

# **THE FUTURE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN NIGERIA: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

**By**

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**A KEYNOTE ADDRESS DELIVERED AT THE CLOSE OUT PROGRAMME OF SCALE TITLED SCALE LEGACY SUMMIT: CELEBRATING OUR IMPACT, OPENING NEW DOORS HELD AT NAF CONFERENCE CENTRE, ABUJA ON 25TH SEPTEMBER 2024.**

## Protocols

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The challenge of development is arguably one of the greatest challenges that has dominated world history. Human beings have always been concerned about how to improve their condition of living and better confront the forces of nature and the environment. Over the years, a lot of progress has been made on how to deal with the challenges of development and improve the standard and condition of living of human beings. Development theorists and practitioners are agreed that partnership among government, private sector and civil society is the most effective way to achieve sustainable economic and social benefits and achieve the sustainable development goals.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, it has been recognised that the three sectors: Government, private sector and civil society have great roles to play in the development of society and that this needs to be done in partnership.<sup>2</sup> This is what is called the trisector model. But it must be understood that **the three sectors have different motivations, approaches and experiences**. The motivation for government is provision of services to all citizens; the motivation of the private sector is profit while the motivation of civil society is the protection of specialised groups and the vulnerable (the poor, persons with disability, persons living with HIV/AIDS, women, children, trafficked persons etc).

The approach of government is utilisation of bureaucracy with emphasis on the political rather than the economic and rational. Therefore, decision making is dominated by administrative or satisficing decision-making approaches rather than rational decision-making approaches. The approach of the private sector is dominated by economics and market forces influenced by supply and demand. The approach of civil society is to target special groups such as the poor and advocate for grants and subsidies.

**The experiences of the three sectors are also different.** In government, we have experienced inefficiency in providing services and poor performance of public enterprises even in sectors where the private sector is making huge profits. In the private sector, we have seen that the private sector has been unable to become the engine of growth in Africa. Instead, they have remained parasitic and dependent on government contracts. In the civil society, we have seen documented experiences of the poor and vulnerable; the commitment, knowledge and resilience of the poor with several good examples of pilots that are never scaled up.

The challenge of the trisector model is that the motivation, approaches and experiences of the three sectors are changing with time. Across the world, there is elite capture of government, and the motivation is no longer primarily the provision of services to citizens. Similarly, there is increasing number of charlatans and criminals masquerading in the civil society sector thereby spoiling the good work of genuine CSOs. The approach of government is changing with increasing partnership with the private sector known as Public-Private Partnership (PPP). The approach of civil society is changing with inclusion of economic models and private for-profit organisations engaging in core civil society work.

The inefficiency experienced by government in providing services and poor performance of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) is challenging the main focus of government. The experience of private sector with privatisation in Nigeria in asset stripping and inability to invest and turn around privatised companies is challenging the role of private sector as engine of growth in Africa. In the civil society, we have seen resilience of committed organisations despite working in a challenging environment and constriction of the civic space.

With the failure of government and the focus of the private sector on profit, there is increasing role for civil society organisations across the world.

In this keynote address, we look at the future of civil society in Nigeria against the background of the opportunities and challenges.

## **2. CIVIL SOCIETY IN NIGERIA**

It has been documented that civil society organisations are agents of development in any nation and the transformation of any society or system, particularly in developing societies like Nigeria which depend on the effectiveness and efficiency of its CSOs.<sup>3</sup> Civil Society Organisations in Nigeria have historically contributed to promoting development through advocacy for social change, providing services especially of underserved groups, fostering participatory development and holding government to account. From grassroots organisations to large national organisations, CSOs contribute to various aspects of development in Nigeria including education, healthcare, governance, livelihood, rule of law, peace and conflict transformation, migration, human rights, environmental protection etc. It has been documented that CSOs in Nigeria have played key roles in humanitarian assistance; influencing policy towards more pro-people legislation; reshaping the attitudes of traditional and cultural practices; improving the public awareness of human rights; providing economic

support for internally displaced persons and communities. <sup>4</sup> In addition, CSOs contributed to the attainment of independence and campaigning against military rule that led to transition to civil rule in 1999. Moreover, CSOs in Nigeria are also an important provider of employment opportunities. Finally, CSOs in Nigeria contribute to harmony and stability in society by addressing normative issues that Government and private sectors have neglected such as human rights, gender equality and women empowerment, social inclusion, credible, free and fair elections, vote buying, conservation, persons with disability, etc.

