

PROMOTING GOOD GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA: THE IMPERATIVE OF STRENGTHENING THE FUNCTIONALITY OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY

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Abstract

Globally and over the years, the civil society has been recognized as a major actor in state governance given its prominent roles in agitating for and actually promoting good governance. This is more particularly so in developing nations with low democratic culture, weak governance institutions and feeble opposition politics. In the specific context of Nigeria, the civil society has, no doubt, been involved in promoting good governance since the nation's independence in 1960. Given, however that the level of good governance has continued to remain very low and for which there exists myriad of social, economic and political problems that ultimately result in mass poverty among the citizens and general underdevelopment of the nation, there is the increasing need for the functionality of the civil society in Nigeria to be strengthened. It is in this circumstance that the paper has, as its core specific objectives, to discuss the vital roles of the civil society in promoting good governance, to identify major impediments to the functionality of the civil society in Nigeria and to recommend measures to strengthen the capacity of the civil society to play more effective and sustainable roles in promoting good governance. The research methodology entailed essentially gathering information and data from secondary sources notably textbooks, journals, institutional publications etc. Consequently, content analysis technique was adopted in the analysis. The basic finding is that insufficient fund and government crack down constitute the major impediments to the functionality of the civil society in Nigeria. The basic recommendation is that the civil society needs to be financially self sustaining in order to gain and sustain its independence from government and to be able to carry out its numerous activities.

Key words: Civil society, functionality, good governance, Nigeria, promoting.

Introduction: Globally, civil society is increasingly being recognized as a major actor in state governance largely because of its roles or contributions in promoting good governance (Helmut, 2013). Indeed, the civil society particularly in developing nations like Nigeria with serious governance challenges occasioned by low democratic culture and weak institutional structures is increasingly playing prominent roles in promoting good governance (Agu, 2011; Peter, 2004; Ugwuanyi, 2013; Kukah, 1999). It is for this that the civil society has come to be seen as an essential element of free society and one of the institutional basis of good governance (Hillary, 2010; Tony, 2010). In Nigeria, civil society and its activities has become a prominent feature of Nigerian socio-political life (Kukah, 2000). Indeed, in Nigeria, there is a plethora of civil society organizations. The civil society groups through their activities, have been contributing in promoting good governance since the nation's independence in 1960. The need for more effective performance of the role is still even increasingly becoming very critical as good governance has largely continued to elude the nation (Mojibayo, 2013; Dike, 2013; Kukah, 1999). The absence of good governance in Nigeria is manifested in lack of transparency and accountability in governance, abuses of human rights and civil liberties, inefficient delivery of public services, absence of rule of law, prevalence of corruption particularly at the leadership level, fraudulent electoral conducts etc. The ultimate results of all these are pervasive poverty among the citizens, national underdevelopment and other evolving negative results of bad governance. This situation, as worrisome as it is, calls for strengthening of the capacities of the civil society for more effective and sustainable roles or contributions in promoting good governance in Nigeria. Indeed, as Kukah (1999) argues, the state in Nigeria has failed to provide good governance and in the circumstance of this failed state, the role of civil society in promoting good governance becomes very critical. It is in the context of this that the paper has, as its basic objectives to:

- (i) Generally discuss the role of the civil society in promoting good governance.
- (ii) Identify the impediments to the functionality of the civil society in Nigeria.
- (iii) Suggest measures for strengthening the capacities of the civil society for more effective and sustainable efforts at promoting good governance.

The paper is divided into six parts. The first part is the introduction while the second part is the clarification of the major concepts in the paper. The third part discusses the place of the civil society in promoting good governance. The fourth part identifies and discusses the impediments to the functionality of the civil society in Nigeria. The identification is mainly done through the secondary sources of information gathering. The fifth part makes recommendations for enhancing the ability of the civil society in Nigeria for more effective promotion of good governance. The sixth part is the concluding part of the work.

Clarification of major concepts

(1) Civil society: Civil society is a complex and multi-faceted concept and so have various definitions. For instance, Anders (2009) defines civil society as the aggregate of non-government organizations and institutions that manifest the interest and will of the people while FOCAL (2006) conceptualized it as the totality of the voluntary civil and social organizations and institutions that form the basis of a functioning society as distinct from the fore-backed structures of the state and commercial institutions of the market. In essence, civil society is an intermediate entity standing between the private sphere and the state. Ogu (2011) again defined civil society as the arena of uncoerced collective actions around shared interests, purposes and values.

