 2021), thereby worsening the problem of poverty in these societies (Nimlyat et al., 2017).

Given the escalation of fire disasters in Nigeria, the fire service continues to face intensified performance pressures amidst excruciating resources, exacerbated by the ongoing carnage of funding cuts which has increasingly become a threat to the survival of most public sector organisations (Ortigueira-Sánchez et al., 2017; Wankhade et al., 2019). As a public emergency response organization entrusted with the important task of safeguarding people's lives and properties, the operational effectiveness of the Nigeria fire service (NFS henceforth) has faced constant scrutiny over the years, leading to significant deterioration in the service's reputation amongst the Nigerian citizens (Esinwoke, 2011; Okoli et al., 2022). Critics argue that the NFS inherently lack any sense of organization and are often unprepared to respond even to most basic fire calls (Adedoyin & Olanrewaju 2006; Falola & Agbola, 2022). For instance, a report by Cobin (2013) which offered a detailed economic analysis of fire disasters in Lagos State — the largest commercial city in Nigeria — revealed serious gaps in current operational procedures, evidenced by a poor safety culture that tend to characterise the service's response to fire incidents. Consequently, the Nigerian firefighters not only suffer harsh criticisms from members of the public, but also occasionally experience verbal and physical assaults mostly from enraged passers-by and hoodlums (Esinwoke, 2011).

Whilst it seems normal that citizens will expect quality service delivery from their public fire departments (Deng et al., 2001), understanding why a national fire service such as the NFS might struggle to achieve such operational excellence seems an important question that warrants empirical investigation. Within the Nigeria context, existing research on fire prevention has focused on regulatory causal factors, such as examining the architectural layout of buildings and whether such buildings comply with building codes and other regulatory requirements (Nimlyat et al., 2017; Ebekozi et al., 2021). Scholars have also measured public awareness of fire safety procedures, predominantly through the dissemination of surveys in market and residential settings (Ajao & Ijadunola, 2013; Oloke et al., 2022). Despite prior efforts, what remains to be captured is a naturalistic account of the operational challenges that typically confront frontline fireground commanders.

Against this backdrop, the objectives of the current study are twofold. First, drawing on qualitative evidence from 15 experienced fire commanders, the study aims to identify the key challenges impacting operational performance across the NFS based on insights from a major fire disaster that each expert fire commander has previously managed. It is believed that the dearth of empirical evidence regarding the operational challenges faced by on-scene firefighters remains a "missing piece in the jigsaw" of the public administration scholarship (Deng et al., 2001; Wankhade et al., 2019; Okoli et al., 2022) and therefore warrants further empirical investigation.

Second, the paper seeks to understand which key actors will most significantly influence fire service effectiveness and how their actions (or inactions) might impact the quality of fire service delivery within the Nigerian context. The contention is that service quality in the important fire service domain may only be improved if the

operational challenges facing the NFS are conceived and understood from the lived (insider) experiences of the frontline commanders themselves.

This study ultimately contributes to a better understanding of the key operational challenges facing emergency public organisations within the African context, with particular focus on the NFS. Findings here are also hoped to provide a groundwork to inform further policy reforms, ensuring that such reforms are not only context specific, but are also fit-for-purpose.

Literature Review

Overview of Fire Disasters in Nigeria

Whilst public safety has historically been threatened by several man-made and natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, cyclones, and hurricanes, fire is still considered the biggest threat to lives and properties (Deng et al., 2001; Nimlyat et al., 2017; Kodur et al., 2020). Furthermore, fires release monumental tonnes of carbon into the atmosphere, thus serving as a major contributor to environmental crises such as air pollution and climate change (Edwards et al., 2020). Fires also create significant fire-fighting and rebuilding expenses, thereby diverting resources that could have served other developmental projects.

According to Cobin (2013), urban fires are economic “bads” which must be tackled by governments as part of their mandate to serve public interests and provide public good (Jaldell, 2005). In this sense, a public fire department is the supplier of firefighting services while the citizens are the receivers or consumers of those services. While the removal of such economic “bads” should, in theory, create profitable opportunities for the society at large, the reality is completely opposite in Nigeria, as the proliferation and cost of fire incidents continue to ravage and cripple economic growth for both individuals and businesses (See Table 1).