### **3. OPPORTUNITIES FOR CSOs IN NIGERIA**

There are several factors which provide significant opportunities for the growth and impact of civil society in Nigeria. **First and foremost is the existence of development partners who are willing to engage, support and provide funding for civil society efforts.** Without development partner support, civil society growth and impact will be limited in Nigeria. **Secondly, increasing failure of government** to provide for the security and welfare of citizens and inability of the private sector to become the engine of growth and development present more opportunities for CSOs. **Thirdly, CSOs have gathered a lot of experience which can be deployed to affect the development trajectory of Nigeria.** We have learnt about drivers of change in Nigeria such as law, economy, institutions, bureaucracy, CSOs, media etc. We have learnt about the power of networking and coalition to push for change. We now know that for advocacy to work require broad based support by government (including internal champions), private influencers, civil society, opinion leaders and the media. We have tried several advocacy methods including evidenced based advocacy, political economy analysis and politically smart advocacy. Our networking and coalition formation have passed through different phases from traditional coalition with rigid structures and officials to a more loose coalition in the form of clusters and cohorts. We have learnt that evidence-based advocacy alone in Nigeria does not translate to adoption by government. We now know that we require multiple strategies including working with reform champions in government backed by a movement of people.

**Fourthly, the recent initiative of Self-regulation by CSOs in Nigeria has the potential to address the hostile environment and change the perception of Nigerians about CSOs.** Over the years, the need for Self-regulation has been recognised globally. In Nigeria, there have been several efforts and processes since the 1990s to enable self-regulation. In other words, the efforts have been on for over thirty years. But the formation of the

CSO Accountability and Transparency Initiative (CATi) and CSO National Self-Regulation Council (CNSRC) and the current effort at self-regulation is a culmination of past efforts. In the current renewed efforts, the CNSRC has established four modalities for self-regulation in Nigeria namely:

1. **Working group** to facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration among CSOs.
2. **Information Service (CSO Atlas)** to promote transparency and accountability through data publication.
3. **Code of Conduct** to establish minimum standards for CSO behaviour and
4. **Self-Assessment** to enable internal evaluations of CSO operations.

If this is well implemented, it will change the narrative of CSOs in Nigeria.

**Another opportunity for civil society organisations in the idea of decolonisation.** Development work should be guided by a decolonization agenda that addresses the negative impact of colonialism, which altered power dynamics, legitimized Western knowledge, and marginalized indigenous cultures. Decolonization theory challenges colonial perspectives, advocating for alternative development strategies that preserve cultural identity, promote indigenous education, and ensure equitable power distribution. For Nigeria, this means reshaping power dynamics, moving away from aid dependency, and indigenizing social work practices. Social development workers should incorporate local knowledge, respect community values, and employ participatory methods to create inclusive, rights-based development. Decolonization involves rediscovery, recovery, visioning, and action phases, aiming to empower marginalized groups and challenge Eurocentric methods.

**Furthermore, the realisation of organising through social movement is another opportunity for civil society in Nigeria to increase its impact.** Social movements are organized groups that aim to create, resist, or voice concerns about societal changes, often emerging from systemic inequalities, deprivation, or widespread discontent. Examples include the anti-tobacco movement, the Arab Spring, and the anti-apartheid movement. Modern social movements leverage social media for mobilization, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) has the potential to enhance this. In Africa, historical and recent movements like #EndSARS, #FeesMustFall, and #ArewaMeToo have successfully influenced policy and societal change by addressing issues such as police brutality, educational costs, and sexual violence.

