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THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN PROMOTING DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of civil society and social movements in promoting democracy and human rights in Nigeria. It argues that civil society and social movements have been instrumental in challenging authoritarianism, corruption, and violence, and in advancing democratic values and practices in Nigeria. The study draws on historical and contemporary examples of civil society and social movement activism, such as the anti-military campaigns in the 1990s, the #EndSARS protests in 2020, and the ongoing advocacy for transparency and accountability in governance. The study also identifies the opportunities and challenges that civil society and social movements face in their quest for democratic change and human rights protection in Nigeria. It concludes by offering some recommendations on how to strengthen civil society and social movement engagement and impact in Nigeria's democratic development.

Keywords: Civil society, social movements, democracy, Human rights, Nigeria.

Background to the Study

Democracy is a universally recognized ideal based on common values shared by people across the world, irrespective of cultural, political, social and economic differences. As recognized in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, democracy is based on the freely expressed will of the people to determine their own political, economic, social and cultural systems and their full participation in all aspects of their lives (UNHR, 1993).

Democracy, development, rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. According to World Report (2021), democracy aims to:

1. preserve and promote the dignity and fundamental rights of the individual;
2. achieve social justice;
3. foster the economic and social development of the community;
4. strengthen the cohesion of society;
5. enhance national tranquility; and
6. create a climate that is favourable for international peace.

Democracy as a form of government is a universal benchmark for human rights protection; it provides an environment for the protection and effective realization of human rights. Today, after a period of increased democratization around the world, many democracies appear to be backsliding. Some Governments seem to be deliberately weakening independent checks

on their powers, suffocating criticism, dismantling democratic oversight and ensuring their long-term rule, with negative impact on people's rights (Udo&Ojebode, 2018).

Human rights protect the essential elements and areas of a human existence, which are necessary for survival and for life as a human being. Human rights are those rights that belong to everyone as a member of the human race, regardless of skin colour, nationality, political convictions or religious persuasion, social standing, gender or age. Every individual possesses human rights. They are subjective rights because the right-holders of human rights are individuals, not collectivities. Human rights are rights with a certain complexity because they are at the same time moral, legal, and political rights. In their legal dimension, human rights are part of a legal system and individuals living in this legal system are entitled to these rights (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019). They are 'legal entitlements of individuals against the state or state-like entities, guaranteed by international law for the purpose of protecting fundamental needs of the human person and his/her dignity in times of peace and war' (Civil Society and Social Movement, 2022).

Civil Society and Social movement. (2022) defines Civil society as the space between the state and the market, where citizens organize themselves to pursue their interests and values. Social movements are collective actions by groups of people who share a common identity, goal or grievance. Both civil society and social movements can play a vital role in advancing democracy and human rights by holding the government accountable, demanding reforms, mobilizing public opinion, providing alternative voices and fostering social change.

Civil society and social movements have played a significant role in promoting democracy and human rights in Nigeria by challenging authoritarianism, corruption, insecurity, violence, and inequality (Daniel &Neubert, 2019). They have also demonstrated creativity, resilience, and solidarity in their struggles for a better Nigeria. However, civil society and social movements also face many challenges such as repression, co-optation, fragmentation, and fatigue that limit their effectiveness and sustainability. Therefore, there is a need for more support, protection, and collaboration among civil society and social movements in Nigeria, as well as with other actors such as media, academia, and international community. The paper therefore seeks to examine the role of civil society and social movements in promoting democracy and human rights in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The role of civil society and social movements in promoting democracy and human rights in Nigeria has been a subject of debate and analysis for decades. Despite the potential of civil society and social movements to contribute to democratic development and human rights protection in Nigeria, they face many challenges and obstacles that limit their effectiveness and impact. The repressive and hostile environment created by the state, which often violates the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly of civil society actors and social movement activists. For example, in 2020, the Nigerian authorities used excessive force to crack down on peaceful protesters who were calling for an end to police brutality and the abolition of a notorious police unit known as SARS (World Report, 2021). The authorities also enacted a new law that could be used to restrict civic space and limit basic freedoms (BBC, 2020).