To put things in perspective, Nigeria is currently ranked 31 st out of 183 countries for number of deaths by fire in the “World Life Expectancy Report” published in 2020 (WHO, 2020). The country has reportedly lost about 6 trillion Naira (approximately USD\$ 4 billion) to infernos between 2013 and 2018 (Oloke et al., 2022). In Lagos State alone, over 6,000 fire incidents reportedly occurred between 2010 and 2015, resulting in a whooping 200.59 billion Naira (approximately USD\$134 million) loss in damaged properties. Additionally, it was shown that the country lost approximately 3 trillion naira (about USD\$2 billion) to 2,845 fire outbreaks in 2021 alone (National Daily, 2022). Table 1 shows the causes and socio-economic costs of fire disasters across selected states in Nigeria.

Governance of Fire Services at the Macro, Meso and Micro Levels

With the fiscal environment becoming harsher for many countries, calls for efficient use of public funds have become commonplace in modern society (Weiss & Campa, 2001; Komsionchi Eslamzadeh et al., 2022). However, whilst the need for perfor-

Table 1 A summary of major fire incidents across selected States in Nigeria (2022–2024)

Date	Incident type	Location	Estimated loss	Possible causes
26th Jan 2023	Market Fire: Balogun Market	Lagos Island	A four-storey building impacted and goods worth millions of Naira destroyed.	Unknown at the time of reporting.
3rd July 2023	Hotel Fire: Soprom Hotel	Anambra State	Multi-million Naira hotel razed	Unknown at the time of reporting.
18th Jan 2024	Petrol Fire: Hanscharis Petrol Station	Enugu State	Petrol station severely burnt; fuel tanker discharging 13,000 L of fuel completely destroyed	Cause not fully ascertained, but most likely from the fuel tanker.
13th Feb 2024	Office Fire: Kwara High Court Complex	Ilorin, Kwara State	A total of fifteen rooms, including one commercial shop severely burnt	Possible electrical surge.
3rd April 2024	Market Fire: Owode Market	Offa, Kwara State	Fifty shops severely damaged.	Cigarette butt falling on combustible materials.
9th April 2024	Market Fire: Dosunmu Market	Lagos State	Four buildings completely razed, with ten other buildings affected	Unknown at the time of reporting.
11th July 2024	Petrol Fire: Mainland Oil and Gas Filling Station	FCT, Abuja	Fuel discharge tanker completely burnt	Cause not fully ascertained, but most likely from the fuel tanker.
11th Aug 2024	Warehouse Fire: LG Electronics	Lagos State	Household good and electronic gadgets worth hundreds of millions of Naira razed	Unknown at the time of reporting.

Source: Author compilation

mance management in public sector has gained popularity since the advent of the new public management.

theory in the 80's (Kloot, 2009), the actual means of measuring, evaluating and benchmarking performance in public organisations such as the fire service has continued to prove problematic (Holmgren & Weinholt, 2016). This is truer for the NFS where although the proliferation of fire disasters across the country has heightened the need for performance measurement across the sector (Punch, 2020), the organisation continues to face operational difficulties that significantly undermine its response efforts. As a result, it would seem unfair to divert attention to performance measurement without first understanding the range of factors that impact firefighting performance, hence the thrust of the current study.

