
Towards Nigeria's Nationhood: The Contributions and Challenges of Civil Society, 1990-2022

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ABSTRACT

In any local or national setting, the role of the civil society cannot be overemphasized. The aim of this paper is to provide a holistic dimension of the contributions and challenges of these non-state actors in campaigning for good governance while ensuring that the government is accountable to the governed in the period under review. The paper interrogates these research directions: i) What is civil society? ii) What are its contributions to nationhood in the period being reviewed? iii) What are the challenges of the third sector in Nigeria's drive for nationhood? This paper presupposes that civil society in Nigeria is significant in terms of advocating for accountability, transparency and good governance, restraining state abuses, supporting people oriented bills, strengthening public scrutiny while ensuring public participation in governance since the 1990s. The discussion centered on the third sector theory which considered the need and impact of citizens in determining how leaders conduct the business of governance. Challenges encountered by these organizations over the years include repressive policies, exclusion by leaders in initiating policies and programs, among others. Primary – oral interviews and secondary sources were adopted in providing a comprehensive analysis of the subject matter. The authors having taken note of the strategic roles of civil society concluded in the discourse that these groups put in more efforts in ensuring that political leaders are continually accountable and responsive to the masses for major developments to occur. The masses on their part must checkmate the activities of those in positions of authority.

KEYWORDS: Contributions, Challenges, Civil Society, Government, Nationhood.

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INTRODUCTION

Humans have always formed groups where issues of public interests were and are being discussed. Civil society as a phenomenon continues to dominate discourse around the world because of their impacts on the policies and programs of government. It is believed that viable civil groups are critical to development and progress of any society because they harmonize the interests of the public. In Nigeria, the case is not different as they have influenced positively the decisions of government. In essence, they are gradually being accepted as part and parcel of government unlike previously where they were perceived as enemies and clog in the wheel of progress. Historical records showed that these groups were instrumental, prominent and evident in Nigeria's struggle, resistance and eventual independence. Different academic scholars are unanimous in conceptualizing civil groups as the third sector, just as the latter has been formally recognized (Japhet, 2017, p.4; Babayo, 2021, p.11). Formally, civil society gained recognition in Nigeria in 1987, though their activities predated this period. In the mid-1980s, civil society groups, some in the form of human rights organizations were established. In 1986, the Civil Liberties Organization (CLO) was established by a group of lawyers. Around that period, there was repression and attacks on human and democratic rights of the people. Some groups rose up to counter and resist the situation. In addition to Civil Liberties Organization (CLO), others like the Committee for Defence of Human Rights (CDHR), National Association of Democratic Lawyers (NADL), Democratic Action Committee (DACOM), Democratic Forum (DF), Gani Fawehinmi Solidarity Association (GFSA), National Consultative Forum (NCF), among others (Ma'azu, 2010, p.64-65) were established. Thus, the mid-1980s to the present era appears as the nation's greatest and historic

period in the formation and activities of civil society organizations, committed to the pursuit of civil liberties, good governance, the rule of law, human rights and generally democratization in Nigeria's polity (Ma'azu, 2010, p.58).

In 1987, the idea of a formalized collaboration was ever muted between the Federal Government of Nigeria and civil society organizations (CSOs). The meeting was organized by the Federal Ministry of Health (FMOH) for CSOs, sometimes perceived as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and this was done for those civil groups active in the health sector (Yusuf, 2011, p.4). In 1992, there was an enhanced collaboration between these groups and the government which focused on issues surrounding development. Non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations have incorporated their activities and provided selfless and humanitarian services to the Nigerian people (Nigeria Network of NGOs). They have been involved in advocacy, developmental issues, conflict resolution, management and peace building, synergy with local and international partners, among others to facilitate progress. Civil society as the third sector plays significant roles in the Nigerian democratic system and have entrenched the crucial roles as well as suffered from the venom of previous military rulers. A dispassionate examination of the transition from military autocracy to democracy revealed that it did not take place on a platter of gold, rather individuals and groups were involved in the process. This paper focused on the different contributions and challenges of civil society from 1991 to 2021 in ensuring leadership is accountable in Nigeria. This is premised on the axiom that leadership deficiency in Africa and Nigeria in particular largely rests on the shoulders of the nature of civil society. More so, the need for vibrant groups cannot be over-emphasized to ensure purposeful leadership as well as inclusive political and economic institutions.

