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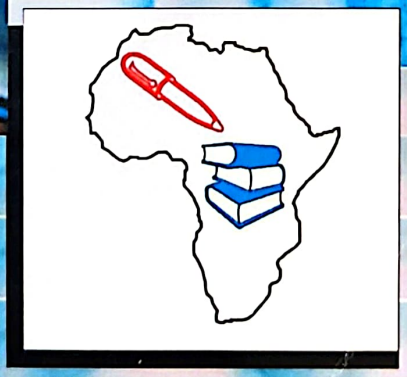



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CHALLENGES OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS (CSOS) IN INFLUENCING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The importance of civil society organisations (CSOs) in democratic governance cannot be overemphasised. Some of these organisations did not devote their activities to the establishment of the democratic system alone, but their operations were also directed at alleviating the sufferings of the people by addressing social and economic problems such as health, education and youth empowerment, and good governance among others. They are the mouthpiece of the society. Therefore, this study analysed constraints of CSOs in influencing democratic governance in Nigeria. Twenty-one civil society organisations were used for the study which comprises of all the twelve pro-democracy and governance-oriented civil society organisations that registered with the Corporate Affairs Commissions and 9 purposively selected non-registered pro-democracy groups. The selection of the 9 pro-democracy groups was informed by their records in pro-democracy activities, national spread and exposure to national issues. In-depth interview, as well as focus group discussion, was used. The findings showed that despite the contribution of CSOs in facilitating, enthroning and sustaining democratic governance in Nigeria they are still faced with some constraints such as fund, corruption, government interference, identity and lack of cohesion in the performance of their duty. The study concluded that for the society to appreciate their performance better there is a need for CSOs to be more pro-active in their dealings.

Keywords: *Civil society organisations, Challenges, Democratic governance, Nigeria*

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Introduction

The over-centralisation of political authority at the centre without the readiness of the government to accept the existence of another multiple areas of power in the state (of which CSOs are one) is the albatross of governance in Nigeria. The CSOs are outside the sphere of governmental activities which includes and manifests inequity, inequality, lack of transparency, poor accountability, lack of probity and legitimacy. They (CSOs) remain as the direct watchdog of the state, hence, the State CSOs interface. Consequently the state, often, resorts to a repressive relationship with the CSOs. The demonstration experiment by Nigeria's Fourth Republic has not departed from the previous regimes' allegations this is because political functionaries often have counterpoised political agenda to the yearnings of the mass of the citizenry. CSOs, being organised groups, drawn from diverse interest groups have a pivotal role to play in reconciling government programmes with the needs of the people.

The Nigerian state is a by-product of the colonial experience. The civil society organisations (whose leaders were referred to as nationalists) pushed for the emancipation of the people from internal slavery. This struggle contributed to the attainment of the country's independence in 1960. After independence in 1960, the momentum that the struggle had generated only subsided for a while. However, the departure of the colonial overlords created a new phase of internal state versus CSO struggle, which has been taking different colouration until today.

The second phase of civil society growth can be traced back to the anti-military regimes, especially from the regime of General Muhammad Buhari when sentiments that grew out of excessive state repression and failed economic policies propelled various protests and demonstrations by various CSOs against the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in the 1980s. The period witnessed an upsurge of civil society organisations (CSOs) in response to the dehumanising effects of the SAP on the Nigerian poor masses (Imade, 2006).

Although, Bayart (1986) argues that the 'political behaviours practiced by Africans are distinctively derived from the continent's material poverty; where resources are scarce, the object of political contestation is to secure economic consumption, which in turn is best guaranteed by capturing state power but this is not the case in Nigeria. Olayode (2004) underscores this point by saying that enthronement of good governance in Nigeria is challenged by bad leadership, poor management, greed and corruption. The literature on governance is emphatic that corruption has adversely affected the entrenchment of good governance in Africa (Ogbonnaya, Omoju & Udefunna, 2012).

One of the serious problems in Nigeria is the general misconception of governance by citizens to mean sharing and looting of national resources; the revenue from oil are seen as "national cake" meant to be shared by all without considering how it should be baked (Okotoni, 2006). The problem is further compounded by looting and squandering by successive governments coupled with lack of transparency, poor accountability and bad leaders in the three tiers of government (Okotoni, 2006). Transparency International (TI) rated Nigeria in 2012 as one of the first ten most corrupt nations in the world and twenty-seventh corrupt nation in 2013 (Transparency International, 2013). Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) World Factbook of January 2012 rated Nigeria as the sixth nation in the world with 70% of her population living below poverty line in their country comparison of nations living below poverty line (CIA World Fact Book, 2012).

The commonality in the arguments of most scholars on this subject centres on the contention that states in African are indeed in quandary because they have failed to meet up with the expectations of the people in terms of development, security of life and property, provision of social amenities, equal opportunities for political participation and improved quality of life (Afolabi, 2005). What derives from these directly is that the African States still leave much to be desired in terms of actual corruption incidence, human right ratings, elections, political legitimacy leadership, institutional efficiency, policy environment and constitutional reforms.