Notwithstanding the fact that the term civil society is conceptualized in different ways, there are some core common conceptual components in the different definitions which include the facts that

civil society is independent of the state, voluntary, to some extent self reliant, interested mainly in seeking improvement in governance for public good, not interested in seeking political power, non partisan and has values and purpose. Inferring from the foregoing, we will take as our working definition here that civil society is the totality of voluntary non-governmental and non-commercial organizations that always seek to promote more effective and efficient state governance for public good.

In Nigeria, the civil society is populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, labour organizations, women groups, faith-based organizations, professional groups, self-help groups, social movements, coalition and advocacy groups etc. Specifically, some of the civil society organizations in Nigeria include the Good Governance Group, Transition Monitoring Group, Save Nigeria Group, Human Rights Monitor, League of Democratic Women, Human Rights and Political Awareness group. Others include National Democratic Coalition, Society for Human Development, Justice Development and Peace Commission, Women Awareness Organization, Agency for Grassroot Development, Joint Action for Democracy, National Liberation Council of Nigeria, Movement for National Rebirth, Campaign for Democracy and Committee for Human and Democratic Rights etc (Ogu, 2011; Oji and Okafor, 2000).

(ii) Good Governance: Basically, governance refers to the use of political authority and exercise of political control to manage state resources for social and economic development (Tony, 2010). It is also described as the process by which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development. In this case and as Potter (2000) notes, governance entails development management. However, when the word good is prefixed to it, it entails efficient and effective management of the resources of the state, (Tony 2010). Good governance again and according to UNESCAP (2010) is closely linked to the extent to which government is committed to improving public welfare and responsive to the needs of its citizens, competent to ensure rule of law and order and deliver public services, create an enabling policy environment for productive activities and equitable and democratic in its conducts (UNESCAP, 2010). Inferring from the above definitions, we can take, as our working definition here, that good governance is the management of the affairs of the state in positive and progressive manners such that it is beneficial to the greater majority of the citizens and enhances national development.

Promoting Good Governance: The place of the civil society.

The place of the civil society in promoting good governance in any polity cannot be overemphasized. As Ayo (2013) argues, without civil society, government may just feel inclined to do always what it wants and with impunity. Indeed, as Kukah (1999) notes, good governance can be sustained not just by the good will of the ruling class but more by a concerted effort of organs and institutions of the civil society. In reality, it is essentially through the activities of the civil society that arbitrary use of state powers could be curtailed and good governance significantly institutionalized. Specifically, the civil society through its various activities serves as a catalyst for regime change, acts as a check on the state power and its excesses, promotes proper democratic practice and strengthens good governance mechanism generally.

For the purpose of a better appreciation of the roles of the civil society in promoting good governance, they are further discussed in detail under the following sub-leadings:

The Role of the civil society in Promoting democratic practice

The role of the civil society in promoting democratic practice is very critical particularly in the developing nations where democratic culture is low and democratic institutions are weak (FOCAL, 2006). Low democratic culture is usually manifested in one party dominance, unrepresentative legislature, rigged elections, lack of separation of powers, absence of rule of law etc (Ugwuanyi, 2013). In such societies, as noted by Liebenberg (2000), civil society becomes the building block of democracy as it helps in various ways to strengthen and sustain proper democratic practice. The roles and contributions of the civil society in promoting democratic practice specifically centers around the following:-

(i) Promoting credible elections: The process of electing freely and fairly representatives of the people into political offices is one that has become all the more challenging in many states of the world especially in the developing nations. For instance, election in Nigeria has, over the years, been characterized by rigging, violence and other forms of electoral fraud and misconducts (Ugwuanyi, 2011; Nwaorgu, 2012). The end results of all these had usually included the coming into power of people not preferred by the electorates, electoral litigations and nullifications. It is in such circumstance that the role of the civil society in promoting democratic practice through educating the voters is necessary and prominent. The civil society, for instance, assists in ensuring free and fair election by educating the voters on the dangers of participating in or supporting electoral violence. Again, civil society educates the citizens on the importance of participating in the electoral process and the need to vote for the best candidates. In Nigeria, for instance, high level of political apathy arising from poor political representation, illiteracy, bad governance and violence during elections have largely affected the zeal and willingness of the people to come out to vote in elections (Ugwuanyi, 2011; Ukegbu, 2013). As such, the citizens need to be extensively educated to understand the importance and power of their votes and the implications of their refusal to participate in electoral process generally. The civil society plays this role of educating the voters through the media and by organizing seminars, rallies and workshops through which the citizens are enlightened on the need for participation in elections, the importance of free and fair elections and the gains in voting for the most suitable candidates. The civil society in Nigeria, for instance, played positive roles in enhancing the fairness, freeness and credibility of the 2011 general elections in Nigeria (Ukaegbu, et al, 2013). Several civil society organizations were involved in sensitizing and mobilizing the citizens for effective participation in 2015 general election. As well most of these civil society organization monitored the electoral process to observe the extent it was conducted in line with basic global principles of democratic elections