**Finally, the localisation agenda being pursued by development partners has the potential to strengthen CSOs in Nigeria.** The idea of local leadership is to shift funding and decision-making power to people, organisations and institutions that are driving change in their own countries.<sup>5</sup> The localisation agenda is a good initiative. But the progress has been very slow. One of the leading donor organisations pushing the localisation agenda is USAID. USAID has the target of giving a quarter of its funding to local organisations by 2025 and half by 2030. But the percentage of funding going directly to local partners from USAID decreased from 10.2 percent in 2022 to 9.6 percent in 2023.<sup>6</sup> This needs to be reversed. There is the need for increasing direct funding to local partners and not decrease. Donor organisations need to take more smart and disciplined risks to make the localisation agenda succeed.

#### **4. CHALLENGES OF CSOs IN NIGERIA**

In spite of the huge opportunities for CSOs in Nigeria, they have faced monumental challenges. **First and foremost, CSOs have operated in a very hostile environment.** The operating environment of CSOs in Nigeria is hostile, harsh to survival and sustainability. The normal organisation cycle of inception, growth, maturity and decline is very short in Nigeria. Many civil society organisations that were thriving in the 1980s have declined in visibility, relevance and impact. Many others that were formed in the early 2000s on return to civil rule are either stagnant or struggling. Very few civil society organisations are over 20 years in Nigeria and are doing well.

**Secondly, there is poor public perception of CSOs in Nigeria. Many Nigerians think that CSOs get easy money from donors without any form of legitimacy, transparency and accountability.** They feel that CSO leaders travel around the world with easy money without any form of accountability. This is why from time to time, legislators introduce “NGO bill” to control and regulate CSOs. This perception is completely false. The driving force for NGO bill in Nigeria is ignorance by many Nigerians using the worst examples of “uncivil society” as the norm rather than the exception. The response of civil society is usually massive mobilisation against the bill. After defeat of the bill, the sector goes back to business as usual without strategic attempt to deal with the challenges of the sector such as addressing the ignorance and misconception of the sector by citizens; declining capacity within the sector; absence of code of ethics and self-regulation for the sector and presence of bad eggs and political jobbers who

take on partisan issues in the name of the sector. There are strict financial policies and guidelines that govern the CSO sector. CSOs are more accountable than the government and private sector in Nigeria. Meanwhile, CSOs are subjected to several regulatory framework in Nigeria including but not limited to the following:

- I. CAC- Annual filling to Corporate Affairs Commission
- II. FIRS – Federal Inland Revenue Service
- III. FCTIRS or State IRS
- IV. SCUML- Special Control Unit Against Money Laundering
- V. NHIS- National Health Insurance Scheme
- VI. NSITF-Nigerian Social Insurance Trust Fund
- VII. NHF- National Housing Fund
- VIII. FRC- Financial Reporting Council
- IX. PENCOM- National Pension Commission

All of these are in addition to strict reporting requirements and guidelines from donor agencies including external audit. Indeed, the CSO sector in Nigeria is overregulated. In spite of this over-regulation, there is a section of the population that want more regulation of CSOs. The aim of the people is to strangle the CSO sector mainly as a result of ignorance of the operation of CSOs. It is hopeful that the recent self-regulation initiative will address this challenge.

