CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRACTIC GOVERNANCE IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICA: THE CASE OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

That there is crisis of democratic governance in Africa is real and tangible. It is obvious and clear, even to the deaf and blind as it is to the common and uncommon Africans. The paper investigates the impact of civil society efforts at democratisation in Africa. It looks at the role of civil society in promoting good governance and argues that good governance is a cornerstone of reconstruction and sustainable development. The paper also gives a cursory look at the various arguments as to what constitute good governance and how civil society plays a role in ensuring its compliance.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, the ideal of democracy has become the only acceptable form of political system. Whether in liberal capitalist society or the totalitarian communist regimes, the need to meet the democratic requirement is the most popular ideal. Over the past twenty years, the idea of civil society has become more prominent in political and developmental parlance. This is mainly due to successive waves of democratisation, beginning from Latin America, the Central and Eastern European countries (CEE) and spreading across the developing world, including Africa. Political scientists and practitioners have come to realisation that it is not just state institutions and policy initiates that essentially ensures a high standard of democratic governance but also the civil society[1].

Civil society's visibility and influence in democratic governance has grown globally. Civil society actors have increasingly become vital forces in discourses, initiatives and programme that foster good governance. It is assuming a greater prominence as the role of the state is being redefined and public accountability becomes more important. The civil society organisations are gradually emerging as the effective pressure group that is capable of serving the dual role of collaborating with and facilitating the government sector in the development management process, and yet constituting a watchdog for diligence of the governance function. Being specific purpose and often specialised organisations, they are positioned to augment governments' capacity to develop people-tested policies, design and formulate realistic programmes and actions and implement development activities[2]. Helping civil society to contribute to the maturation of Africa's polity and economy is the continue aim of the African Charter for Popular Participation in Development and Transformation. This Charter views popular participation as "a fundamental right of the people to fully and effectively participate in the determination of the decisions which affects their lives at all levels and at all times[3].

The renewal of interest in democracy has thrust the concept of civil society into a prominent position in both social science theory and development policy. To the extent that popular forces have captured the political initiative from state elites, analysts now acknowledged the importance of civil society[4]. Common elements in civil society discourse are a critique of state domination of public life, a preference for reform over revolution, and a strategy for political change based on negotiations and elections. Since this discourse has emerged in Africa countries, we must now ask: Is there a civil society in Africa? What role, if any, can it play in democratisation?

In Nigeria, Africa most populous country, civil society organisations became very prominent in the 80s. One of the reasons for this noticeable visibility at this time was the need to protest against the negative consequences to the implementation of structural adjustment policies which were being introduced by the Nigerian state. Beyond this quest civil society associations in Nigeria dedicated themselves to the pursuit of human rights and democracy[5]. The civil society challenged government as much on its economic policies as on its social and political records. Among the prominent of these associations are the Civil Liberty Organisation (CLO), Academic staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Campaign for Democracy (CD) etc.

Today, Nigeria is ripe for increased civil society activity, especially as market forces continue to push and pull a plethora of demands[6]. During periods of military authoritarian, civil society organisations have served as mediating agents of repression. On the other hand, during periods of civilian rule, civil society has served as mediating agents of stability. Furthermore, the civil society has been at the fore front of democratic progression since independence. The civil society actors in Nigeria's nascent democracy have had a tumultuous path to securing political rights and civil liberties. Civil society organisations play an important role in the promotion of human rights and the sustenance of democratic governance in Nigeria.

As society's watchdog, it is the patriotic duty of the civil society to point to the inadequacies in the democratisation process. Hostility to opposition forces must also be shown to be an anti-democratic temperament. As noted by Ake[7], "the whole question of democracy implies precisely the assumption of differences to be negotiated, to be conciliated, to be moved into phases of higher synthesis.

This study is based on the assumption that under the emerging democratic dispensation, some Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are, (a) in general, playing a positive role particularly with regards to pressurising government to open more space for democratic governance, and (b) they could be useful arena for producing capable and democratic leaders who could strengthen the ranks of policy makers and political leaders. We certainly do not assume that CSOs will produce better leaders than political parties or other institutions or consider them as alternative fora whose function is to exclude and bypass political parties from producing political leaders. We view civil society simply as an additional arena for pushing the process of democratisation forwards and which has the potential of producing new leaders.

The paper investigates the impact of civil society organisations' efforts on democratic governance in the face of uncertainty in Nigeria. The study begins with a conceptualisation and brief literature review of civil society, democracy and governance. It gives an assessment of involvement of civil society in democratic governance. It also examines the growth and development of civil society and the challenges faced in its attempt to bring about responsive and accountable governance in Nigeria, while the last segment is the concluding aspect of the paper.

CIVIL SOCIETY

The concept of "civil society" has become a buzzword in recent times. Touted by political leaders, academics and activists as the key to political, economic and societal success, civil society's worth as a concept has soared high. The concept of civil society is not new. It has been contested within the political philosophy and social theory for hundreds of years. What is new is the increasing emphasis on the concept over the last decade. All manner of claims that have made or implied about the potential of "civil society" and, specifically civil society organisations (CSOs) to act as a force to reduce poverty, promote democracy and to achieve sustainable development[8].

Defining civil society and identifying which organisations fall within the framework of civil society continue to be a challenge, but one way to think of it is in terms of activities that are undertaken for the public good by groups or individuals in the space between the family, the state and the market. The difficulty of conceptualising civil society in Africa is that there is a tendency to focus on non-governmental organisations (NGOs), excluding groups and associations that reflect Africa's associational culture, e.g traditional governance structures.