CIVIL SOCIETY

A firm and comprehensive grasp of what constitutes civil society is essential in order to clearly articulate their objectives and goals. Though there is no common acceptable definition of the aforementioned concept, however, it is important to state that it is that realm of organized social life, which is open, voluntary, self-generating, self-supporting, autonomous from the state and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules (Popoola, 2011, p.106). This connotes that to a large extent, there is no restriction in terms of membership and they have the ability and capacity to source funds through every possible way. Basically, membership is drawn from all walks of life while issues considered encompass major interest of members. Here, it involves private citizens acting collectively to demand from the state, concessions, benefits, policy changes, redress, transparency and accountability, all in the interest of the public. It constitutes a range of organizations, formal or informal, concerned with public matters such as economic, commercial, socio-cultural and political issues (Popoola, 2011, p.107). In essence, this is the avenue through which unpopular decisions of the state, excesses of government officials in the exercise of their powers are checked while these same groups of individuals can be held accountable and compelled to be transparent. With the nature of their activities in place, the propensity to be autocratic or consider tyranny is erased. More so, the fact that the people are aware that decisions taken affects them directly or indirectly strengthens their resolve to be involved and not to be politically indifferent and apathetic (Popoola, 2011, p.107).

Across the world, civil society are being recognized as non-state emergent agent responsible for providing critical social welfare, social services, humanitarian services, socio-economic empowerment, political participation, human capital development and productive economic activities. They are known for instituting accountability, transparency and good governance, restraining state abuses, restricting the untamed effects of market forces and strengthening public scrutiny (Nenpomingyi, 2014, p.212). They represent the diverse and pluralistic nature of a society or people like Nigerians who on daily basis advocates for different issues or interests. The history of Nigeria's struggle and campaign for independence vis-à-vis the country's independence is incomplete without the efforts and activities of these strategic groups. These groups generally include the arena of voluntary, uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. It accommodates a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, while their degree of formality, autonomy and power varies (Peacebuilding Initiative). In recent time, it has evolved as a fundamental element of the entrenchment of the democratization process in Nigeria. In essence, the continuous practice of democracy owes its survival and sustenance to the deliberate involvement of civil society. These groups are viable platforms for the specific purpose of defending the rights of citizens and ensuring the complete freedom of these citizens.

Quite significant is the axiom that certain groups have shouldered the responsibility of pursuing the agenda of the generality of the people; this is in order to ensure they have a voice and sense of belonging in governance. Civil society consists of human and associational activities which operate mostly in the public sphere outside the state. The interests and aspirations of the people are expressed voluntarily; the citizens are organized and united by common interests, goals, values or traditions, and mobilized into collective action either as beneficiaries or stakeholders of the development process. They are non-profit, voluntary, independent, and also regarded as the third sector. Their descriptive forms includes the third sector (non-profit, voluntary, and independent), NGOs, and community-based (or grassroots) organizations (Peacebuilding Initiative). Indeed, they are a highly contested public sphere, characterized by struggles, crosscutting, and contradictory alliances, either in relation to the economy and the state. They are independently or autonomously placed sometimes against the state with the cumulative interests of the society at heart. They work towards the realization of the common good for all and their approaches in most cases are civil while they play mediatory roles between the leaders and the masses. While they do the latter, they also serve as the rallying point in terms of assessing and

monitoring policies and programs of government. In third world countries, they have positioned themselves as the engine of transition to democracy. They have succeeded in limiting tyranny, dictatorial tendencies, excessive and arbitrary use of power while stimulating political participation by the masses (Attahiru, 2007, 246-259; Popoola, 2012, p.110).

These groups express the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations. They possess the elements of public-spiritedness, social trust, non-violence and tolerance and are capable of resolving issues amicably (Ardian, 2016, p.61). Considering the fact that they are different but working towards one major goal, they vary in size, function, mission, vision and culture. As grassroots' movements, networks, intermediaries, or confederations, they network with communities to deliver services, national level advocacy, or with other intermediate function which includes assisting grassroots or local organizations. In recent years, they have formed youth networks, women groups, faith-based organizations, community-based organizations, non-governmental organizations, professional organizations, trade unions, cooperatives, consumer and human rights groups (Ademolu, 2020, p.3049). As independent groups, they determine the nature and methods of executing their activities suitable to themselves and their peculiarities. A dispassionate look at civil society within the scope of this work revealed that the task of development and good governance has always required the active participation of these groups. In recent years, we have witnessed at an increasing level, diversity in their constituencies, functions, size, resource levels, organizational forms, geographical scopes, historical experiences, cultural contexts, agendas, strategies, and approaches (Ademolu, 2020, p.3049). For instance, while victimization, harassment, molestation and incarceration of the members of the civil society by the military juntas occurred, with necessary support from Western countries, these organizations were never cowed. Their resistance to the military government and their dictatorial tendencies culminated in the eventual return to democracy. It is important to state that the efforts of civil society thus far have been responsible for the attainment of development, peace and progress during the military era and during the democratic process thus far.