Civil society organisations, therefore, have seen their ever-increasing relevance in shaping the political landscape of the country as ones that occupy the civil space and monitor the activities of the State. Thus, where civil society organisations are dormant and inactive, the state officials would probably have a field day to do whatever they like with little or no accountability consciousness. On the other hand, where the (CSOs) are very active and vibrant, their activities would serve as checks to the excesses of the state, thus creating awareness for accountability, responsiveness and good governance. The onus of the study is therefore to determine how far the civil society organisations have been able to sustain the momentum in keeping the state on its toes to abide by the manifestoes and political promises made to the electorates while maintaining internal consistency with respect to decorous conduct of its own activities because he who lives in glass house does not throw stones.

From preliminary observations, it appears that the civil society organisations have a more conducive atmosphere to operate under the civilian democratic regimes than the era of the oppressive and brutal rule of the military. With

possible more conducive atmosphere to operate and the view to create awareness on accountability, responsive governance and human rights for both the government and the governed; the role of the civil society organisations cannot be overemphasised. Though it may appear that the struggle for democratic governance is over, this is far from it. As it can be observed that since the commencement of the Fourth Republic, the nation is faced with governance crises manifesting in high rate of unemployment and underemployment, hyper-inflation, retrenchment, high level of insecurity ranging from kidnapping, violence, terrorism, robbery, rape, institutional failure, bad leadership, mismanagement and misappropriation of resources. It is against this backdrop that the study examines the structure, mode of operations and the direction of influence as well as the constraints facing civil society organisations in the struggle for democratic governance in Nigeria from 1999 to 2012.

Literature Review

Civil Society

Stephen (1984) defines civil societies as an arena where manifold social movements... and civil associations from all classes attempt to constitute themselves in an ensemble of arrangements so that they can express themselves and advance their interests. This they do by bringing citizens together non-coercively in deliberate attempts to mould the formal laws and informal norms that regulate social interaction. This explains why Kowonise (1997) says it is the intermediary and autonomous organisations which function and sometimes flourish in the space that exists between the state and the household.

The working definition of London School of Economics (2006) Centre for Civil Society is illustrative and is considered empirically and analytically useful as it captures the multi-faceted nature of the concept. Civil Society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purpose and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market, are often complex, blurred and negotiated (Alqadhafi, 2007). Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degrees of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often, populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations faith-based movements, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations and coalition and advocacy groups (Updated March 2004) in Alqadhafi, (2007)

The key features of successful civil societies which emanate from various definitions include the following: separation from the state and the market, formed by people who have common needs, interests and values like tolerance, cooperation and equality, and development through a fundamentally endogenous and autonomous process which cannot easily be controlled from outside. Civil Society is defined as a sphere of social interaction between the household and the state which is manifest in norms of community cooperation, the structure of voluntary association and networks of public communication (Bratton, 1994).

From the above definition, Bratton distinguishes the institutions of the civil society as:

(i) The norms of civil community: According to him, the most important values to the construction of civil society are trust, reciprocity, tolerance and inclusion. Trust is a prerequisite for an individual to associate voluntarily, reciprocity is a resource for reducing the transactions cost 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 norms are taught not only in the family but also in schools, community groups, churches and they can be measured through public opinions and sample surveys polls.

(ii) The structures of associational life: For civil life to be institutionalised it must be expressed in organisation's form. The common organisational structure in civil society is the voluntary association, which is the coming together of people by reason of their interest and identity to pursue a common cause. All types of voluntary association help to populate and pluralise civil society.

(iii) The network of public communication – For citizens to be politically active, they need a means of communication with one another; this discourse can take place in various forms. For example, public communications media, both print and electronic. Civil society is stronger where there is a diversity of media outlets and political views. New technologies of personal communication - including telephones, fax and photocopying machines can strengthen civil society by empowering citizens to communicate independently of state supervision. A healthy civil society is a multi-stranded web of cross-cutting channels of communication.

Civil Society and the State

It is interesting to note that over the last fifty years most theorising and conceptualisation in political science, political economy and sociology has been focused on definitions, re-definitions and re-formulations of the state on

the question of governance (Tendon, 1991). The state has been equated with a geopolitical configuration following the Second World War, while prior to the colonial rule, countries and communities continued to exist and flourish in different parts of the world without the modern concept of state. The pertinent question is what provided the basis for the generation of science, technology, culture art education etc. in these communities? Obviously, it was the result of the configuration of civil society (Tendon, 1991).

The state so conceptualised, plays an increasingly dominant role in determining every aspect of the existence of the individuals and the families in contemporary societies. For example, the state determines law and order; makes macroeconomic policies, takes over the functions of education and health care; focuses on the other issues of agricultural development and performed the task of industrial development. In many situations as the state begins to acquire greater role, it begins to take over economic, political, cultural and social functions which were to be played within civil society.