The lack of internal cohesion, coordination and collaboration among civil society organizations and social movements, which hampers their ability to present a unified front and amplify their voices. For example, Nigeria has a diverse and fragmented civil society landscape, with many organizations operating along ethnic, religious or regional lines (Online Wikipedia, 2022). There is also a gap between urban-based NGOs and grassroots movements that often have different agendas and strategies. The limited resources, capacity and sustainability of civil society organizations and social movements, which affects their ability to carry out their activities, reach out to their constituencies and influence policy-making.
These challenges pose serious threats to the role of civil society and social movements in promoting democracy and human rights in Nigeria. Therefore, there is a need for more research on how these actors can overcome these challenges and enhance their contribution to democratic development and human rights protection in Nigeria. It is against this background that this study examines the role of civil society and social movements in promoting democracy and human rights in Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine the role of civil society and social movements in promoting democracy and human rights in Nigeria.
Specifically, the study seeks to:

i. examine the historical and contemporary role of civil society and social movements in Nigeria's democratic transition and consolidation;
ii. analyze the challenges and opportunities for civil society and social movements to influence public policies and hold the government accountable;
iii. identify the best practices and strategies for civil society and social movements to promote democracy and human rights in Nigeria and
iv. provide recommendations for enhancing the capacity and effectiveness of civil society and social movements in Nigeria.

Research Questions

1. What are the historical and contemporary role of civil society and social movements in Nigeria's democratic transition and consolidation?
2. What are the challenges and opportunities for civil society and social movements to influence public policies and hold the government accountable?
3. What are the best practices and strategies for civil society and social movements to promote democracy and human rights in Nigeria and
4. What are the recommendations for enhancing the capacity and effectiveness of civil society and social movements in Nigeria?

Literature Review- Concept of Democracy and Human Rights

The concept of democracy and human rights are closely intertwined and have been the subject of extensive academic research in the past three decades. One of the key questions that scholars have addressed is how to define and measure democracy and human rights. These concepts are often contested and have different meanings and implications in different contexts and cultures. Some scholars have adopted a minimalist or procedural approach to democracy, focusing on the presence of free and fair elections, political pluralism, civil liberties, and accountability (Akinbobola&Ojebode, 2017). Others have advocated for a more substantive or participatory approach, emphasizing the importance of social and economic

rights, inclusion, deliberation, and empowerment. Similarly, human rights can be categorized into different generations or dimensions, such as civil and political rights, economic, social and cultural rights, collective or solidarity rights, and emerging rights such as environmental or digital rights (Ibrahim&Igbuzor, 2003). Different indicators and indices have been developed to operationalize these concepts and assess their level of protection and promotion across countries and regions.

Another important issue that has been explored in the literature is the relationship between democracy and human rights. Are they mutually reinforcing or conflicting? Do they have a causal or a correlational link? How do they interact with other factors such as culture, religion, development, security, or globalization? The answers to these questions are not straightforward or unanimous. Some scholars have argued that democracy is a necessary or sufficient condition for human rights, as it provides mechanisms for accountability, representation, participation, and rule of law that can prevent or redress human rights violations. Others have pointed out that democracy can also pose challenges or trade-offs for human rights, such as majority tyranny, populism, nationalism, or illiberalism (Civil Society and Social Movements, 2023). Moreover, some scholars have suggested that human rights can also contribute to democracy, by providing norms and values that can foster democratic culture, institutions, and practices. However, others have cautioned that human rights can also undermine democracy, by imposing external or universal standards that may clash with local preferences or traditions.

A third theme that has emerged from the literature review is the role of actors and institutions in advancing or hindering democracy and human rights. Who are the main agents of change or resistance in this field? What are their motivations, strategies, and impacts? How do they cooperate or compete with each other? The literature has identified a variety of actors and institutions that play a role in this domain, such as states, international organizations, courts, civil society organizations, social movements, media, corporations, or individuals (Civil Society Organizations' Advocacy Strategies, 2020). These actors and institutions can operate at different levels of governance (local, national, regional, or global) and use different tools or mechanisms (such as lawmaking, monitoring, advocacy, litigation, education, sanctions, incentives, dialogue) to influence the development and implementation of democracy and human rights norms and policies.

WHAT ARE THE HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION AND CONSOLIDATION?