It is a fact that civil societies do not only achieve mutual goals but make demands on the state and hold state officials accountable. The characteristics and benefits of an organized civil society can be seen in the following context:

- (i) An organized civil society serves as a check against the excesses of government, human rights violation, abuse of the rule of law, monitoring of the application of constitutional provisions.
- (ii) Increases the participation and the skills of all the various segments of society and instills a sense of tolerance, thrift, hard work, moderation, compromise among the various competing parties.
- (iii) It serves as an alternative to political parties and can offer a refuge for those who are shut from their rights due to non-membership of given political parties.
- (iv) It serves to enhance the bargaining power of interest groups and provides inclusive mechanisms for them.
- (v) It has a role in mitigating the excesses of fundamentalist extremists and maximalists who tend to have a very narrow view of life within the context. It thus provides other alternatives for negotiation within a multi-faceted society.
- (vi) It can serve as recruiting ground for, and the training of prospective members of the political or economic classes to enhance the quality of participants in government. In effect, it is a leadership recruitment field. This has been reflected in the Nigerian society though it is not as organized as it is in other climes. More so, in terms of the relationship of civil society to the state, it is natural it manifest at various levels, sometimes vertical, horizontal or even hierarchical (Matthew, 1999, p.44-45; Catherine, p.1, 6-7).

THEORETICAL EXPOSITION

Civil society organizations are perceived as the third sector; as such one of the theories adopted to drive this paper is the "Third Sector" theory. The idea of this theory originated in the United States during the 1970s. Based on context, there was a revival of the concept from the late 1980s which in itself was a wider move away from state provision of services, a formalized shift from excessive reliance on government to reliance on the market and individual responsibility. This theory suggests that the third sector is not part of the government, profits are usually reinvested for social, environmental or cultural aims, and participation is largely voluntary. The term indicates a space for social, economic and political activities that offer an alternative to both state command and free market economies. Two theories seek to account for the third sector, namely to cast the third sector as a distinct area of activity that arose in response to the failure of both state and market to provide for welfare. Secondly, it frames the development of a third way or sector as part of the expansion of modern democratic states, where a range of public spheres, or civil society, play an active and profound role (Catherine, p.1, 6-7). In theorizing the third sector, it neither has to do with the government nor businesses, it extends beyond the boundaries of negative stipulations of non-state and not-for-profit purposes.

Basically, it is characterized by value-driven action and commitment from individuals operating within it, persuasion and appeals are used to convince those in position of authority and the general public about its shared goals and the need to support her for the general good of the society. An alternative approach is to perceive civil society as a particular kind of process of interaction or communication between different sectors, usually the public and private sectors. This approach looks at what communicative forms allow third sector organizations – be they social enterprises, partnerships, community organizations, or pressure groups- to form and function (Olaf, 2010, p.13-16). It is considered as a power-free zone of non-coerced realization of shared values where

authentic human communication can take place, not necessarily as a zone of contestation, as always believed, rather where leaders perceive civil society as advancing the cause of humanity. However, it adopts the method of contestations where government considers her to be naïve and does not understand that discourses and institutions of civil society such as partnerships, private associations, or guilds form part of the avenue through which a certain kind of governance can be achieved. This theory presupposes that actions are tilted towards restricting the excesses of leaders, disciplining the individual and family, while oiling the wheels of the economy which inevitably leads to a positive and drastic change in the society (Olaf, p.16-17).