**Thirdly, after the initial euphoria on return to civil rule in 1999, there is constriction of civic space.** Different scholars have defined civic space in different ways. It has been defined as “the public spaces where citizens can freely exercise their human rights.”<sup>7</sup> It has also been defined as the set of legal, policy, institutional and political conditions non-governmental actors need to access information, express themselves, associate, organise and participate in public life.<sup>8</sup> The term has also been used to describe those human rights which facilitate the ability of individuals and groups to participate in the polity and governance of their country.<sup>9</sup> It is the freedom and means to speak, access information, associate, organise, and participate in public decision making.<sup>10</sup> Civic space is essential to the healthy functioning and development of any society and it is a precondition for accountable governance and social justice. In the past two decades, there is a global trend of constriction of the civic space. There is a global clamp down on civil society which has deepened and accelerated in recent years.<sup>11</sup> Studies show that the civic space has been shrinking in Africa in the last decade.<sup>12</sup> In Nigeria, at the return of civil rule in 1999, the civic space expanded. As from 1999, government engaged civil society in increasing

measures. Civil society representatives were included in some constitutional and legal bodies such as the Police Service Commission and NEITI. President Olusegun Obasanjo had summit exclusively with civil society between 1999 and 2007. President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan had summit with civil society between 2010 and 2015. But Buhari's eight years saw the decline in engagement with civil society. In the last decade, there is documented evidence of attempts by federal and state governments in Nigeria to silence activists and dissenting voices while imposing restrictive measures, laws, and policies to disrupt the legitimate operations of civil society organisations and human rights defenders.<sup>13</sup> The governments make deliberate and consistent efforts to weaken or silence institutions or individuals demanding political accountability or challenging official impunity. Meanwhile, research has shown that closing civic space affects development outcome by enabling land and natural resource grabbing, abuse of labour or other rights of marginalised and disempowered groups and hampering economic growth and inclusive development.<sup>14</sup> It is important to recognise the emergence of some actors within the civic space which has been called "uncivil society" who are the "terrorists, criminals, drug dealers, traffickers in people and others who undo the good works of civil society...(and) thrive in countries with weak laws and institutions."<sup>15</sup> Although these groups exist outside government and private sector, they cannot be regarded as civil society properly so called. They are criminal organisations and the appropriate response is prosecution and not more regulation of CSOs.

**Finally, there is inadequate funding for CSOs in Nigeria.** Many CSOs in Nigeria operate with limited resources and face challenges in sustaining their activities. There are many small CSOs run by young, energetic, enthusiastic and creative people but have not been able to secure any funding because of the dynamics of fund raising in the sector. There is the need to create a mechanism for such groups going forward.

## **5. CONTRIBUTION OF THE SCALE PROJECT**

The goal of the Nigeria Strengthening Civic Advocacy and Local Engagement (SCALE) project is to strengthen the financial, management and advocacy capacity of Nigeria's local civil society organisations (CSOs) and business membership organisations (BMOs) to create a more accountable, transparent, peaceful and democratic Nigeria with more effective and efficient public service delivery.



As at September, 2024, SCALE project has reached 35 states plus the FCT. SCALE worked directly with and strengthened 215 CSOs and BMOs through the cluster approach. SCALE work covered 14 sectors including extractives; agriculture; health; water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH); education; sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV); trafficking in persons (TIP); child and early forced marriage (CEFM); youth development; anti-corruption; fiscal transparency; social inclusion; elections; and civic space. In 2024, SCALE extended its reach in the health sector to tuberculosis advocacy working with the national coordinating body to advance response to tuberculosis treatment.

The work of SCALE provided training and capacity development opportunities to more than 1,000 local organisations across the country. The project graduated 72 OD and advocacy professionals through the OD/Advocacy market place training programme. SCALE work resulted in 81 policy actions by government. Over 1300 CSOs signed up to CSO Atlas platform as part of CSO self-regulation initiative. SCALE deployed 1,133 election observers during the 2023 elections; provided survivor recovery support to over 72 trafficking survivors; established three private sector against Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Forums; reached 443, 469 unique listeners with SGBV and CEFM messages; established safe spaces in 87 communities for over 4,810 survivors and prevented early marriage of 10 girls.

## **6. CONCLUSION, THE WAY FORWARD AND THE FUTURE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN NIGERIA**

The consolidation of democracy, building of democratic institutions, holding of elected officials accountable and effective and efficient public service delivery will depend on the capacity and ability of CSOs in Nigeria. Therefore, a prosperous future for Nigeria will depend on the capacity and quality of civil society that we are able to build.