Civil society and social movements have played a vital role in Nigeria's democratic transition and consolidation since the 1990s. They have mobilized citizens to resist military dictatorship, demand good governance, and promote human rights and social justice. Historically, civil society and social movements emerged as a response to the authoritarian rule of the military regimes that dominated Nigeria's politics from 1966 to 1999, with brief interludes of civilian rule. These regimes were characterized by corruption, repression, and human rights violations. Civil society groups such as the Civil Liberties Organization and United Action for Democracy led the movement against military rule, organizing protests, strikes, and campaigns to restore democracy. They also formed alliances with other sectors of society, such

as labor unions, students, women, religious groups, and ethnic associations, to create a broad-based opposition to the military (Daniel &Neubert, 2019).

The transition to democracy in 1999 was largely facilitated by the pressure and activism of civil society and social movements. However, democracy did not automatically translate into good governance, accountability, and development. Nigeria continued to face challenges such as corruption, insecurity, poverty, inequality, and ethnic conflicts. Civil society and social movements did not relent in their efforts to hold the government accountable and demand reforms. They also engaged in constructive dialogue and advocacy with the government and other stakeholders on various issues affecting the country.

Contemporarily, civil society and social movements have been at the forefront of addressing some of the most pressing issues facing Nigeria's democracy. For example, in 2020, a nationwide protest movement known as #EndSARS emerged to call for the end of police brutality and the abolition of an abusive police unit called the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) (The Guardian Newspaper, 2020). The movement received global attention and support, and led to the dissolution of SARS by the government. However, the movement also faced harassment and violence from security forces and armed thugs, resulting in several deaths and injuries. The #EndSARS movement highlighted the need for police reform and justice for victims of police abuse in Nigeria (BBC, 2020).

Another example of civil society and social movement involvement in Nigeria's democracy is the campaign for transparency and accountability in governance. Several civil society organizations have been working to expose corruption, monitor public spending, track public projects, and advocate for anti-corruption laws and institutions. Some of these organizations include BudgIT, Connected Development (CODE), Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP), among others. These organizations have used various strategies such as data analysis, social media, litigation, civic education, and grassroots mobilization to promote transparency and accountability in Nigeria.

Civil society and social movements have been instrumental in shaping Nigeria's democratic transition and consolidation. They have contributed to the restoration of democracy, the protection of human rights, the promotion of good governance, and the resolution of social problems (Development Research Centre on Citizenship Participation and Accountability, 2011). They have also faced various challenges such as repression, violence, co-optation, fragmentation, and funding constraints. Despite these challenges, civil society and social movements remain resilient and relevant in Nigeria's democracy.

Civil society and social movements have played a vital role in Nigeria's democratic transition and consolidation since the 1990s. They have mobilized citizens to demand an end to military rule, to protect human rights, to fight corruption, and to advocate for social justice. In this blog post, I will explore some of the historical and contemporary examples of civil society and social movement activism in Nigeria, and how they have contributed to the country's democratic development.

One of the most prominent civil society organizations in Nigeria is the Civil Liberties Organization (CLO), founded in 1987 by a group of lawyers and activists. The CLO was instrumental in exposing and challenging the human rights violations committed by the military regimes of Ibrahim Babangida and SaniAbacha. The CLO documented cases of torture, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and detention of political opponents, journalists, and activists. The CLO also organized protests, rallies, and campaigns to demand the restoration of democracy and the respect for the rule of law.

Another influential civil society organization is the United Action for Democracy (UAD), formed in 1997 by a coalition of trade unions, student groups, women's groups, and other pro-democracy activists. The UAD was one of the leading forces behind the June 12 Movement, which protested against the annulment of the 1993 presidential election won by Moshood Abiola. The UAD also coordinated mass actions against the Abacha regime, such as strikes, boycotts, and civil disobedience. The UAD played a key role in mobilizing Nigerians to participate in the 1999 elections that marked the end of military rule (Donnelly, 1999).

Another example of a contemporary social movement in Nigeria is Follow The Money (FTM), launched in 2012 by a group of young activists who use data and technology to track public funds and expose corruption. FTM monitors government spending on health, education, environment, and other sectors that affect the lives of ordinary Nigerians. FTM also engages with citizens, media, civil society organizations, and government officials to demand transparency and accountability in the management of public resources. FTM has successfully uncovered cases of misappropriation, diversion, and embezzlement of public funds meant for development projects in various communities across Nigeria. FTM has also advocated for policy changes and legal reforms to improve governance and service delivery. FTM has won several awards and recognition for its innovative and impactful work (Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC), 2015).