The traditional focus of third sector has always been on social welfare, encompassing housing, education, health and social justice. A major strength of this theory as practically seen is that they are often rooted in locality and communities and can act as intermediaries between households, state and market enterprises. The theory further situates the third sector between community, market and state, which also generates tension. It is integrated with politics, the market, local communities and household, to different degrees and markedly different from one country to another as a result of specific socio-economic and political histories, public policies and legal frameworks. It contests that this sector can be better understood and properly assessed from the 1990s because of expected changes in quantitative and qualitative forms. The aforementioned period clearly relates to the current paper being the period civil society organizations increased and intensified their activities in Nigeria. Theoretically, this work presented and suggested logically that civil society is assuming the responsibility of a third tier of government in modern democracies, Nigeria inclusive. The public sector operates within the public sphere, the private sector aspires for personal gain while civil societies balances the equation of serving both public and private interest (Catherine, p.2-12). It is factual that it is a third sector in governance or an independent sector different from the government and private /business sectors. It is an independent body for social order. This suggests that as witnessed in Nigeria, these groups have the capacity to provide regulations, order, needs, and social norms for individuals in the society.

Contributions of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to Governance and Nationhood in Nigeria

Governance is a social contract between the leaders and the masses, thus, it is expected that leaders must be accountable for their decisions and actions. Generally, accountability is a consequence of the implicit 'social compact' between citizens and their delegated representatives and agents in a democracy. A fundamental principle of democracy is that citizens have the right to demand accountability and public actors have an obligation to account. Quite significant is the fact that government officials and bureaucrats are accountable for their (i) conduct and (ii) performance while in office and whenever there is a need to account for their stewardship. From the 1990s, there was an increase in civil groups, especially human groups. In a bid to compel the government to do the needful, they also ensured that the government protected humans whom they had sworn to protect. It is believed that irrespective of the nature of government, accountability, transparency and financial responsiveness and probity should characterize any government. In Nigeria, it has not always been the case with the different military administrations and democratic governments. As such, poor leadership in Nigeria contributes to the myriads of leadership debacle and governance deficit in Africa. In order to ensure government executes her responsibilities to the people as expected, the civil society also regarded as the third sector have been contributing in no small measure towards ensuring that the social contract entered into by leaders and the led are adhered to.

The authoritarian regimes evident in the military administrations of General Buhari, Babangida and Abacha from 1983 to 1998 resulted in the increase in civil groups, especially in preventing the excesses of these regimes. The Babangida's regime for example gave a further boost to the concern to challenge human rights violations by using the UN human rights instrument. It led to the establishment of both the Civil Liberties Organization (CLO) and the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR) (Ya'u, 2010, p.3). Most of the organizations in coalition with trade unions, students' movement, women organizations, pro-democracy movements, etc were united in November 1991 and formed a broad based front, the Campaign for Democracy (CD) to halt the Military Junta of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida from its tactics of postponing the disengagement from the transition program (Ma'azu, 2010, p.66). The Abacha's regime was averse to these groups, imprisoned some of their leaders but still experienced stiff resistance as these groups were undeterred. With the sudden demise of Abacha in 1998, these groups, especially human rights groups were in momentary confusion as to how to respond to the situation. One way forward was the involvement with the new external donor agencies; a Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) was established with the aim of monitoring the transition to civil rule. The human rights groups, particularly the CLO and the CDHR, were instrumental to the establishment of the Campaign for Democracy (CD), a national platform that brought together several organizations including professional groups, youth associations, traders and so on (Yau, 2010, p.18-21).

As a way of compelling government to be accountable and responsive, the civil society opposed policies considered to be unpopular and anti-people. In situations where an amicable resolution was possible, they were favorably disposed to settling these issues. Over the years, groups like labour unions, peasant organizations and parties, students unions all ensured the defence of the right to work. More so, they worked towards complete pay as and when due, democratic administration of all educational institutions, compelled the government to abolish all undemocratic labour laws, defended and protected the rights of women, media and media workers from police, police harassment and intimidation (Ibrahim, 2000, p.48). These groups became

confrontational towards the 1990s to enforce the fundamental human rights in an environment considered toxic and characterized with violations of all kinds. They brought up ideological, economic and political issues which they expected the government to address. In tandem with the need to end military incursion into politics and enthrone democracy, they exposed and campaigned against undemocratic actions like extra-judicial killings, executive lawlessness and rascality (Otiye, 2000, p.80-81).