In the last five years, SCALE has strengthened the Organisational Development (OD) and advocacy capacity of 215 local CSOs and BMOs through targeted in-depth capacity development intervention enabling them to effectively employ the acquired capacity to advance policy reforms. SCALE's interventions are unique in the sense that it addressed issues that previous interventions ignored such as Organisational Development (theory and practice), Strategic leadership and management, strategy plan development, gender equality and social inclusion (GESI), conflict sensitivity programming and board governance and evaluation. In addition,

SCALE enhanced capacity in countering trafficking in persons, sexual and gender based violence (SGBV), campaign to end child, early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) and working to improve the policy and regulatory enabling environment for civil society. But there is a false narrative that there is too much capacity strengthening of CSOs in Nigeria. This is not correct. First, there are over 10,000 CSOs in Nigeria. Whatever has been done is a tip of the iceberg. Secondly, capacity strengthening is a continuous process especially as we live in a VUCADD world characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, diversity and disruption. In such conditions, continuous capacity enhancement cannot be over-emphasised. The emergence of changing technology and artificial intelligence reinforces this position.

Finally, in order to create an enabling environment for CSOs to flourish, we need to change the way politics is played in Nigeria. We need to fix the politics dominated by “uncivil” people whose interest is looting and brigandage. The beginning point is that decent, hard working and God-fearing professionals must participate in politics. It was Plato who counselled us that “if you refuse to participate in politics, you will be ruled by your inferiors.” Edmund Burke admonished us that for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing. Frantz Fanon warned us that the future will have no pity for those men and women who possessing the exceptional privilege of being able to speak the words of truth to their oppressors have taken refuge in attitude of passivity, of mute indifference and in some cases of cold complicity. Frantz Fanon argued that any bystander is either a coward or a traitor. It has to be recognised that the ruling class will never relinquish power on its own accord.<sup>16</sup> This will require taking over of power by coalition of patriots and democrats and the establishment of democratic institutions that will work in favour of the people.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, the future of civil society in Nigeria depends on what we decide to do. Together, we can build a stronger, more vibrant civil society that continues to play a pivotal role in deepening democracy, promoting good governance, and ensuring that the voices of all Nigerians are heard and respected. The future of Nigeria’s democracy depends on the strength and vitality of its civil society, and I am confident that, with the right strategies and partnerships, we can overcome the challenges and achieve our collective aspirations. The Future of civil society in Nigeria is bright.

Thank you for your attention.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> Igbuzor, O (2021), Contemporary Issues on Development and Change in Nigeria. Abuja, Risafu Publishers.
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- <sup>4</sup> Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD)(2021), Civil Society Organisations in Nigeria: Impact Assessment Study.
- <sup>5</sup> USAID (2022), Moving toward a Model of Locally led Development. FY 2022 Localisation Progress Report.
- <sup>6</sup> USAID Localisation Progress Report, 2023
- <sup>7</sup> Roberts and Ali, 2021
- <sup>8</sup> OECD, 2022
- <sup>9</sup> Ibezim-Ohaeri, Victoria (2021), Galvanising Collective Action to Protect the Civic Space in Nigeria. Lagos, Spaces for Change.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid
- <sup>11</sup> European Parliament (2017), Shrinking Space for Civil Society: The EU Response. Belgium, Directorate-General for External Policies of the European Parliament.
- <sup>12</sup> Afrobarometer (2022), Confronting threats to Civic Spaces, June, 2022.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibezim-Ohaeri (2021) Op Cit
- <sup>14</sup> Hossain, et all (2018), What does Closing Civic Space mean for Development? A Literature Review and Proposed Conceptual Framework. IDS Working Papers.
- <sup>15</sup> PLAC () CSOs and the Nigerian Civic Space since 2021.
- <sup>16</sup> O' Malley, P. National Democratic Revolution