Drawing on the micro level (attitudes and behaviours at individual or organisational level), meso level (laws, programs and practices within the state) and macro level (strategic goals, rules and policies at governmental level) of analyses often discussed in the public administration literature (see Roberts, 2020), this paper explores how both uni-level and multi-level interactions collectively influence fire service performance. At the governmental (macro) level, the intricate relationship between a country's political structure and the effectiveness of its disaster management efforts has been reported in the literature (Boin & Lodge, 2016; Ewart & McLean, 2017). With the emergence of multiple schools of thought regarding the causes and possible solutions to the growing concerns of natural disasters globally, the consensus has been that political power remains a prevalent influence on the capacity of public

emergency organisations to combat disasters (Olejarski et al., 2019). In essence, a country's powerlessness and/or loss of control in the face of disasters is attributed to the quality of governance mechanisms that characterise the country's political structure. This point is exemplified by the gross failings at the political level shown by the US government in their collective response to the 2005 Hurricane Katrina (Kapucu, 2009), as well as the incapacitation of the Turkish government in mobilising resources and coordinating humanitarian support in relation to the 2017 earthquake in Southern Turkey (Ertas, 2024). In both cases, political leadership were found to have undermined emergency preparedness (Boin, 2009), thwarted inter-agency collaboration (Wankhade et al., 2019) and compromised public safety (Nimlyat et al., 2017) — all of which are important tools for disaster risk reduction.

At the societal (meso) level, scholars have attributed the escalation of fire disasters to poor safety awareness amongst citizens, coupled with a weak 'moral will' to comply with existing fire regulations and safety codes (Esinwoke, 2011; Cobin, 2013; Ebekozien et al., 2021). As a result, regulatory lapses on the part of national governments have been highlighted, whereby rules and regulations that should guide safety behaviour at the societal level hardly exist, and where they do, are hardly enforced. This further shows how macro-level forces could affect the design and implementation of rules and policies at meso level, and how such lapses at the societal level could subsequently influence micro level behaviours and attitudes (Roberts, 2020). For instance, in a survey conducted in Ile-Ife, Nigeria, Ajao and Ijadunola (2013) found that only less than 10% of commercial sites had successfully installed fire safety equipment such as fire alarms, smoke detectors, emergency lighting systems and fire extinguishers, leading to the conclusion that failure on the part of the state and national governments to enforce safety regulations is largely responsible for the poor safety culture at the societal level.

On the one hand, public expectations that political leaders will perform well during times of calamity often lead to wider moral outrage when those expectations are deemed to be unmet (Olson & Gawronski, 2010), however, not much is known about the impact of public insubordination on fire service delivery. Similarly, the implications of these wider societal behaviours on the quality of service delivered to consumers (public members) are rarely reported in the literature. Findings from this paper are therefore hoped to bridge these knowledge gaps.

At the micro level, scholars have identified the crucial role of organisational learning, focusing on why equipping street level bureaucrats with adequate skills may enhance their ability to carry out domain tasks more competently (Chen, Hsieh & Chen, 2021; Okoli & Ogwu, 2024). Front-line emergency responders play a fundamental role in managing disasters and the skills, knowledge and competencies required to efficiently discharge their duties are rarely developed in vacuum (Kroll & Moynihan, 2015; Thaler et al., 2017; Scheller & Reglen, 2021). It is therefore important that emergency responders are imbued with sufficient, up-to-date training tailored to their job roles, particularly given that employee training not only improves individual job performance, but also enhances organisational performance as a whole (Owens, 2006). In their quantitative study involving a random sample of 114 local administrators in Germany, Thaler et al. (2017) found that knowledge, skills and abilities derived from experience, education and training contributed to better opera-

tional performance. The study concluded that a culture of continuous learning ultimately improves competence and drives public service motivation amongst public sector workers.

In light of the above, a key objective of the current paper is to evaluate the influence of domain-specific training (or a lack of it) on fire response effectiveness.

Method

Study Area and Data Sources

A total of five fire stations were covered across two major states in Nigeria — Kwara and Lagos states. Kwara state was chosen due to ease of access to senior fire commanders, but also because the state represents an important case point from the North central geo-political zone of Nigeria known for its long service history. Lagos State, on the other hand, was chosen because of the high prevalence of fire disasters relative to other states (Cobin, 2013). Data were collected from three main sources: (i) secondary data from fire service bulletins, national training manual, fire service web-pages, Sahara reporters, national newspapers, and fire service act 1963 (ii) observations from site visits to five fire stations across both states, including the Lagos and Kwara state fire service headquarters; (iii) 15 in-depth interviews involving senior fire incident commanders across both states (See Table 2).