In the long run, there were civil society groups, which were not primarily set up as human rights organizations but due to their work, and networking activities had to play critical roles in the human rights movement. As the movement expanded in the late 1980s and 1990s, the dimension of Nigerian civil society gradually became inseparably linked to the struggle (Yau, 2010, p.10,13). Since the 1990s, different parts of the country have witnessed various conflicts which affected and currently constitute serious challenge to national security and security apparatuses. The government has not been able to manage these conflicts properly. Civil society have maintained that how these conflicts are resolved, managed or contained is critically dependent on the effectiveness of existing governmental institutions for conflict prevention and resolution. They challenged the government to do the needful considering the humongous amount spent in providing security in conflict prone areas which sometimes are not accounted for. It must be averred that these conflicts have occurred since the 1990s and has been intensified since the return to civil rule. They pointed out that social chaos is, therefore, often a manifestation of a failure of government machinery or governmental systems as may be revealed by a thorough and dispassionate consideration of past conflicts (Bukar, 2015, p.17). For this, the government has always been at loggerheads with them.

Civil society noticed a lacuna during this period in the modalities adopted in the formulation of policies and programs for national development. Different administrations have failed to engage these groups of people who have people with credible resumes and track records and these actions by leaders have been considered to be deliberate. As such, these groups decided on their own to be part of the process towards engaging political leaders over the choice of system of governance, leadership disposition and orientation, abysmal performance of the institutions of government and management of resources. Over the years, this has resulted in heated debates between the government and the civil society which represents the masses. The spate or nature of these continuing debates harped on the need for strong leadership or strong institutions or a combination of both. Consequently, they challenged leaders to develop strong institutions and institute a culture of transparency in governance; formulate and execute credible national development policies, programs and projects of mass appeal. They were of the opinion that citizens directly affected by these policies, programs and projects must be consulted before they are implemented or executed.

Considering the fact that the question of leadership and governance in Nigeria has been a major issue, it is believed that good leaders guide governments to perform effectively for their citizens. In Nigeria, we have had leaders with character problem who have been challenged by the third sector. These leaders are of many varieties and lack strength of character; they are focused on power itself, not on the uses of power for good. They are predatory kleptocrats; autocrats, whether democratically elected or militarily installed; simple-minded looters; economic illiterates among others (Robert, 2007, p.350). Their penchant to exploit the resources of the nation has been called to question by the civil society including their exploitation of social or racial ideologies for political and personal purposes as well as lack of initiative to facilitate economic growth. Since the advent of civil society in Nigeria, they have been ensuring that government deliver high security for the state and the people; functional rule of law; education; health; and a framework conducive for economic growth. These groups ensure that leaders also provide Nigerians with a sense of belonging to a national enterprise of which everyone can be proud because poverty within the context of resource abundance, as in oil-rich Nigeria indicates inadequate leadership (Robert, 2007, p.350-351).

Looking at the extent to which leadership has fared in Nigeria since the fourth republic in relation to civil society, they have been involved in the tasks of democratic consolidation like exposing the excesses of government officials. Though checking the excesses of government officials by civil society may be considered as anti-government, rather it is aimed at putting government on its toes, in order to ensure accountability, transparency, probity and integrity necessary for entrenching democracy. For example, through comprehensive research, it was revealed that a civil society group was able to expose some banks in the United Kingdom where a sum of fifty-five billion dollars of Nigerian money had been stashed. They were able to expose the wasteful and corrupt tendencies of such individuals. While doing this, they have called for strengthening of the laws and reforming the judicial process in order for it to be stricter to serve as a preventive measure. In order to tackle these corrupt officials in government, they have advocated that institutions such as the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), among others like the Nigerian Police, etc, should also be strengthened. More so, they have called for the prosecution and conviction of high ranking administration officials; Tracing, seizing and confiscation of all proceeds of crime, etc (Popoola, 2012, p.108). For example, SERAP filed in 2007 before the ECOWAS Court of Justice in Abuja, arguing that massive corruption in the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) amounted to a denial of the right to a free, quality and compulsory education for Nigerian children (SERAP, 2017). In a landmark judgment delivered in November 2010, the ECOWAS Court in suit no: ECW/CCJ/APP/12/7 upheld SERAP's submission and declared that the Nigerian government has a legal responsibility to provide as of right, free, quality and compulsory basic education to every Nigerian child. This initiative led to the recovery by the ICPC of over N3 billion (meant for the education of disadvantaged and disabled children) misappropriated by top officials of the UBEC (SERAP, 2017).