(ii) Monitoring election processes and procedures: A fundamental important role of the civil society towards promoting proper democratic elections is the monitoring of elections to ensure that the basic rules and regulations guiding electoral conducts are followed. The civil society usually monitors elections by putting physical modalities in place for observing elections at the polling centres. This may include placing election monitors at the polling booths and arranging for live media coverage of elections. Doing this effectively, however, requires a broad coalition of civil society organizations unconnected to political parties or candidates that can deploy neutral monitors at the different polling stations to ensure that voting and vote counting is free, fair, peaceful and transparent. Ogu (2011) argued that it may, indeed, be difficult to have credible and fair elections particularly in new and developing democracies unless the civil society plays this role.

(iii) Engaging in the political education of the citizens: The civil society educates the citizens on their fundamental and political rights and obligations in democratic dispensation and state governance generally. The civil society helps to encourage and develop, through political education, the citizens skills to work with one another to solve common problems and to debate public issues and express their views and other values of democratic life like compromise and respect for opposing views (Emine, 2000). They civil society can do this by organizing political programs, town hall meetings, opinion pools and political debates (Ukaegbu et al, 2013).

The Role of the Civil Society in Limiting and controlling the powers of the state: This is another vital area in which the civil society plays very important role. This role is very necessary in the developing states particularly those ones emerging from decades of dictatorship (FOCAL, 2006). Indeed, in such states, there is the need for the civil society organizations to check, monitor and restrain the powers of political leaders and state officials. Ukaegbu (2013:34) affirms this need in his comment thus

When a country is emerging from decades of dictatorship as it is the case in most African countries, it becomes imperative to checkmate, monitor and restrain the powers of political leaders and state officials.

The civil society perform this function by watching how state officials use their powers, the kind of policies or programmes that government formulates and implements and ultimately raising of concern or alarm about abuse of state powers and the implications of obnoxious policies and programmes. Usually, where the civil society perceives problem with given government actions or policies, it conscientizes the public, creates awareness about the implications of such government policies and through these galvanize the people or the masses into action against such policies. Through such actions, government could be pressurized into either reforming or changing such policies. Instance of such roles by the civil society in Nigeria include the agitation or demonstration against the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1989. That demonstration notably championed by the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) and the Nigerian Labour congress (NLC) eventually forced the government, under the leadership of president Ibrahim Babaginda, to introduce SAP relieve measures to cushion the biting effects of the programe.

Another instance is the respective agitations by the civil society against fuel price hikes in 1989, 1990, 1993, 1998, 2000, 2003, 2005 and 2012. In 2012, for instance, government increased fuel price from ₦65 to ₦140 per litre. The agitation against the hike principally organized by the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) eventually compelled the government to reduce the price to ₦97 per litre. Again, the civil society in Nigeria played prominent roles in controlling the exercise of state powers by government leadership during the June, 1993 presidential election. The result of the presidential election was arbitrarily annulled by the military leadership then led by Ibrahim Babaginda who wanted to continue in office. The Activities of the civil society organizations notably, National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) and the Campaign for Democracy (CD) forced Ibrahim Babaginda to set up an Interim National Government (ING) and to step down from office. (Kukah, 1999). In 2007, the civil society in Nigeria played another prominent role in controlling the exercise of state power by agitating against and eventually frustrating the Third Term Agenda of the president then Chief Olusegun Obasanjo. Chief Olusegun Obasanjo was on the verge of introducing some political and constitutional reforms that were intended to enable him contest and continue, for the third time, as the president of Nigeria. All these, the civil society were

able to do by mobilizing the support and solidarity of the masses or the citizens to agitate against those anti-people policies and programs.