These are just some of the examples of how civil society and social movements have shaped Nigeria's democratic transition and consolidation. They have demonstrated courage, resilience, creativity, and solidarity in their struggle for a better Nigeria.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS TO INFLUENCE PUBLIC POLICIES AND HOLD THE GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABLE?

Civil society and social movements are two concepts that are often used interchangeably, but they have different perspectives and implications. Civil society refers to the features of associations in a public sphere or arena and their role in politics and society. Social movements refer to processes of mobilization and action that aim to challenge or change the status quo. Both civil society and social movements can play an important role in promoting social inclusion, defending collective interests, increasing accountability, providing solidarity mechanisms, influencing decision making, directly engaging in service delivery, and challenging prejudice (Ibrahim&Igbuzor, 2003).

However, according to Human Rights Watch (2021), civil society and social movements also face many challenges and opportunities in their efforts to influence public policies and hold the government accountable. Some of these challenges and opportunities are:

- The type of regime and the level of decentralization: The political context can enable or constrain the space for civil society and social movements to operate and participate. For example, authoritarian regimes may repress or co-opt civil society and social movements, while democratic regimes may offer more opportunities for dialogue and representation. Similarly, decentralized governance may create more channels for local participation and responsiveness, while centralized governance may limit the access and influence of civil society and social movements.
- The normative implications of the concepts: Civil society and social movements are often associated with certain values and expectations, such as liberal democracy, non-violence, and politicization. However, these normative implications may not always reflect the reality or diversity of civil society and social movements. For example, some civil society actors may be illiberal, violent, or apolitical, while some social movements may be conservative, peaceful, or institutionalized. These normative implications may affect the legitimacy, recognition, and support of civil society and social movements by the government and other stakeholders.
- The alliances and platforms across state and society: Civil society and social movements can benefit from building alliances and platforms across state and society, to connect champions of change and negotiate collective solutions. However, this also requires overcoming barriers such as mistrust, fragmentation, competition, co-optation, or capture by elite interests. Moreover, alliances and platforms across state and society may entail trade-offs between autonomy and influence, radicalism and pragmatism, or diversity and coherence.

Civil society and social movements are not homogeneous or static entities, but rather dynamic and complex processes that interact with the political context and each other. They have both challenges and opportunities to influence public policies and hold the government accountable. Therefore, it is important to understand their different perspectives, normative implications, and strategies of engagement.

WHAT ARE THE BEST PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS TO PROMOTE DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN NIGERIA?

Nigeria is a country with a long history of activism and social movements, especially during the struggle against military rule in the 1990s. However, in recent years, the country has faced various challenges that threaten its democratic consolidation and human rights protection, such as insecurity, corruption, inter-communal violence, and Covid-19 pandemic. In this context, civil society and social movements have a crucial role to play in promoting democracy and human rights in Nigeria.

One of the best practices for civil society and social movements is to mobilize citizens to demand accountability and transparency from the government and other actors. This can be done through various means, such as organizing protests, campaigns, petitions, advocacy, litigation, and monitoring. For example, the #EndSARS movement that erupted in October 2020 was a nationwide protest against police brutality and abuse of power by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a notorious police unit that was later dissolved by the authorities. The movement also called for broader reforms in the security sector and governance. The #EndSARS movement was largely driven by young people who used social media platforms

to coordinate their actions and amplify their voices. The movement also received global attention and solidarity from celebrities, activists, and international organizations (BBC, 2020& Leadership Newspaper, 2020).

Another best practice for civil society and social movements is to collaborate and form coalitions with other stakeholders who share common goals and interests. This can help to increase their influence, legitimacy, and resources. For example, civil society groups can partner with media organizations to expose human rights violations and corruption cases, or with academic institutions to conduct research and provide evidence-based recommendations. Civil society groups can also work with traditional and religious leaders to promote peace and dialogue among different communities, or with international actors to advocate for human rights standards and norms. For example, civil society groups in Nigeria have collaborated with Human Rights Watch to document and report on various human rights issues, such as sexual violence against women and girls, chaining of people with mental health conditions, forced return of refugees from Cameroon, and attacks on civilians by Boko Haram insurgents (Landman, 2018 &Oluwaseun, 2020).