The concept of civil society offers an opportunity to understand, and influence, the process of democratisation. The literature on civil society has burgeoned, with more than fifty items appearing over the last five years in Africa alone. Nevertheless, there is a danger that the rapid acceptance of the concept may simply be a fact. All too often the concept of civil society is used unreflectively. Civil society is defined here as a sphere of social interaction between the household and the state which is manifest in norms of community cooperation, structures of voluntary association, and networks of public communication[9]. The Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) of the African Union defines civil society as comprising social groups; professional groups; NGOs, Community-Based Organisations (CBOs), voluntary organisations; and cultural organisations, among other segments in which women, youth, children, national diasporas and elements of the private sector such as market women's associations and media are listed[10]. According to Nkwi[11], civil society could be define as an "arena where manifest social movement.... and civic organisations from all classes.... attempt to constitute themselves so that they can express themselves and in advance of their interest.

There are multiple understandings for civil society. For the purpose of this study, the definition of Diamond[12] is most insightful:

> [Civil society is] the realm of organised social life that is voluntary, self generating, self supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by the

legal order or set of shared rules … it involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passions, and ideas, exchange ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state, and hold state officials accountable. It is an intermediary entity, standing between the private sphere and the state.

According to this definition, civil society includes a wide array of organisations such as community groups or community-based organisations; non-governmental organisations (NGOs); labour unions; student and youth organisations; social movements; women's organisations; traditional leadership; charitable organisations; faith-based organisations; professional associations; and the media.

Beyond the wide operational definition of civil society as including each individual or group of individual acting to influence the public sphere, we need to identify the specific new aspects of civil society in contemporary global and national politics. Present discussion on civil society is related to its role on advancing citizen representation, the construction of collective values in the making of the political system and the ways by which citizens can influence the destiny of society through participation in the public sphere as opposed to the traditional forms of political representation[13].

Civil society includes those organisations that are separate from the legislative, administrative and judicial power of the state and these include labour unions, religious groups, cultural and educational associations, sports, clubs, student groups, political parties and ethnic groups adhering to their own rules of conduct and distinctive customs[14]. The activities and interest of associations which constitute civil society will always be major factors in the running of any state. All public institutions will, in making decisions and implementing these decisions, have to take into account the attitudes and activities of the institutions constituting civil society.

The idea of civil society and building stronger, wider participation in governance has been, like good governance, a dominant component of global political and development forums over the last two decades. The current interest on civil society came particularly as a result of the persistent push for growth of the formal sector to achieve a liberal economy. Although the role of civil society was not clearly articulated or emphasised in the initial packages of good governance, it was later endorsed in the re-conceptualised definitions of the concept. The term civil society has various origins, forms and denominations, notwithstanding the various definitions. It is basically understood as:

The realm of organised social life that is voluntary, self generating, self supporting, autonomous from the State, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules. It is distinct from society in general in that it involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passions and ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the State and hold State officials accountable[15].

Drawing on the definitions presented above, we can distinguish the institutions of civil society as;

The Norms of Civic Community: Trust, reciprocity, tolerance, and inclusion are the most important values for the construction of civil society. According to Bratton[16] trust is a prerequisite for individuals to associate voluntarily; reciprocity is a resource for reducing the transaction costs of collective action; political tolerance enables the emergence of diverse and plural forms of association. These values are promoted by citizens who actively seek to participate in public affairs.

The Structure of Associational Life: The most common organisational structure in civil society is the voluntary association, a group of citizens who come together by reason of identity or interest to pursue a common objective. There are various types of voluntary associations raging from the localised informal and apolitical on the one hand to national, legally registered, policy advocacy organisations on the other[17]. Whether or not they are explicitly oriented to civic or political functions, all types of voluntary association help to populate and pluralise civil society.

The Networks of Public Communication: Civil society is always stronger where there is a diversity of media outlets and political views. State or private monopolies of media ownership and public opinion are not conducive to civil society. In order to be political active, citizens require means to communicate with another and to debate the type of government they desire for themselves.

Historically, three traditions provided support for the development of civil society[18]. Firstly, the Mediterranean European tradition of the 16th Century Renaissance in Italy triggered the conceptualization of the three most fundamental values of civil society: "The Citizen's rights, peace and safety; the right to enjoy one's possessions and one's wealth; and one's right to have and defend one's convictions." These three values set the stage for the current debate on the relevance and meaning of civil society. Secondly, the continental European tradition characterized by the activities of the guilds (associations of craftsmen and merchants) in Germany provided a sufficient basis for the aggregation of private interests and attenuation of German authority, which later metamorphosed into a burgeoning associational life. Thirdly, the development of civil society was supported by the liberal Anglo-American tradition, which consists of;

❖ John Locke's philosophy of private property;
❖ Adam Smith's ideology of modernization and self regulation;
❖ Thomas Paine's conception of a limited government;
❖ Alexis de Tocqueville's historic visit to America during the 19th century, which trumpeted the burgeoning associational life Americans were enjoying at that time; and
❖ John Stuart Mill's juxtaposition of state and civil society in the context of complementarity, not dependence.

All helped in one way or the other to bring civil society into the socio-political discourse of the earliest part of the 19th century. To sum up this perspective, Lewis[19] postulated that the emergence of civil society is inextricably linked to the interrelated changes in the modern-legal-rational state, the economy and forms of social organizations. The idea of

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civil society came as a way of facilitating the growth of private enterprise, and to help ensure that the state does not suffocate the economy. The middle class that emerged out of the success of capitalism serves as a counter-hegemonic force on state power.
The broad context of civil society in contemporary democratic countries according to Edward[20] includes;

Civil Society as an Autonomous Actor: Much of the bibliography on civil society, especially that coming from the left, emphasises not only the autonomous of civil society from the market and the state, but also is different logic, one in which individuals communicate freely, giving voices to the excluded, without the barriers of economic and political power[21]. In fact, civil society organisations may be viewed as part of a continuum between the state and the market, rather than as a radical alternative to them. Moreover a feature of contemporary societies is the increased melting of frontiers between social subsystems (judiciary, economy, politics and science) rather than their increased autonomy. The image of an independent civil society was seen as an autonomous actor confronting the state. In contemporary Nigerian states there are no walls protecting the boundaries of civil society[22].