Prior to the enactment of the Fiscal Responsibility Act 2007, there was no openness in budgetary allocation and government spending as well as allocation of resources. The Act provided for prudent management of the Nation's Resources, ensure Long-Term Macro-Economic stability of the National Economy, secure greater accountability and transparency in Fiscal operations within the Medium Term Fiscal Policy Framework, and the establishment of the Fiscal Responsibility Commission to ensure the promotion and enforcement of the Nation's Economic objectives; and for related matters (Fiscal Responsibility Act, 2007). The enactment of the Act meant that organizations like the civil society could actively participate and monitor the process because the process is expected to be conducted in a transparent manner. It also meant that transactions and decisions involving public revenues and their expenditures be widely published. This gave fillip to these groups just as they have been actively championing the crusade against corruption as anti-corruption agents or groups considering the fact that the process is no longer secretive and non-participatory. Furthermore, having been empowered by the Act, civil groups have been upholding the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people.

The Nigerian civil society has been ensuring that elections are conducted periodically as and when due in tandem with constitutional provisions and being accountable. This is another method of getting political leaders to stick to the tenets of democracy while ensuring change in leadership and rotation of power. More so, it is to prevent arbitrary use of power and authoritarian form of leadership. They have always resisted any form of elongation of tenure, just as they did when ex-president Olusegun Obasanjo attempted to insert an elongation clause in the constitution in order to extend his stay in office. Different groups rose up which vehemently challenged the former President's decision (Moses, 2015, p.341). The protest gathered momentum and cut across different facets of the society but was mostly coordinated by CSOs. The protest was organized by the National Civil Society Coalition against Third Term (NACATT). In synergy with different organizations like the Peoples Problems and Solutions (PPS) organization, Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria and individuals like Professor Wole Soyinka, former governor and factional chairman of the Alliance for Democracy (AD), chief Bisi Akande, among others, Bamidele Aturu led the protest. He averred that there was no basis for the elongation as it contravenes the spirit and letters of the constitution (Moses, 2015, p.341).

In pursuing the cause for accountability from political office holders, the civil society have been generating pressure for reforms, such as electoral reform, constitutional reform or judicial reform. They mounted systematic but persistent pressure on the government to ensure the implementation of the report of the "Justice Uwais-led Committee on Electoral Reform." They submitted tones of memoranda to the Electoral Reform Committee (ERC) offering suggestions on how Nigeria can break the chain of her electoral debacle (Muhammad & Abdulkarim, 2017, p.6). The report encapsulated issues which could be useful in consolidating the nation's democratic practice. They also mounted pressure on the legislative arm of government to pass the "Freedom of Information Bill" which has been passed. The bill was also drafted to ensure accountability and transparency on the part of the government (Popoola, 2011, p.109). It is hoped that the more access the media has to certain information which previously had been covered, the more civil society will be able to ensure the right thing is always done and government will be accountable for her actions.

Since 1999, especially from 2000, there was a generational shift among these groups in Nigeria whose motivations and drive were influenced by a variety of factors including ideological orientation, knowledge and training, thus they have been classified into four groups: abolitionists, transformist, reformist and conformist. The abolitionists are of the view that the structures and systems established thus far cannot lead to the needed development and it constrains liberty. They stressed the need for abolition of government structures, among others, which hinders progress. Civil group known as transformists argued that there are major problems with the structures and mechanisms needed to stimulate growth and development. They have always argued that against government stance that an enhanced restructuring of the structures and mechanisms is the panacea to misuse of power and resources by leaders and by extension development (Otive, 2010, p.84). The reformists as another branch of civil society have always checkmated the activities of government and believe that bad leadership is the bane of underdevelopment. In their interaction with political leaders, they suggested that good leadership, discipline and proper management can lead to the desired development. These set of civil groups are known for their stand against corruption and corrupt activities evident in both public and private sphere. They have reiterated the need overtime for the involvement of the civil society in governance and development projects. The conformists on their part as civil groups are opportunists and they have not been able to make the government accountable (Otive, 2010, p.85).

However, in recent years, many of these organizations have undergone some forms of transformation in tandem with the objectives of being established. They have made efforts to ensure government is seen to be accountable. We have had civil society organizations which focused their attention on democratization and social provisioning, particularly against the background of the steadily collapsing state institutions (Habu, 2010, p.107). Civil society groups have been canvassing for equality and stressed the need that all human beings are born equal; therefore they should enjoy equal opportunities and participation in the political life of the community as well as entitlement to equal treatment before the law. This also includes social and economic equality between women and men. The issue of participation in the democratic system which encompasses participation in community and policy affairs has been stressed by these same groups. It is based on the latter consideration that they have stressed the need for majority

rule and minority rights whereby the majority has an obligation to take into account the rights and different needs of the minority groups. The implication is the provision of amenities also to the latter groups and continuous consideration by the relevant authorities to whom they are also accountable. They perceived that the extent to which this obligation is achieved attested to the level of entrenchment of democratic values in the Nigerian society.