Beyond the use of mass agitation or demonstration to influence and control state powers, the civil society equally influences the way government or state powers is used through peaceful means (Ukaegbu, et al, 2013). This could be by presenting their views in national, state or local government parliament, contacting individual members of the parliament and testifying before parliamentary committees. The civil society can also attempt to influence the content of policies and programs by establishing dialogue with the relevant government ministries and agencies and lobbying for policies to be formulated and implemented in a particular way. Indeed, the civil society need not just be in antagonism with the state. The fact that the civil society is independent of the state does not mean that it must always criticize and oppose the state. In some circumstances, the civil society may have to work towards strengthening the citizens support and respect for the state and promoting their patriotic values and positive engagement with it. With such respect and support to the state, the civil society can create positive relationship with the former and which can even result to more peaceful and positive monitoring and controlling of the state by the civil society.

In summary and from the foregoing, the civil society plays prominent roles in promoting functional democracy and good governance generally through curtailment of the arbitrary use of state powers.

The functionality of civil society in Nigeria: The impediments:

No doubt, the civil society in Nigeria have, over the years, played considerable roles in promoting democratic practice and good governance generally. It is, however, pertinent to note and discuss some factors that have constituted impediments to its optimum performance of these roles.

(1) Insufficient fund: Most civil society organizations in Nigeria often do not have sufficient fund to operate with. This is because civil society groups are non-profit oriented and only depend on charity and donations. Undoubtedly, without fund, civil society cannot effectively mobilize or undertake propaganda or organize seminars or workshops (Oji and Okafor, 2000). As a result of this insufficient fund, the civil society in Nigeria is fragile as it is not financially self sustaining on its own (Ayo, 2013). For the same lack of fund, civil society organizations rely on government funding for their various activities and so the relationship between the state and the civil society in Nigeria has largely been more of extreme dependence of the latter on the former (Kukah, 1999). This really constitutes an impediment to the performance of expected roles by the civil society organization. For one thing, the dependence compels undue loyalty of the civil society to government and also to follow government's programme priorities (Boardi, 1995). Indeed, and as noted by Ukaegbu et al (2013), most civil society groups who are often supported financially by government are most times dragged into the politics of supporting and keeping blind eye to the bad policies and programs of the government that funds them.

(2) General poor economic condition in the country: The general poor economic condition of the Nigerian state has led to the emergence of civil society organizations that are not only unviable but are compelled to be state inclined because members of such civil society organizations believe that by showing loyalty to the government in power, they would be rewarded financially or materially (Osaghae, 1998). Indeed, some people see and join civil society organizations as an alternative source of income earning opportunity besides providing services (Salihu, 2013). Ayo (2013) argues similarly as he remarks that in Nigeria, civil society activism is sometimes a decoy or a strategy to bargain for juicy political offices. Indeed, Chidozie (2005) observes that most

times, the struggle for leadership of some civil society organizations in Nigeria is a struggle for entry point to penetrate government for selfish economic bargains. Ultimately, and as Mobibayo (2013) contends, the general poor economic condition in the country weakens the capacity of the civil society for effective mobilization and its ability to sustain long period of protests.

(3) Co-optation of civil society leaders into Political offices: In Nigeria, there is always the desperate but subtle attempt at co-optation of the leaders of civil society organizations into political offices. Such co-optation once effected, negatively charges the character and ideology of the civil society organizations. Boardi (1995) observes this phenomenon and its implication as he notes that leaders of many civil society organizations in Nigeria are given political offices and once this happens, such civil society organizations become more of political action committees and proto parties that have more in common with political than civil society. Such groups hardly can play any meaningful role in enhancing good governance. Indeed, once the leadership of a civil society organization starts to involve itself in unnecessary political intrigues, its effectiveness in promoting good governance gets hampered as it would lose strength, direction and focus (Oji and Okafor, 2000). Co-optation was one of the strategies adopted by the military leaderships of General Ibrahim Babangida and General Sani Abacha to weaken the civil society groups in Nigeria. For instance, General Ibrahim Babangida broke the strength of NLC by appointing Mr. Paschal Bafyan, who was its president, as a member of the political Bureau. Similarly, the strength of the National Union of Petroleum and Gas Workers Union (NUPENG) was weakened when its president, Mr. Frank Kokori was appointed member of the Constitution Drafting Committee (Kukah, 1999).