Civil Society as Agents of the Good Society: Civil society in the media has become synonymous with anyone that by definition struggle for the good society. This approach is based on a native Manichean view that social institutions can have an *a priori* moral nature, and that it can be taken for granted what the good precisely society, or, more precisely, who has the power to define what is good[23]. In this view, we will need to recognise as good as definition produced by any civil society actor, and they have various definitions of the good society, many of them contradictory.

Civil Society as Pillar of Democracy: Strengthening civil society as the path to consolidate democracy has become part of the credo of international agencies. Although strong civil societies are common in strong democracies, there is no direct link between civil societies and the democratisation of the state[24].

Civil societies have a dialectic relationship with the state, rather than being their opposite or opponent. The more societies mistrust state institutions, the more civil society will tend to be alienated and its actions will even erode the legitimacy of democratic institutions. On the contrary, the stronger the identification with the state's main institutions the more civic civil society organisations will become, to a point where the separation between civil society and the state's basic institutions will be almost effaced.
Only under a democratic state, civic oriented civil societies flourish, but civil societies can also beget undemocratic groups. This is particularly in the context of weak or corrupt states like Nigeria.

DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE
Democracy as a concept is one of the most striking features of contemporary politics. There are no people or nation states nowadays that do not practice democracy or claim democracy. Democracy is cherished and claimed by many all

over the world. Even the die-hard dictators verbally associate themselves with democracy so as to bring some form of recognition and legitimacy to their regimes[25]. However, in an attempt to conceptualize the concept, it would be appreciated that democracy is a very loaded concept whose entire essence cannot be captured by a singular school of thought. In fact, it means different things to different people. In contemporary world politics democracy has become a significant concept, which most nation in the world claiming to adhere to the broad principles of democracy. However, there exist significant diversities and contradictions among nations describing themselves as democratic in the modern world. This has made democracy increasingly difficult to define. It is in light of this difficulty that Crick[26] has this to say about democracy;

> *It is perhaps the most promiscuous word in the world of public affairs. She is everybody's mistress and yet somehow retains her magic even when her lover sees that her favours are begin, in his light, illicitly shared by many others. Indeed even amid our pain at being denied her exclusive fidelity, we are proud of her acceptability to all sorts of circumstances, to all sorts of company*.

Democracy in the classical sense as Ake[27] brilliantly argues is a concept that is uncharacteristic precise. It simply connotes popular power. It is not about delegated authority, or representative government, but about popular expression of power by the people. Democracy is the best system of government ever evolved by human being. It is a form of government in which citizens in a state have political investments of political participation and trust[28]. In the view of Omole and Olukotun[29], democracy is all about giving opportunity to virtually all individual to partake in decision making on issues concerning their lives as member of the society. In their opinion, most writers on democracy put on high premium on the participation of the citizens in managing their affairs. This definition in the view of Aliagan[30] contains one basic ingredient of democracy, which is freedom to participate in government. This freedom encapsulates other rights of the citizenry in government; namely, freedom from want and ignorance, equality, justice and fairness, respect for the rule of law, promotion and defense of human rights, creation of appropriate political machinery, sustenance of political communication to create thrust and confidence among the rulers and the ruled, accountability of leadership to the followership, decentralization of political power and authority, as well as periodic and orderly succession through free and fair election[31].

Democracy connotes a representative form of government with participatory decision-making and accountability and the guarantees of human and civil rights without whose exercise the political system of democracy could not function. It does not connote good government or efficiency of lack of corruption, except to the extent that periodic elections act as a rectifier of ineptitude or malice in government behaviour[32]. De Tocqueville[33] aptly summarized it thus:

> *Democracy does not provide a people with the most skilful of governments but is does that which the most skilful governments cannot do. It spread throughout the body social, a restless activity, super abundant force, and energy never found elsewhere, which, however little favour by circumstance could do wonders. Those are its true advantages.*

Turok[34] furthers explicate democracy as "a concept of society (which) is about how its resources are used and distributed. Democracy then becomes "a development strategy which will overcome underdevelopment and benefit the people". Democracy is a consensual system. Its legitimacy comes from the acceptance of the fairness and transparency of its procedures for elections to state offices and policy making[35]. To Appadora[36], democracy can be described as;

> *A system of government under which the people exercise the governing power either directly or through representatives periodically dated by themselves. This means that a state may in political science, be termed a democracy if it provides institutions for the expression and in the last analysis, the supremacy of the popular will on basic question of social direction and policy. Other factors, such as economic equality, fraternal feeling and the small size of the state, are desirable and make for its successful working, the optimum of democracy; political liberty is the indispensable minimum.*

Democracy means giving the citizens the opportunity to participate in their own governance, by allowing them to select their leaders through free and fair periodic elections and having an assembly through which their views and desire are articulated, aggregated and expressed for concrete action. In spite of its probable imperfections, there seems to be a general opinion that democracy is the political system that most comfortably fits the nation state[37]. Laski[38] puts it succinctly by arguing "Democratic government is doubtless a final form of political organization in the sense that men who have once tested power will not without conflict, surrender it. "No matter it imperfection therefore, democracy remains the best and most reliable form of human organization ever known to man.

Democracy, in its holistic sense, would, therefore, mean that the people not only participated effectively in the political affairs of their society, but also take an active part in the control and management of the economy. Thus, democracy refers to political and economic empowerment of the mass of the people. The foregoing definitions and other by right-living social scientist not mentioned here, stress free election, free assembly, government by the people, social equality, free market economy, as essential traits of democracy, that is, if the latter is looked at in its totality. They thus reflect the perception, which is used as a yardstick of assessing the extent to which a country is democratic.

Governance means the act and manner of managing public affairs. Through the process of governance, the essential link between the civil service and the state is established, giving a shape to the ways decisions are made for serving public interest. The constitution and the law provide the legal framework of governance. The institutions embodying the governance process include, the executive, judiciary, bureaucracy, political parties and interest groups. It is the moral principles and rule of conduct, having a bearing on both the legal framework and the institutions, which basically determine the nature of governance and, for that matter, the relationship between the government and the governed[39].