Of utmost importance is the fact that the civil society in Nigeria especially from the 1990s have been campaigning for the respect for human right. This presupposes that leaders must accept that all human beings are born equal and free in dignity and rights which in itself is the basis of a functioning democratic community. To them, a democratic state has the obligation to assure the respect, protection and fulfillment of all human rights in order to ensure that its citizens can live free from fear as well as from want. They have paid special focus on those rights crucial for civic participation, such as freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, freedom of thought, conscience and religion. They have harped on these civil and political rights to be embedded on the fundamental economic, social and cultural needs of the people for a favorable environment necessary for democracy to be fostered. In their bid to promote the aforementioned, they have incorporated organizations like the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA). These groups have been able to ensure the sustenance of their agenda of promoting human rights as well as discouraging human rights abuses during military dictatorship and since the return to civil rule. Civil society groups in Nigeria have proven that they cannot co-exist with dictatorship, whatever form, i.e military or civilian, benevolent or tyrannical (Matthew, 1999, p. 216).

SERAP filed a case in 2009 against the Federal Government of Nigeria and six oil companies over alleged violation of human rights and associated oil pollution in the Niger Delta. Specifically, SERAP alleged: "Violations of the right to an adequate standard of living, including the right to food, to work, to health, to water, to life and human dignity, to a clean and healthy environment; and to economic and social development – as a consequence of: the impact of oil-related pollution and environmental damage on agriculture and fisheries." SERAP also alleged "oil spills and waste materials polluting water used for drinking and other domestic purposes; failure to secure the underlying determinants of health, including a healthy environment, and failure to enforce laws and regulations to protect the environment and prevent pollution." (SERAP, 2017). In a groundbreaking judgment delivered in December 2012, the Court unanimously found the Nigerian government responsible for abuses by oil companies and makes it clear that the government must hold the companies and other perpetrators to account. The Court also found that Nigeria violated articles 21 (on the right to natural wealth and resources) and 24 (on the right to a general satisfactory environment) of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights by failing to protect the Niger Delta and its people from the operations of oil companies that have for many years devastated the region (SERAP, 2017).

Civil society have also been ensuring that the government is proactive, accountable and responsive in terms of spending before and during periods of economic crises, epidemics, pandemics, etc. They have always harped on the need for the government to be prepared for emergencies and unforeseen circumstances. Government's inability to adhere to these warnings over the years manifested during the Covid-19 pandemic where there was unavailability of healthcare facilities and initial slow response to the situation. It also attested to the fact that the huge budgetary expenditure of the past years never translated into well-equipped and highly functional hospitals in a very good number of cases. A critical examination of the aforementioned period portrayed the Nigerian government inefficiencies. The public which also constitute bulk of the civil society questioned the reality of the virus due to lack of trust. Nigerians were indifferent to the pandemic because of the ethical concealment of Covid-19 victims by Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) and individual search for food. These groups challenged the authority during the pandemic, especially in relation to the lack of the culture of transparency in the administration of palliatives and stemming the tide. In the heat of the pandemic which was a national disaster, politicians adopted the politics of palliatives and exploited the vulnerability of the people to amass wealth. The distribution of the palliatives was politicized and not properly coordinated. Nigerian civil society and media organizations as part of their responsibility to make leaders accountable tracked funds allocated for some of the most vulnerable members of the society and frontline workers (Esamagu, Progress & Martha, 2020, 40-43).

Challenges Bedeviling Nigerian Civil Society

Irrespective of the contributions of civil society since the 1990s, they have been bedeviled with some challenges which largely inhibit them from performing their functions to the optimal level.

The military era was characterized with all forms of tyranny and abuses against Nigerians which these organizations represented. Though they survived, they suffered various forms of losses and thus learnt they must be vibrant, dogged in their approaches in order to compel the military administrations to be responsive and relinquish power. These military administrations employed various means to weaken and destroy these civil structures like preventing mass protest, pitting one group against another, incarceration of leaders and members of these groups, among others. The complete and comprehensive lack of conceptual clarity coupled with the fragility and fractured nature of the society at that time; it suggested that the struggle would take time to achieve any meaningful results (Matthew, 1999, p.217). The organization and strengthening of civil society became problematic during the military regimes as they destroyed the middle class along the intellectuals who constituted a major component of the class, in essence, they destroyed the bureaucracy. There was also the issue of fractionalization and fragmentation of these groups and their co-option by dictatorships which accounted for regime legitimacy (Matthew, 1999, p. 281-282).