Table 2 Participants' demographics

Participants ¹	Years of experience	Rank	Type of fire incident	Education	Fire station (City)
Jack [M]	30	Chief Fire Supt.	Wood factory	SSCE	Lagos
Sammy [M]	8	Fire Supt. Officer	Warehouse	NCE	Kwara
Knight [M]	8	Watch Commander	School building	NCE	Kwara
Adams [M]	30	Chief Fire Supt.	School building	Diploma	Kwara
Ryan [M]	8	Fire Supt. Officer	Residential	NCE	Kwara
Marvin [M]	30	Commandant trainer/ Station Manager	Train fire	Diploma	Kwara
Atkinson [M]	8	Watch Commander	Gas plant	NCE	Kwara
Sunny [M]	29	Asst. Chief Fire Supt.	Office	OND	Lagos
Steve [M]	9	Fire Supt Officer	Petrol tanker	BSc	Kwara
Francis [M]	28	Chief Fire Supt	Residential	HND	Kwara
Billy [M]	25	Asst. Station Manager	Residential	HND	Kwara
Young [M]	8	Fire Supt Officer	Road Traffic Collision	HND	Kwara
Kevin [M]	8	Watch Commander	Residential	NCE	Kwara
Margareth [F]	11	Fire Supt Officer 1	Residential	BSc	Lagos
Mike [M]	28	Asst. Chief Fire Supt	Petrol tanker	Diploma	Lagos

¹Pseudonyms, not real names

Participants

To ensure that the right level of information is obtained, only high-ranked officers were recruited to participate in the interview (average years of experience between all the participants = 17.86). All the participants were mid to senior level fire experts who had completed the relevant leadership and incident command training (see Table 2). Additionally, all the participants had been authorised to independently lead one or more fire crews to major fire incidents.

Data Collection

Access was obtained from the Lagos and Kwara states' fire service headquarters. Senior fire commanders were then approached with requests for participation. In almost all cases, these requests were honoured, as the fire experts were generally willing to share their operational challenges and, in some cases, their success stories. Each participant was asked to recall and 'walk through' a memorable fire incident they had previously managed as a lead operational commander. This way, it was possible for the service needs (i.e. training gaps, resource deficiencies and operational challenges) to emerge naturally across the incident accounts. Specifically, the interview questions were focused on probes that helped to generate insights into the problems facing the fire service at the macro (governmental), meso (societal), and micro (organisational and operational) levels. All interviews were held at the fire station where each participant was resident at the time of the study, with each interview lasting between 45 min and 1.5 h.

Data Analysis

The transcripts were first analysed on a case-to-case basis and subsequently abstracted into categories, allowing for comparison across subsequent cases and categories. Since the aim is to elicit information regarding the operational challenges that confront the Nigerian firefighters, the inductive thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was adopted for data analysis. The inductive analysis began with the coding of data aligned with the study's coding frame. A set of initial open codes were generated and subsequently condensed into categories and then into sub-themes. Finally, through an iterative analytical process, higher-order themes were developed, taking into account the deeper causal mechanisms across the qualitative dataset.

Findings

Following a detailed analysis of the interview data, the paper presents four key operational challenges that most significantly impacted performance effectiveness within the NFS: insufficient fire stations (resulting in extremely high firefighter-to-population ratio), resource scarcity, poor civic sense, and multiple training gaps. These were then thematised into three strands of failures that appear to be reinforcing these operational challenges i.e. weak institutional capacity, failure of civic responsibility,

Table 3 Distribution of fire stations across selected Nigerian States

State	Population (Million)	Landmass (km ²)	No of fire stations
Lagos	10	3,345	21
Kwara	2.5	36,825	4
Oyo	5.6	28,454	14
Ondo	3.5	14,606	7
Osun	3.4	9,251	12
Ekiti	2.4	6,353	7
Taraba	2.3	54,473	3
Anambra	4.2	4,844	10
Ogun	3.75	16,762	12
Plateau	3.2	30,913	10
Imo	3.9	5,530	1
Enugu	3.3	7,161	8