Indulging in a lengthy discourse on, or investigating detailed theoretical arguments surrounding the concept of good governance is beyond the immediate scope and purpose of this study. It would suffice to adopt a definition, which, more or less, incorporates the basic elements commonly shared by most existing definitions. Narrowly defined, governance means the exercise of political power to manage the affairs of state. In a broader sense, it can refer to the various processes relating to leadership, such as policy making, transparency, accountability, the protection of human rights and the relationship among the public, private and civil sectors in determining how power is exercised[40].

World Bank[41] simply described the concept of governance thus;

> *the exercise of political power to manage a nation's affairs. Because counter-veiling power has been lacking, state officials in many countries have served their own interests without fear of being called to account. In self defence, individuals have built up personal networks of influence rather than hold the all powerful state accountable for its systematic failure. In this way, politics becomes personalised, and patronage becomes essential to maintain power. The leadership assumes broad discretionary authority and losses its legitimacy.*

Governance, therefore, has undoubtedly emerged as one of crucial issues in many countries. We can plan, mobilize investments, train personnel, raise financial resources, induct the most modern technologies, and set for ourselves the goal of economic development, equity, social justice and better quality of life for all. We can time and again, reaffirm our resolution to wipe off the last teardrop from the eyes of the weakest and the humblest. We can evolve policies and programmes keyed into the goal of the state. But, it must be remembered that good governance is indispensable. It generates conditions for converting finer thoughts into concrete actions[42].

The major factors affecting governance are:
- ❖ Organizations such as governments, parliaments and the judiciary,
- ❖ Institutions, formal and informal rules, values and procedures used to manage human and economic resources,
- ❖ Interaction between institutions and organisations, and the capacity of government to formulate and implement policies.

The exercise of political authority is central to governance. It is therefore important to recognize that the rationale for government decision making is more often political and economic than anything else. Government directly or indirectly use authority to establish and maintain their grips on the formal and informal framework of institutions to regulate social and economic interaction.

Good governance is very sensitive to the expectations of the people and sincere efforts in this direction have already been initiated. Good governance is an overarching component of the agenda of government which according to Goel[43] has taken measures to make administration accountable, responsive, and transparent through;

❖ citizen charters to signify the visible commitment for quality service and attention to grievance;

❖ review of administrative laws and regulations for dismantling procedures and red tape by repeal or amendment of outdated and obsolescent laws, regulations and procedures that mystify and confuse the people,

❖ creating the environment to reap the benefit of IT by harnessing IT,

❖ setting up information and facilitation counters, and

❖ formulation of a Freedom of Information Bill.

Good governance, generally, encompasses a broad array of practices that maximise common good. Some of the attributes of good governance are democratic practices, rules of law, and respect for human rights

Over the past decade, the concepts of good governance and civil society participation have been assuming increasing priority in international discourse on politics and development across the world. There have been constant definitions and re-definitions – by institutions and individuals alike- as to what really constitutes good governance. Although by no means new, the term good governance featured prominently in the parlance of politico-economic discourse in the late 1980s. The World Bank, as the chief engineer of the good governance agenda defines it as the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development[44].

Good governance requires effective decentralised participation by the governed and their organised social partners, because governments and official institutions alone cannot manage the challenges of good governance and sustainable development. The officialdom lacks the human and physical capacities to organised and manage this requirement of grassroots' participation. Civil society organisations have the added attributes of watchdogs of governance, among other unique qualities[45]. By promoting civil society involvement, they ensure that citizens have the means to express their preferences, engage in dialogue with policy makers and influence public decisions. This ensures that the interests of ordinary people, including women, disadvantaged minorities, and children, the poor, professional associations, traditional groups and authorities etc are taken into account in policy decisions and resources allocation.

Good governance may be described as a general array of practices that maximise the common good of a country. According to the United Nations Development Programme[46] (UNDP) the major attributes of good governance include:

- ❖ Participation of citizens in the decision-making process of the country;
- ❖ Respect for the rule of law, which is the extent to which legal frameworks are fair and impartially administered;
- ❖ Transparency, with the free flow of information as its linchpin;
- ❖ Accountability where the government, the private sector and civil society organisations (CSOs) are accountable to the general public, as well as to institutional stakeholders.

The key components of good governance, according to the Bank, include effectiveness and efficiency in public sector management, accountability and responsiveness of public officials to the citizenry, rule of law and public access to information and transparency[47].

Governance has assumed a wider significance in the present changing scenario. With the state, the Market and the civil society as three critical players in facilitating the task of development, government has to perform a multi-dimensional restructured role. It has to harness the potentialities of markets, technology and people in exercising the task of governance.

In recent years, the concept of "democratic governance" has become increasingly prominent in the literature on development, and the buzzword "civil society" has become a key element of the post-military zeitgeist in the developing world. As increasing attention is paid to democratization, human rights, popular participation, regime stability, transparency, accountability, probity, privatization, and reducing the size of the state, the important role of civil society can no longer be ignored. The growing universal consensus on the relevance of civil society to the survival of democracy can be traced to phenomena ranging from the decline of the Western welfare state to the transformation of the former Soviet bloc to resistance against authoritarian regimes in the developing world[48].

Democracy and good governance are mutually self-reinforcing. Any democratic government that parts ways with good governance is not *strict sensu* a democratic government. The attributes of democracy are presumed to be facilitative of "good governance"[49]. The abiding parameters of good governance are accountability of government officials, transparency in governmental procedures, predictability in government behaviour and expectation of rational decisions, free flow of information and freedom of the press, decentralisation of power structure and decision making.

THE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

In seeking to explain the meaning of civil society in theoretical and practical terms, as well as its relevance to African reality, an attempt will be made here to go beyond the normative definition in the abstract world of politics and economics to embrace the empirical definition in the real world. This involves viewing civil society from a historical perspective. It is only through an examination of history that one can fully understand the

current environment within which civil society dwells and its implications for democratic governance.