Most civilian leaders behave and conduct their activities as if the country still operates a military system of government. These leaders hardly listen to the yearnings of the people which the civil society represents. In the period under consideration, the government was known for the use of police force to compel the people to discontinue whatever action they embarked on, for example the 2020 #EndSARS movement, which was against police brutality and government's inability to reform the police. At other times, due to information received by the government, they prevented public protest from taking place. In most cases, the use of maximum force was employed to dissuade people from gaining access to venues of planned protest (Popoola, 2011, p. 110). The aforementioned is an attestation of government's intolerance and resistance towards the civil society which the former in most cases regard as clog in the wheel of progress. This opposition threatens and hinders formidable nature of these groups and makes their actions less effective. They have also employed blackmail beyond intimidation against these organizations which criticizes their shady or corrupt activities.

The Nigerian civil society is also bedeviled with the challenge of finance; indeed it is considered a major encumbrance. Finance is very vital in prosecuting her activities because most of these organizations rely on foreign donors. In situations where these donors are not available to provide these funds, these organizations are constrained and find it almost impossible to execute their activities. CSOs accept and promote neo-liberal and global manipulative concepts without taking into consideration the negative effects (Chom, 2010, p.136). The dependence on these foreign donors is a signal that their activities are largely tied to the dictates and these organizations may not determine their agenda by themselves. For instance, during the period of the Covid-19 scourge, some activities of these groups had to be suspended because of the impact of the pandemic on donors which invariably affected these organizations. Members who pledged financial commitment were also affected due to the negative impact of the pandemic (Esamagu, Progress & Martha, 2020, p.42). Over the years, it has been considered an abnormality for the civil society to approach the government for assistance because their activities would be compromised and rendered ineffective (Popoola, 2011, p.111). It is a fact that finance is not only needed to provide empowerment like provision of assistance to the vulnerable, but also in employing the services of legal personnel, except where these personnel offer pro bono services.

In more recent years, civil society has been plagued with the problem of disunity because of its diversity. The disunity occurred as a result of religious and ethnic differences in these organizations coupled with their ideologies and economic interests. In other instances, inadequate opportunities for the masses, poor governance, corruption and greed have all combined to reduce the majority of our people to a life of despicable poverty (Matthew, 1999, p.232) which invariably has affected forming a united front. In most cases, they failed to unite against policies and programs of government due to the aforementioned. This was evident in the past public protests against increase in fuel prices, deregulation of the oil sector, End-Sars, strikes by different labor unions, among others. The differences which the leaders in these organizations failed to solve are responsible for the slow level of democratic progression in Nigeria and this has prevented the immense contributions of these groups to governance. Also, civil activism which used to be driven by ideals of freedom, national unity, prosperity and peace, is increasingly being driven by economic considerations, career ambitions and the dreams of big incomes if not profits (Chom, 2010, p. 135).

CONCLUSION

The paper considered the contributions as well as the challenges of civil society organizations (CSOs) to governance in Nigeria from the 1990s. It has been adduced that they became prominent from the aforementioned period, especially with the bane of leadership, politics and governance which characterized the era. Civil society groups were formed to deal with certain anomalies in governance and for which different governments were known. They include human rights abuses, poor leadership and governance/leadership deficit, abysmal level of growth and development, corruption, military dictatorship, electioneering issues, among others. Over the years, some of these organizations have been vociferous and proactive in the execution of their mandates, while ensuring that the government is accountable to the Nigerian populace. Regardless of the efforts of civil society in the past and with the abysmal performance of different administrations since the 1990s, there is a dire need for re-organization and strengthening of these groups to enable them serve as checks and balances on government's activities. The war against bad governance cannot be fought only by the leaders found culpable in the quagmire of corruption, but by civil society and non-governmental organizations such as Transparency International, Integrity, Civil Liberties Organization, Constitutional Rights Project, Concerned Professionals or professional bodies, Labor unions, among others. All hands must be on deck to support the continuous initiatives of civil society to checkmate government activities towards a sustainable democratic society.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data is available on request

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