(4) Antagonism/repression by government: In Nigeria, Government usually sees civil society organizations as opponents rather than partners in the business of state governance. So crackdown and repression of civil society motivated by sheer politics do frequently occur. Government do even label civil society activities as subversive. The crackdown and victimization of the Nigerian students union in 1979 for their demonstration against the introduction of tuition fees in higher institutions of learning and in 1989 for their demonstration against SAP, the Nigerian Labour Congress, over the years, for their demonstration against fuel hikes and crack downs against NADECO and Civil Liberty Organizations between 1994-1998 for their agitation for democratization of the Nigerian state are cases in point here. Indeed, the government of General Sani Abacha extensively used intimidation, harassment and blackmail to weaken some civil society organizations like NADECO and even to force the key members of the organization to flee the country (Kukah, 1999). Another instance of government repression of the civil society is the proscription of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in 1988 by the government of General Ibrahim Babangida.

(5) The ethnic character of the civil society organizations in Nigeria: Another major drawback for the functionality of civil society in Nigeria is that the formation, membership and activism of most civil society organizations in Nigeria is crisis-crossed by the ethnic and religious divisions that afflict the larger Nigerian society (Ayo, 2013). In this case, most demands or agitations by civil society organizations are biasedly seen from these perspectives. Given this, for instance, the various activities and agitations of NADECO was seen, from this ethnic perspective, as Yoruba dominated organization and consequently motivated by Yoruba interests (Kukah, 1999). It is usually difficult to mobilize nation-wide support and consensus on agitations against bad governance in the circumstance of this biased perception.

Recommendations: For the competencies of the civil society in effectively promoting good governance to be strengthened, we made the following recommendations based on the identified impediments to the functionality of the civil society in Nigeria:

(1) The civil society need to be truly independent: To effectively gain and sustain this independence, the civil society organizations need to diversify their sources of income and funding through creative revenue generation activities. In other words, the civil society need to address the possibility of getting funding sources outside of the subversive generosity of the political class. The civil society should also try to be non-partisan in the true sense of the word by dealing or relating even handedly with different factions of the political class and resisting incorporation into the narrow political agenda of any section of that class. Indeed, the extent to which they can successfully do these will be the extent to which they can be independent of government and partisan politics.

(2) The civil society organizations need to increase their advocacy power and capabilities through acquisition of basic facilities and equipment, training of members in grassroots mobilization and advocacy.

(3) The civil society organizations could make their efforts more effective by co-ordinating and integrating their activities. In essence, there is the need for increased synergy and focused networking among the civil society organizations.

(4) The civil society organizations need to embark on acquisition of basic skills in problem and policy analysis particularly for the leaders. This will enable the leaders have the required skill to comprehensively investigate problems of the society, proffer appropriate solutions and develop plans to facilitate buy-in by other segments of the society.

(5) The civil society organizations in Nigeria would be more effective in promoting good governance if they are formed on the basis of interests that cut across tribal, ethnic, religious and linguistic identity. For this, there is the need for the civil society in Nigeria to be built on trans-ethnic and trans-religious coalitions in order to pre-empt the characterization of genuine civil society struggles as ethnically driven. Indeed, when people of different religions and ethnic identities come together on the basis of common interests as, for instance, women, artisans, civil servants, students, traders, lawyers, media practitioners, human right activists etc, more effective and sustainable control and influence could be exercised on the state managers in the direction of proper management of state affairs.

(6) Government leaders, very importantly, need to realize that pluralism is integral to democracy as no one entity-the state, political party or leaders-will even have all the answers to all the societal challenges. And for the fact that the ideas and conceptions of the civil society may be useful in solving certain problems and advancing good governance, government leadership need to accommodate them. Afterall, leadership of democracies need not fear their own people. Rather, they need to recognize that citizens are free to come together to advocate and agitate for their rights and needs, to remind government leadership that it derives its power from them and, as such, that they have the right to redirect it, as the need may arise, to the path of good governance.

(7) Finally, and very importantly, effective and sustainable effort at promoting good governance requires sacrifice, dedication and fearlessness on the part of the civil society groups. The civil society organizations need to always be guided and fortified by this understanding in their activities.

Conclusion

Good governance is what every nation needs for development and for enhancement of the welfare of the citizens. The promotion of this good governance has been observed to be an integral function of the civil society both in the developed and developing states. This is, however, more so in developing nations with weak democratic institutional structures for enhancing or enforcing good governance. As such, in Nigeria, as a developing nation, the civil society has this role to play and has actually been involved in promoting good governance. However, there are some impediments to its ability to optimally play the role. The ability of the civil society to contribute more meaningfully in promoting good governance in Nigeria, therefore, depends on the extent to which it is strengthened to function more effectively and sustainably. A buy-in to the recommendations made above by the civil society itself and the government is considered necessary in this direction.

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