**For comparison, the landmass of New York city and London are 784 km² and 1,572 km² respectively*

and poor learning culture. These operational challenges and their failure strands are discussed below:

Weak Institutional Capacity

Weak institutional capacity specifically relates to institutional failure across all levels of government to build sound systems of infrastructure that will aid the mobilization and coordination of human and physical resources in combating societal challenges (Falola & Agbola, 2022; Peeters & Campos, 2023; Abdillah et al., 2025). All the expert participants agreed that the Nigerian Government has failed in its responsibility to provide the NFS the required level of support both in terms of bolstering firefighting resources and in spreading the reach of the NFS across the country. In buttressing the issue of weak institutional capacity, the expert participants emphasised two major failure points:

Inadequate fire stations to serve the constantly growing Nigerian population

Evidence from both interview data and site observations revealed gross inadequacy of fire stations across multiple locations across the country, resulting in poor coverage of fire services in these areas (See Table 3). In Kwara State, for example, only four fire stations currently exist to serve a population of over 2.5 million across 16 local government areas. In Lagos state, although sixteen functional fire stations currently exist (plus an additional five stations commissioned by the present administration in the last five years), these are still deemed to be grossly inadequate given the status of Lagos as the most populous state in Nigeria with a projected population of 15 million (nearly twice the population of London, UK, which in itself has 102 fire stations spread across its boroughs). In fact, most of the expert participants noted that numerous states in Nigeria cannot effectively cope with multiple fire incidents happening concurrently.

Also, where “support cover” is required from other nearby fire stations, this is often difficult to achieve given the remarkable distance between existing fire stations. For instance, when asked what action he would take if called out to another fire incident while already enroute to an incident, the chief fire superintendent at Offa station, Kwara State (Young, 28, CFS) struggled to offer any glimmer of hope. He explained that meeting the service needs of the local community is almost impossible with just one fire truck and six firefighters designated to serve the entire Offa town and its environs (a town with an estimated population of 180,000 people). The commander added that reinforcements from other fire stations are also not feasible as the closet fire station to Offa is one-hour drive away.

This notion of inadequate fire stations across Nigeria aligns with existing reports suggesting that current firefighter-to-population ratio is unrealistic in curbing the growing menace of fire disasters in the country. For instance, Isa et al. (2016) reported significant deficiencies in firefighting resources in Kano state (the second largest commercial city in Nigeria with a population of approximately 3 million). The study found that firefighter-to-population ratio was at a shocking rate of 1:6,000 in Kano State, and of particular interest was a local government area (LGA) with a landmass of 158km² and a population of over 400,000 without any established fire station. This is one of the numerous regions across the country where citizens are often left hopeless and helpless in the face of fire disasters.

Resourcing Issues — Poor Infrastructure and Outdated Firefighting Equipment

Inadequate firefighting infrastructure and dilapidating resources consistently emerged as a common theme from the interview data, reportedly posing as a major barrier to fire response effectiveness. Despite affirming their commitment to the NFS’s core mission of saving lives and properties, all the participants decried the poor state of firefighting equipment at their disposal. The Nigerian firefighters claimed they are still stuck with using antiquated, poorly maintained and dysfunctional firefighting equipment, coupled with the need to grapple through an enormous workload due to insufficient fire personnel.

“The fire service also looks to be suffering from low manpower as staff turnover tend to be high. The job is not attractive to a lot of people.....we have little equipment and insufficient personnel; we have a shortage of personnel to even make use of the equipment” (Steve, 9, FSO).

“The breathing apparatus [BA] is one of the effective equipment for firefighters, but in Nigeria, let me say in Kwara State, we don’t normally use the sets because [you know] our government is not ready to finance them. There are many of those in the fire engine, but we don’t normally use them. If we use the BA sets and the air inside gets exhausted, who will refill them? The Government is not ready to help with such things” (Ryan, FSO, 8).

Worst of all is the inherent difficulty in securing the right quantity of water needed to put out a fire. The fire crews would usually arrive at fire scenes relying solely on water carried in fire trucks. Once the water gets exhausted, the driver goes back to the nearest fire station to refill, while any available fire engine is engaged.