In looking at the origin of civil society in Africa, Mahmood Mamdani's book entitled *Citizen and Subject* makes an interesting case; Mamdani[50] argues that the history of civil society in colonial Africa originated from colonialism with racism as the prevailing factor. Such a description of the situation, however, raises the problem of whether concepts such as civil society, which have evolved from within a specific historical context in Western society, can with relevance be applied to an analysis of contemporary Nigeria without forcing an ethnocentric perspective on the situation. For our purposes the development of civil society in Africa can be divided into four broad phases. In the pre-independence phase civil society groups began by advancing the economic well-being of their members. Many of them were tribal associations. The social and economic safety nets provided by the early civil associations contributed to the development of Africa's first middle class in the colonies. Drawing on the popular discontent of their people, the middle class exerted pressure on the colonial administrators. This was the case in most African countries during the struggle for independence. The period immediately after independence was one in which the distinction between civil society and the state was blurred, and relations generally good. But the marriage between CSOs – especially trade and student unions, bar associations, and religious leaders, on the one hand, and African governments, on the other – did not last. The new élites soon fortified themselves with the same powers and privileges accorded the former colonialists, excluding the citizens that gave their sweat and blood in the freedom struggle[51].

The emergence of civil society in Nigeria is still a nascent historical process, which according to Nkwi[52] can be divided into three stages: First, the period that preceded independence was informed by a national liberation struggle characterized by the burgeoning activities of nationalist movements that culminated in one of the fiercest battles against colonial domination anywhere in the world. On the basis of this single objective to get rid of colonial rule, it was relatively easy to mobilize support across internal ethnic and religious lines. From the start, nationalism in Nigeria was a political rather than a cultural, let alone an ethnic, movement. But after independence in 1960, the political competition that ensued created political problems that often impacted social cohesion adversely.

The momentum that the struggle had generated subsided, and the civil society movements that had sprung out of the struggle retreated into isolation and eventually dwindled along ethnic, religious, and regional lines. The next government of Sir Abubakar Tafewa Balewa, following in the traditions of the colonial administration saw little benefit in providing an enabling environment for the growth of private interests. As a result, these moribund movements were co-opted by the state and others atrophied. The second period of civil society growth can be traced back to the anti- Babangida and Abacha sentiments that grew out of excessive state repression and failed economic policies. Protests and demonstrations against the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) in the 1980s engendered another upsurge of civil society organizations (CSOs) in response to

the dehumanizing effects of the SAP on the Nigerian poor masses. This period was followed by what Agbaje[53] called "mobilization by design"—characterized by government involvement in social mobilization at both the elite and mass levels. This mobilization was foisted on Nigerians by the then-military dictator General Ibrahim Babangida. As Agbaje[54] has noted, "developing and nurturing pro-democratic values (at both the elite and mass levels) is likely to depend more on the growth of associational life and the further empowerment of civil society than on the actions of the state and its managers." Ihonvbere and his colleagues[55] argued, along the same lines that Babangida's government "was bent on imposing 'democracy' from the top and curtailing the country's burgeoning civil society. Indeed, the military and their advisers rejected the notion that liberal democratic traditions require at least an attempt to nurture the emergence of civic organizations." A case in point was the creation of a national Directorate of Social Mobilization and Political Education charged by Babangida's political bureau with the responsibility of bringing forth a new political culture that would be supportive of constitutional democracy. This was a classic case of what Lawrence Fuchs[56] calls "coercive pluralism."—An attempt to introduce a new political culture that will foster "discipline, loyalty, true patriotism, commitment, dedication and accountability to the Nigerian State." Evidence suggests that any attempt by the state to augment the mobilization processes will work only "outside of dictatorial contexts, where states can play a valuable role in developing a healthy civil society. They can do so by establishing clear and workable regulatory frameworks for non-governmental sectors, enacting tax incentives for funding of non-profit groups, adopting transparent procedures, and pursuing partnerships with non-governmental organizations."

At the end of the Abacha military dictatorship, Nigeria was a civil society that was activated and mobilised – vibrant and confident, and tested in the most trying periods of Nigeria's recent political experience. It was also a civil society that was bruised by the arrest and detention of its leaders, by the banning and repression of some of its organisations, by scant resources and low capacity, and by the creeping division in vision and strategy. This is a legacy that continues to hamper the inherent dynamism of Nigerian civil society under civilian rule. The growth and development of civil society in Nigeria has been intermittent. Once the assumed missions had been accomplished, civil society disintegrated or retreated into isolation, only to surge again when threats reappeared. The state has played an enormous role in the development of civil society in Nigeria through co-optation, manipulation and oppression since independence in 1960.

As Carver[57] puts it, "Nigeria has the advantages of vast natural wealth, a rich and politically sophisticated history, abundance of human talent and a vibrant civil society. Yet poor government has transformed it from a potential continental leader to a brutal and poverty-stricken pariah. Its administration is corrupt and inefficient. Its citizenry is plagued by violent crime. Religious divisions are increasing, as is ethnic fragmentation." In all countries in Africa, civil society groups have become more politically aware and willing to engage the state. In light of the above, it becomes imperative to rethink the importance of civil society to Nigeria's fledgling democracy at the dawn of the new millennium. The importance of civil society derives from the awareness that there is a

pressing need to democratize and stabilize the system of government in Nigeria. The need is pressing because for sustainable development initiatives to take root in Nigeria there must be a stable, democratic, and accountable government. The pivotal role of civil society in achieving this end can no longer be underestimated.