A third best practice for civil society and social movements is to engage in constructive dialogue and negotiation with the government and other actors to influence policies and decisions that affect democracy and human rights in Nigeria. This can be done through various platforms, such as public hearings, consultations, forums, roundtables, and committees. For example, civil society groups participated in a public hearing on a draft mental health bill in February 2020, which aimed to improve the mental health care system and protect the rights of people with mental health conditions. Civil society groups can also use their expertise and experience to provide technical assistance and capacity building to the government and other actors on various issues related to democracy and human rights (Partnership Initiatives in The Niger Delta (PIND) Foundation, 2020).

Civil society and social movements have a vital role to play in promoting democracy and human rights in Nigeria. Some of the best practices and strategies they can adopt are: mobilizing citizens to demand accountability and transparency; collaborating and forming coalitions with other stakeholders; and engaging in constructive dialogue and negotiation with the government and other actors. These practices can help to enhance the quality of democracy and human rights in Nigeria.

WHAT ARE THE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCING THE CAPACITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN NIGERIA?

Civil society and social movements play a vital role in promoting democracy, human rights, and social justice in Nigeria. However, they face many challenges and constraints that limit their capacity and effectiveness. Some of these challenges include: lack of funding, poor coordination, weak institutional capacity, legal and regulatory barriers, political interference, security threats, and shrinking civic space. To enhance their impact and sustainability, Technical Assistance for Civil Society Organisations (TACSO) (2023) in its submission opined that civil society and social movements in Nigeria need to adopt the following recommendations:

1. Strengthen their internal governance, accountability, and transparency mechanisms to ensure credibility and legitimacy among their members, partners, donors, and the public.
2. Build coalitions and networks with other civil society actors, social movements, media, academia, private sector, and international allies to amplify their voices, share resources, and coordinate actions on common issues and goals.
3. Engage in constructive dialogue and advocacy with the government and other stakeholders to influence policies and reforms that advance their causes and protect their rights and interests.
4. Enhance their capacity to mobilize resources, both locally and internationally, through innovative fundraising strategies, diversification of funding sources, and collaboration with other actors.
5. Invest in capacity building and knowledge sharing among their staff, volunteers, members, and beneficiaries to improve their skills, competencies, and performance.
6. Leverage the power of technology and social media to communicate their messages, raise awareness, mobilize support, and monitor their impact.
7. Document and disseminate their achievements, challenges, lessons learned, and best practices to showcase their contributions and inspire others.

Summary

The role of civil society and social movements in promoting democracy and human rights in Nigeria is crucial, especially in the context of the country's history of authoritarian rule, ethnic conflicts, corruption and violence. Civil society organizations (CSOs) and social movements (SMs) have been active in advocating for political reforms, electoral accountability, human rights protection, social justice and peacebuilding. They have also been instrumental in mobilizing citizens' participation, raising public awareness and providing alternative voices to the dominant narratives of the state and the elites. This summary provides an overview of the main challenges and opportunities for civil society and social movements in Nigeria, as well as some recommendations for enhancing their effectiveness and sustainability.

Conclusion

The role of civil society and social movements in promoting democracy and human rights in Nigeria is crucial and indispensable. They have been instrumental in challenging authoritarian regimes, demanding accountability and transparency, mobilizing citizens for civic engagement, and advocating for social justice and human dignity. They have also contributed to the development of democratic institutions, norms and values, as well as the protection and promotion of human rights in the country. However, they also face many challenges and constraints, such as repression, co-optation, fragmentation, lack of resources, and internal weaknesses. Therefore, they need to strengthen their capacities, networks, and strategies to overcome these obstacles and enhance their effectiveness and impact. They also need to collaborate with other actors, such as the media, academia, religious groups, and international partners, to create synergies and leverage their collective influence. In conclusion, civil society and social movements are vital agents of change and democratization in Nigeria, and they deserve recognition, support, and protection from the state and the society at large.

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