“Hydrants are not available, if water gets exhausted, we have to come back to the station. Unfortunately, fire does not wait for anyone. The tanker can only take 15,000 litres of water” (Kevin, 8, Watch Commander).

“We come for [water] replenishing, that is one of the problems around here. But if we had water hydrants around the incident scene, the best thing to do is to couple our hose and other equipment into the hydrant and start to fight the fire” (Adam, CFS, 30).

Additionally, a quick site tour with the participants showed that some essential equipment required to support basic fire and rescue operations (e.g., fireman axe, chemical foam solutions, turntable ladders, PPEs, safety boots, gloves, fireman jackets, and breathing apparatus sets) are either lacking or are not being utilised by the firefighters due to not having sufficient training. Wireless and radio communication systems were also found to be non-existent, neither was there any protocol in place to aid proper coordination between the fire service and other emergency services such as police and ambulance. Observation from site visits also revealed the dysfunctional state of numerous fire engines, with over five fire engines across the site visits found to be out of order (non-runner) either due to a mechanical fault or flat tyres.

Failure of Civic Responsibility

The Nigerian firefighters emphasised a key threat to the quality of their service delivery, largely driven by the actions of disgruntled passersby that significantly undermine operational efforts, in what the authors have term *failure of civic responsibility*. As discussed below, the firefighters consistently flagged this seemingly recurring behaviour as a key operational challenge:

Poor Civic Sense Towards Emergency Safety Operations

The hostile environment where firefighters operate emerged as an important theme across the interview data. Participants reported some degree of assault occasionally faced by fire crews, mostly from aggrieved crowds — particularly where these group of individuals perceive firefighting operations to have fallen short of public expectations. References were made to incidents where firefighters were subjected to verbal abuse from passersby and stones being hurled at fire engines. These actions are largely driven by claims that taxpayers’ monies are not being utilised to good effect.

Ironically, in their own defence, the firefighters explained how the masses are themselves part of the bigger problem. When a distress call is relayed to a fire station, the fire crews immediately set out in their fire trucks amidst loud blaring sirens as the

fire engines strive to navigate their way through a long-congested traffic — but since the average Nigerian hardly gives the right of way to emergency sirens, this unfortunately leaves the fire crews trapped in traffic for longer than necessary. Once the fire crews eventually arrive at the scene of incident, the fire is likely to have spiralled out of control, thus sparking resentment from public members and leaving the fire crews scrambling for their own safety. In narrating their ordeal, the expert firefighters reported thus:

“Look at Ilorin (for example), we have only 2 stations. If a fire happens in like Oloje (45 mins away from here), do you think the house will not get burnt down before we get there? That is why we face huge problems when we get there; people try to stone us. They keep fighting us” (Kevin, 8, Watch Commander).

“Our main problem at the scene of incidents is the crowd; they cause a lot of problems. Where there are no crowds, you see, we can finish our tasks within 2–3 mins, but when there are crowds, you are practically helpless” (Sammy, 8, FSO, Nigeria).

These findings ultimately explain why fire service departments should not solely focus on improving the technical aspects of firefighting, but must also consider the impact of fire service provisions on the perception of citizens towards the fire service. In this sense, the NFS must build mechanisms to better understand the perceptual divergences that might exist between the fire service and the people they serve, as failure to bridge such perceptual gaps will often result in what Shariff (2002, p.5) termed “bureaucratic bashing” i.e. the constant criticism of frontline public workers.

Poor Learning Culture

It is common knowledge that firefighters operate in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environment, which means they are constantly exposed to operational hazards that pose significant threats to their safety. To cope with the affordances of this high-risk domain, it therefore becomes imperative that fire services place continuous learning at the heart of their culture (Owens, 2006; Scheller & Reglen, 2021). Regrettably, such culture of learning has remained unpopular within the NFS for a variety of reasons:

Inadequate Training and Personnel Development: Multiple Training Gaps

Almost all the expert participants were explicit about the lack of training opportunities and outdated training curriculum that characterise the NFS culture. The expert participants also highlighted the impact of such poor learning culture on operational effectiveness.