AN ASSESSMENT OF INVOLVEMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Further discussion is needed on the roles of civil society in democratisation and good governance. Because civil society manufactures political consent, it is the source of legitimation of state power. The right of any elite to exercise state power is ultimately dependent upon popular acceptance. This consensus is the key political resource for those who wish to rule is manufactured by the institutions of civil society. In this way, civil society serves the "hegemonic" function of justifying state domination[58]. As Putnam[59] has argued,

> *The key determinant of the success or failure of democratic reforms in a society is the character of its civic life. To create and sustain democratic institution, a society must possess a critical mass of citizens who are well educated about their rights, concerned about the long-term goals of the community as a whole, and are in constant social contact with each other, allowing a free exchange of ideas.*

A robust society is a clear indicator of strong democracy. Debates over the last decade have created polar, at times antagonistic relations between the state and civil society. Emanating from the neo-Gramscian literature of the 1980s, the state was perceived as a "hegemony protected by the armour of coercion", whereas civil society was perceived as the bearer of democratisation and the agents for setting limits on state power. Hence, a robust civil society came to constitute an essential pillar of a mature liberal democracy[60]. Moreover, civil society organisations have come to be viewed as the representatives of diverse and sectoral interest groups, widening access to and public participation in public institutions and process[61]. Recent debate on civil society in Africa points to the fact that this may be tantamount to adopting an impositional approach; can civil society play the same role in Africa as it has in Europe? Its role has been celebrated in Europe because it has enabled the common man to confront the state in its marginal as well as vital space. This cannot be done in the absence of a "civic" culture. Can such a culture be nurtured in Nigeria where because of the prevalence of the economy of affection, "invisible organisation" tends to promote a primordial consciousness as public morality? If civil society's contribution to the furtherance of democracy is crucial, then how can this society be nurtured in Nigeria? These questions are germane to the understanding of the involvement of civil society to democratic governance in Nigeria.

As observed by Mafunisa[62], current debates emphasize the importance of robust institutions of civil society in generating good governance and economic growth. The social constructionist view asks not only about the nature of the state but

also about class, development and societal context, as well as the fabric of civil culture and state-civil relations. The current democratic dispensation that started since 1999 in Nigeria had significant implications not only for state-civil society relations but also for civil society relations but also for civil society itself. Informed by the social movement literature, the expectation was that civil society would enter a period of demobilization after the institution of democracy and that the high levels of political mobilisation that characterised much of the late 1999 and 2000s would dissipate. The democratic functions of civil society seem long recognised. As Almond and Verba[63] conclude from the examination of the survey data from five nations: the organisational member, political or not, compared with the non member, is likely to consider himself more competence as a citizen, to be a more active participant in politics. The member, in contrast with the non member, appears to approximate more closely what we have called the democratic citizen. He is competence, active, and open with his opinions. The most striking finding is that any membership – passive membership or membership in a non-political organisation – has an impact on political competence, and thus on pluralism, one of the most important foundations of political democracy[64].

Civil society has yet another democratic function, that of facilitating democratic transitions. Montesquieu clearly believed from a theoretical perspective that civil society should function as a counterbalance to governments in order to inhibit their tyrannical tendencies; he also suggested that civil society actually did perform in this capacity[65]. This is enforced by the empirical finding by Inglehart[66] that organizational membership does show a statistically significant linkage with changes in levels for democracy from 1990 to 1999. Weigle and Butterfield's[67] case studies of the democratic transitions in the Eastern European countries and in the former Soviet Union also show the important role played by the civil society.

Nie, Powell and Prewitt[68] also investigate the democratic functions of civil society in terms of its effects on political participation. The density and complexity of economic and secondary organizations increases, greater proportions of the population find themselves in life situations that lead to increased political information, political awareness, sense of personal political efficacy, and other relevant attitudes. These attitude changes, in turn, lead to increases in political participation. On how the institution of civil society contributes to democratisation, USAID's Centre for Development Information and Evaluation (CDIE) provides a useful list of three "demand-related activities". First, civil actions widen participation by mobilizing marginalised groups into public life, especially the poor, women and minorities. Second, civil society protects citizens against excesses by the state by acting as a buffer against possible predatory behaviour and by monitoring public performance on human rights abuses and corruption. Thirdly, civil society helps to guarantee political accountability, the "distinctive hallmark of democracy". It does so because civil institutions perform

functions of communication, representation, and negotiation through which citizen preferences are heard and acted upon[69].

The institution of civil society is an important aspect of democratisation process because it provides a vital link between citizens and the state. It also provides an environment that can be used to enhance community cohesion and decision making. Information is vital to civic participation and also encourages its development. When people get better informed, they are most likely to participate in policy discussions and communicate their ideas and concerns freely. The development of an informed citizenry is one of the basic functions of civil society.

Civil society plays a crucial role in the consolidation of democracy. At the deepest levels of political culture, civic institutions include the political norms and rules that underpin the rules of democratic competition. Democracy depends upon attachments among citizens to a matrix of civil liberties which they are willing to defend against encroachment by the executors of state power at a more concrete level, civil society is the arena of voluntary associational life. A healthy democracy is founded on a plurality of organised social groups through which citizens learn the arts of associating together, practice the procedures of democratic governance, and express group interest to policy makers[70]. It is through civic organisations that people participate in politics and development. Civil society also provides networks of communications among citizens, and between citizens and the state.

The impact of civil society in governance according to Adablah[71] may be summarised as follows;

- ❖ government institutions become more transparent, accountable and more responsive to the people;
- ❖ People have greater access to improved government information
- ❖ More people vote in local and national elections and legislatures become more representative;
- ❖ Levels of poverty fall through increased empowerment, which result from the above gains.

The reinvigoration of civil society as a fore for democratic governance over the long term is a major item for the post-transition agenda. As instruments of political consent, the institutions of civil society can either provide political legitimacy of governments, or withhold it. Any political legitimacy won at the poll is a scarce resource which is easily dissipated and must be constantly reviewed. Governments that are attempting a crash programme of marketisation are essentially needy of institutions of civil society that can educate citizens, build support, and divert opposition into constructive channels. On the whole, it is apparent that democracy can strive only within an enabling environment. That is, its nurturance would require not only the growth but also the deepening civil society, good governance and the strong media. Given the organic link between these concepts, all of them require the same emphasis. However, in the Nigerian context, they would have to be adapted with a view to catering to the Nigerian

realities. If we are to achieve genuine transformation of the Nigerian polity and society and ensure that it is not business as usual, the Nigerian people must actively participate in the development process while civil society organisations must facilitate the process.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE CHALLENGES OF RESPONSIVE AND ACCOUNTABLE GOVERNANCE

Civil society has its pitfall as exposed by the Strategic Planning Workshop on Democratic Development in Nigeria. The 1997 report of the proceedings on the State of Civil Society revealed major constraints on civil society in Nigeria. There is much wasted and/or inefficient utilization of resources and dissipation of energy in the ways in which many Nigerian civil groups have been operating.