Regrettably, most of the fire commanders reportedly claimed they were yet to undergo any significant training activity in the last 5 years (from the time the study was undertaken), a situation they attributed to a lack of willingness on the part of

government to fund and support developmental programs. Aside from the skills gained in fire training school at the point of entry, the participants noted that firefighters are rarely given the opportunity to reskill or upskill throughout the span of their firefighting career:

“We need more training, as the training we currently undergo does not cover everything. Unfortunately the fire service is not recognized in Nigeria. We need overseas training, such as fire policing, complex incident management, and principal firefighting courses. We have so many fire courses in our handouts that we could attend, but we never actually get to attend them” (Margareth, Fire Supt Officer, 11).

Some of the participants also revealed inherent limitations in the scope of training being offered, as well as weaknesses in the design and delivery of those training curricula:

“We need to be trained on how to fight chimney fires. Hospital fires are also very dangerous. [If we get called to a hospital fire] I would personally stay outside, as the life support equipment in hospitals are highly flammable” (Atkinson, Watch commander, 8).

Another officer, although acknowledging that training sessions are occasionally organized, criticised the antiquated training procedures currently employed by the fire service. He argued that the NFS are still backward in their approach to training and has failed to catch up with the pace of time and technology:

“As things are changing, the fire service has to be structured so that we move with time. That is why I cannot say that we’ve had enough knowledge to combat what may happen in future. NO!” (Young, CFS, 28).

Discussion

Building on qualitative evidence from fifteen experienced firefighters across five major fire stations in Nigeria, this paper revealed key performance issues impacting fire service effectiveness. Contrary to popular notion that the Nigerian firefighters exert a negative approach to work (e.g., late arrival to fire scenes), findings here show that the underlying factors deterring quality service delivery are intricate, multi-dimensional and intertwined. The operational challenges that emerged from this study are underpinned by three strands of failures, namely weak institutional capacity, failure of civic responsibility, and poor learning culture — each representing the macro, meso and micro levels of administration. Put together, these issues continue to plague the NFS and further compound the performance issues faced by frontline firefighters.

Against this backdrop, the study makes two important contributions. First, the study offers a qualitative perspective into the operational challenges affecting opti-

mum performance within the NFS, differing from previous studies that have drawn predominantly on secondary data to create causal links (e.g. Komsionchi Eslamzadeh et al., 2022; Peeters & Campos, 2023) and those that have utilised a deductive approach to measure public awareness of safety practices through surveys (e.g. Ajao & Ijadunola, 2013; Nimlyat et al., 2017; Oloke et al., 2022). The uniqueness of the findings reported in this study is therefore hinged on the inductive, phenomenological and case-based approach that allowed senior firefighters to reflect on a real-life fire incident they were particularly involved in managing. This exploratory approach allowed the views, perceptions and field experiences of the elite commanders to be elicited first-hand, ensuring our findings are tailored to the performance issues facing the NFS within the Nigerian context.

Second, the findings reveal how the actions of key stakeholders, namely the government, the citizens and the fire service, typically impact fire response effectiveness at the micro, meso and macro levels of administration. At the governmental (macro) level, failings stemming from weak institutional capacity support prior claims suggesting that governance failures and deficiencies in disaster management initiatives are typically rooted in underlying political quagmires (Ewart & McLean, 2017; Ertas, 2024). As findings here will prove, the NFS are not dysfunctional because fire personnel lack the technical ability to combat fires. Instead, the lack of political will to prioritise emergency response capabilities were identified as key inhibitors to fire service effectiveness in Nigeria. As Kapucu (2009) argues, the challenge often lies in getting political actors to prioritise the event of disasters on their political agenda, especially when such disasters are likely to be perceived as events that may never happen, at least while they still hold office (Boin, 2009).

At the societal (meso) level, the notion of poor civic sense is perhaps a reflection of a wider societal issue which invariably reveals a lack of requisite public knowledge on safety culture amongst Nigerian citizens (Uzondu et al., 2018). Consequently, this poor safety awareness is displayed through acts of unwarranted intrusion into fire scenes, aggression towards firefighters, as well as a complete disregard for emergency protocols. Whilst claims of poor safety regulations have been discussed in the literature as pre-conditions for disasters (Spencer et al., 2019), findings here suggest that regulation, in and by itself, is insufficient to drive public safety effectiveness. This is because regulatory policies, no matter how well intended, would often be constrained by what Kodur et al. (2020) referred to as a “lack of civic sense”. In other words, emergency protocols will only work to the extent that individuals agree to play their role as *active citizens* (Bourgon, 2010).

At the organisational (micro) level, our findings provide further support that successful emergency response operations will fundamentally require competent human resources, including the need to imbue operational fire operators with the skills, knowledge and expertise required to effectively tackle fire disasters (Owens, 2006). One of the expert participants (Marvin, commandant trainer for the Kwara state fire service, 30) revealed the training needs that must be prioritised for frontline firefighters, specifically in the areas of BA usage, fire investigation, crowd control, fires involving highly flammable substances, fire tenders, turntable ladders and advanced operational training.

Collectively, these findings offer additional evidence suggesting that the meso and micro-levels of administration are largely nested within the macro-level. For instance, the Nigerian government's lack of interest in disaster risk reduction (DRR) initiatives will undoubtedly produce a poorly funded NFS, which in turn influences the quality of training accessible to the firefighters at the micro level (if at all any). Furthermore, the lack of political will on the part of the Nigerian government to implement and enforce safety protocols at the macro level would imply that public members remain poorly educated towards emergency safety protocols and may continue to act in ways that jeopardise fire response efforts at the meso level.

Implications for Practice and Conclusion

In terms of practical implications, our findings support the growing calls for reforms in the fire service (Kloot, 2009; Murphy & Greenhalgh, 2013). Unfortunately, studies on emergency sector reforms have often emerged from the developed world context (Holmgren & Weinhold, 2016; Taylor et al., 2019) and are rarely discussed within the African context — Nigeria in particular. As it stands, the process of adapting to the 'new public management' (NPM) paradigm (Puolokainen, 2017), centred on improving the efficiency, accountability and productivity of public sector organizations has remained painfully slow within the NFS. It therefore seems obvious that reforms are crucially needed within the NFS if the goal is to challenge existing status quo.

Whatever direction these reforms takes, securing modern firefighting equipment, enhancing the welfare and professional development of the firefighters, as well as increasing the number of fire stations across the country are hereby prescribed as top priority action points for the Nigerian government. Also, to make any meaningful progress, the gross neglect of the fire service by the state and federal governments will have to cease, so is the continuous deprivation and underfunding of the fire service. As highlighted by Farazmand et al. (2024), strengthening administrative capacities in managing turbulent events that may potentially disrupt public safety represents a crucial political task for any morally responsible government.

Future studies should carefully consider the nature and dynamics of specific reforms that would be most productive for the NFS. Furthermore, future studies could use surveys to test the plausibility and generalisability of the operational challenges identified in this paper across a wider sample of firefighters. Finally, future studies could examine how government-owned fire services could potentially work in collaboration with private-owned fire services in order to improve service efficiency across the country.

There is certainly more to firefighting than simply spraying water on fire, and unless the operational challenges identified in this study are taken seriously the NFS may continue to be wrongly perceived as weak, lazy and ineptitude by the public members whose taxes essentially fund the fire service.

Authors' Contributions All the authors played a key part either in the conceptualisation, data collection or writing phases of the project.

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Data Availability Interview excerpts and thematic coding are available upon request.

Declarations

Ethical Approval This study received ethical approval from the Ethics Review Committee of Middlesex University, UK where the research study was approved in accordance with the university's ethical protocols.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection and in line with Middlesex University's ethical procedures. The participant firefighters were duly briefed about the purpose of the study and signed informed consent was obtained prior to data collection.

Conflict of interest The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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