Perhaps one of the major issues confronting the present democratic government in Nigeria is how to promote the sustenance and content of democracy and not just its infrastructure or form. The debate on the involvement of the civil society in governance and the entire political process has been on for some time. At the centre of the civil society debate is the fundamental problem of the social sciences; by which process capitalist democratic societies, in spite of their natural tendency to create possessive individuals, produce institution that aim towards altruistic behaviour, in which people are ready to invest their personal resources and even their life, in advancing freedom and solidarity[72]. The vibrancy of the debate is such that conservative establishments such as the Bretton Wood Institutions have lent their weight in support of the need to bring the "state closer to the people". The advocacy in support of the involvement of civil society is partly based on the failure of the state, especially in developing countries, to deliver its promise to the people. The neo-colonial state in Nigeria, a product of the colonial project, is particularly notorious for the abdicating its responsibility to the people[73].

Accordingly, civil society is attracting a new level of scrutiny in its role as a major public actor. It is forced to grapple with both external and internal challenges, from those who are seeking to make civil society stronger and more credible, as well as from those who question its right to play certain roles. In several cases, the experience of the participatory process of civil society in governance has encountered major constraints, these according to Adablah[74] includes;

❖ Conflicting interest, differing bargaining power and limited thrust among stakeholder groups that resulted in disorganisation of the process
❖ Diverse perceptions by different stakeholders concerning the participation process and the possible stalemate in required actions.
❖ Insufficient sharing of information between participants in the process, resulting in restrained synergy.
❖ Lack of political will among government agents to allow wide participation because they fear loss of power or influence.
❖ Limited time, capacity and finance
❖ Consultation fatigue.

In addition, other persisting challenges facing civil society in Nigeria, includes, the challenges of power and power imbalances within civil society. The sector is vibrant and extremely diverse. It encompasses both major transnational NGOs with organisations with multi-million dollar operating budgets and tiny citizen-based organisations with highly constrained resources, access to information and capacity. It embraces highly structured groups such as trade unions alongside loose issue-based social movements. While this diversity adds to the sector's richness, it also throws up fundamental questions about whose voices are heard and in which venues, how resources are accessed and distributed, and who is speaking for whom.

The narrow focus on NGOs also constitutes a challenge. The growth of NGOs within civil society has resulted in the tendency for NGOs to be seen as representing CBOs in general. This narrow categorisation of civil society often sidelines the contributions of important actors such as CBOs and traditional rulers. Furthermore, there is weak collaboration among civil society. While there are networks and umbrella organisations functional in the country, competing over donor funding among network members fosters adversarial relationships rather than cooperation and sharing information. This results in duplication of efforts and initiatives[75].

The challenge internal to civil society is about bringing narrow interests and broader goals. Many civil society actors are committed to advancing a specific issue, whether this involves protecting, reinforces, promoting fair labour practices, or advancing women's rights. While recent civil society activity has been noteworthy for the alliances that have been formed among groups with different areas of interest, there remains a type of "silo mentality" which prevents CSOs from working across areas of speciality toward common goals.

Another challenge is one that emanates from outside civil society. For instance, allegation has been made that citizen activism threatens to undermine democratic systems by "short circuiting" established procedures for decision making. This is a critique that civil society vehemently rejects. An active, engaged citizenry is essential for a healthy democratic society. Civic activism complements democratic practices and makes them more effective by drawing citizens more fully into public life and providing a constant check on official accountability. Also the challenge of legitimacy and the related issues of transparency, representation and accountability constitute another problem. The challenge to civil society legitimacy comes from many quarters. They are often voiced by national political leaders, and occasionally by prominent voices at global institutions. It is frequently said that civil society groups do not represent the views of everyone but themselves and that if they are accountable at all, it is usually "upward" to their founders, rather than "downward" to those they purportedly serve. But despite the challenges enumerated above, some civil societies have been very successful in opening up space for democratic governance in Nigeria. Indeed these few CSOs

make up for the large number of CSOs that have failed, for various reasons, to contribute towards the democratisation process. However it is only fair to point out that a vast number of small, rural based CSOs are simply concerned with development projects and improving the material well-being of their respective constituencies rather than in opening up democratic space.

The contributions of civil society to responsive and accountable governance in Nigeria remain largely unknown due to the absence of a documentation culture among CSOs. CSOs are mainly activity driven and rarely take time to reflect and document their achievements and challenges.

WHAT NEED TO BE DONE

This paper has show that civil society plays an important role in democratic governance and sustainable development. Though, this is not an exhaustive study, it provides a snapshot of the diversity and breath of civil societies involvement. The study has shown that governance provides the most practical machinery for grassroots' participation in national development. The study revealed a dire shortage of human and physical capacity for a functional decentralisation. No amount of intervention by civil society will equate the shortfall, which is a recurrent problem. Therefore governments at all levels must therefore make effort to commit resources to decentralisation programmes. There is serious need for capacity building of CSOs operatives and leaders in effective accountable management and in democratic practices especially with regards to the procedures of electing and in their succession. There is need to strengthen the capacity for civil society to contribute more effectively in sector and microeconomic policy dialogue, including determining the initiatives. However, it has been observed that civil society is still viewed with suspicion in certain areas, and is therefore not fostered by some governments. This attitude must be addressed. In addition, there is a need for a clear policy framework between the governments and civil society. Needless to say, this relationship is key to democratic governance. What civil society organisations need are legitimization, recognition, consultation, dialogue and political space in which to develop.

As this study demonstrates, Nigeria will not be able to sustain democracy nor revamp its ailing economy until there is an improvement in its devastated civic infrastructure. This can be accomplished by grassroots mobilization through social engineering, crosscutting social ties, and a strong and vibrant civil society that will usher in a democratic cultural ethos. Since it is almost certain that the predatory Nigerian state is not committed to a democratic agenda of development, civil society need to undertake a robust programme of advocacy geared towards sensitizing the people themselves on the need to confront and engage the process of governance as active participants in order to ensure that they are not short-changed by those who claim to be representing them. They need to go beyond mere rhetoric and transcend the agenda of donors who often one part of the problems militating against the well-being of the poor and disadvantaged in society. They should engaged in what

Walter Rodney[76] calls "grounding with my people" and act as what the French would call "animateur", by working in close association with Community Based Organisations (CBOs) to mobilize the people to demand for, and exercise their rights to participate in the development process[77]. This was the point emphasised by Rasheed[78] in that civil society has an historic role to educate the poor about their democratic rights, convince them of the value and benefits of exercising these rights – particularly the linkage between political and economic gains and assist them in practising these rights. To enhance the role of civil society in promoting good governance, it is important the governments should formulate constitutions providing for, among others, a Bill of Rights, the rule of law and state institutions supporting constitutional democracy. The political, economic, social, cultural and technological challenges facing the country can only be solved through effective governance. The strengthening of democratic institutions is essential to addressing these challenges. This, however, is only possible if civil society is allowed to participate in the process of governance, including policy making. Governments should provide a democratic environment conducive to the functioning of civil society. For civil society organisations to be effective, they must be independent, capacitated, recourse and legitimate.

To promote good governance, governments should strength citizens' involvement. For partnership to be effective the government should adhere to a code of good conduct vis-a-vis the funding community sectors and voluntary organisations, accountability for public functions, acquiring access to information and communication at all levels and evaluate the degree of progress made by these organisations to ensure effectiveness. In addition, both governments and advocacy CSOs should stop adopting hostile and confrontation attitudes towards each other. They should try to work out a consensus on the process for democratic change within a clear government policy frameworks towards civil society; government should remove all legal and bureaucratic constraints on setting up civil society institutions. Involve civil society in policy process, agenda setting, and service delivery as well as the recognition of civil society as partners in development.

If the civil society organisations are genuinely concerned about the plight of the people, this is the least they can do. They should not pretend that they can speak for the people; rather they should speak and work with them. For relevance and in order for people who have become victims of development not equally regard the civil society as collaborators with the state actors, the civil society should consider addressing themselves to the issues raised in this paper. These issues equally represent an advocacy and a challenge to the civil society organisations.

Political sociologist Shils[79] described civility as "the most fundamental concept for understanding how societies are shaped and organized and, hence a distinctive rules of etiquette and standards of behaviour that render the behaviour of individuals more or

less predictable and set the tone for public life." A strong and well-respected civility betokens an integrated and coherent society. Moreover, a society's level of civility determines how democratic its political culture is. Pluralistic democracy requires the highest degree of civility. As Lucian Pye[80] puts it:

> *When civility totally breaks down, society ceases to exist. When civility is strong and widely upheld, the society will be integrated and coherent. Civility is critical not just for private, personal relationships, but also for relationships of power and authority. Since parliamentary democracy cannot operate without respect for rules of civility, civility is the measure of democratic political culture: High civility means smooth democracy; low civility means repressive rule to keep people in line. Pluralistic democracy, especially when it involves rival moral concepts, requires an exceptionally high level of civility.*

In the context of contemporary Nigeria, it is impossible to conceive of true democracy without a genuine national unity. This necessitates a new national project that will unite the country without regards to ethnic origin, religious background, or political affiliation. Civic nationalism—the notion that national identity is a matter of belief, not blood—should form the basis of such a new national project. In the long run, this will engender the most needed foundation for social interaction: the "Nigerian creed." It is only through such a national creed that the stage for mixing and mingling of different cultural traditions that cut across long-standing regional, religious, ethnic, or partisan cleavages will be set.

CONCLUSION

Democratization may be in vogue in Africa, but strictly adherent to the tenets of democracy is not yet a reality in Nigeria. One possible explanation is the weakness of civil society. If civil society is strengthened to perform its democratic roles, civil society can exert pressure on the state and promote democratic development and consolidation. The creation of a vibrant civil society therefore is critical for the effective performance of democracy and must be linked inextricably to the social, cultural, and historical institutions of a society. There are challenges and problems in the ongoing efforts aimed at improving governance and economic management through civil service participation. Still, with all their weaknesses, debilitations, and divisions, civil society organizations remain Nigeria's best resource for sustaining democracy. The notion that government is the panacea for all of Nigeria's economic woes is fraught with uncertainty. Neither the private nor the public sector alone can provide solutions for the deepest problems confronting the country. The institutions of family, neighbourhood, churches, synagogues, and charitable and voluntary organizations need to be strengthened if democracy is to be consolidated. Our best and perhaps only chance to bring into being a more sustainable peace, economic development, and stable government in Nigeria is to give civil society a greater role in governance.

Conclusively, though there are challenges of distilling the real civil society organisations from the port folio type, or the family business groups, but we can say with conviction that there are sincere groups in this country committed to

social change. We must therefore seek out one another; build synergies towards achieving civil society organisation as a recognised force for change in Nigeria. To conclude on this issue, the potentials of civil society in enhancing democratic governance is real, positive and considerable. This potential is being actualised as time passes and especially if government adopt a clear policy framework and the civil society adopt a consensual approach, practice democracy, and undertake capacity building. Civil society can be central player in improving democratic life but they need to reconnect to the local population, developing projects and agendas linked to their context, going beyond the declaratory stand for universal agendas and values.

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