In various studies of democracy in every part of the world, it has been documented that the greatest threat to democratic functioning has been the dominance of the state over the institutions of civil society (Diamond, Juan, Linz and Seymour, 1989). Wherever democracy has been threatened or derailed, wherever authoritarian or military dictatorships have taken over, it has been a consequence of the supremacy of the state over civil society and the dismantling of the institutions of a civil society built over a period of history. Braton (1994) submits that civil society is a complex concept and different writers see civil society from different dimensions. According to him, while Engels, Hegel and Marx focus on the material; Gramsci and Harvel insist on ideology and Ferguson and de Tocqueville focus more on the organisation. Keane, as cited in Braton (1994), says eighteenth-century liberal philosophers saw civil society as a means of defending communities against potential abuse by political leaders. Fergusson (1967), in his essay, *History of Civil Society,* recognises that the solidarity of society was undermined by commerce, industries, and by the emergence of a centralised constitutional state. Although the term civil society was not distinguished from the state initially, the importance of checking the state as a condition for civil society was given emphasis from the 17th century onwards. This concept of checking state power was later expanded by de Tocqueville (1945).

Locke (1690) as cited in Mushi (2012), the first scholar to develop a notion that the development of the private property was the basis of civil society, argues that humankind possesses his own labour and if he adds this to the products of nature, the products become his. Smith (1977) one of the enlightenment thinkers, later elaborated on this notion by stressing the development of the market economy as the basis for civilised society. Georg

Hegel, a German philosopher also sees civil society as the dividing stage between the macro community (the state) and the micro-community (the family) (Peczynski, 1984). Later, Hegel who was influenced by the Scottish political economists defines civil society as, the realm of difference, intermediate between the family and state. He equates civil society with bourgeoisie society and included the market. This definition was later taken up by Marx, Engels and other 19th century thinkers. Hegel emphasises that civil society is the realm of contradiction and the modern state is a mediator.

Following the Gramscian perspective, the state can be seen to represent the "politics of domination" while civil society represents the politics of consent. The state and civil society are both needed to complete the process of governance of society. Hegel's definition was adopted by Karl Marx to form part of his 'pelt bourgeoisie' description, whilst other theorists adopted Hegel's definition to include emerging societal structures brought about by a modernising Europe (Masterson, 2005). A French aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville (1945) who wrote his seminal work on Democracy in America in 1838 had his work on American democratic model, its strengths and flaws and in particular, the relationship between the state and civil organisations can be said to be one of most significant works in advancing the liberal democratic perspective.

Tocqueville (1945) and Marx in Stepan (2008) in their theories separated the civil society, from the State, but they disagreed on the extent to which civil society relates to the economic sector of a state. Tocqueville saw civil society acting as a restraining influence to the economic sphere while Marx saw the bourgeoisie as an extension and collaborative partner of the corporation. In Hegel as in Marx, the civil society can be equated with the bourgeois society, he saw the civil society as "not a natural condition of freedom but a historically produced sphere of life" (Mandani & Wambadia, 1995). Hegel was of the opinion that civil society is a contradictory construct that is in a continuous conflict with the State, while Karl Marx's theory stated that the set of contradictions that obtains in the civil society are also reproduced in the state formation (Draper, 1997). That is, the state promotes some set of interests in the civil society, while at the same time, it undermines other interests. John Locke and Thomas Hobbs asserted that the state is in some sense accountable to and therefore should be identified with civil society. Although the two should not be seen as the same, Gramsci argues that civil society should be understood outside the power of the state, whilst de Tocqueville liberal philosophy argued that civil society should be understood in at least partial if not significant opposition to the state (Masterson, 2005).Gramsci elevates the civil society to a realm of public opinion and

culture where the ruling class establishes its hegemonic legitimacy and consent (Edwards, 2004).

The civil society stands apart from the state (Tandon, 1991). The state is concerned as the realm of the politics of force by which governing elites exert their domination over society. By contrast, civil society is the realm of consent through which citizens may choose to accept or to reject the use of force by state officials. Bratton also distinguishes the civil society from the realm of social action known as "political society" whereas the civil society contains institutions like neighbourhood associations, professional bodies, and organised religions, political society refers to political parties, elections and legislatures.

Challenges of Civil Society

However, certain issues militate against the effective operation of civil society organisations in Nigeria, one of which according to Boadi (1995) in the issue of insufficient funds. Most civil society organisations rely on government funding for their various operations, which is not a healthy phenomenon as it breeds loyalty of civil society organisation to the government. Osaghae (1998), also opines that "the poor economic conditions of the Nigerian state has also led to the emergence of a civil society that states inclined because members of such groups believe strongly that by showing loyalty to the incumbent government, material resources are assured". The appointment of civil society leaders into political offices has also affected the character and ideology of such societies. In the words of Boadi (1995), "many of Nigeria's new democracy civil associations turned out to be nothing more than political actions committees and proto parties that have more in common with political than civil society". This may soon be the case for the Save Nigeria Group in few years if the Buhari/Bakare campaign organisation wins the Presidency at the 2011 general election.

Jega (2006) has identified another limitation to civil society roles, which he tagged, "lack of sensitivity to the plural nature of Nigeria". The heterogeneous nation of the Nigerian state has to a large extent strained civil society organisations.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach to the research. Officials of all the 12 pro-democracy and governance oriented CSOs that are duly registered with the Corporate Affairs Commission in Nigeria (CAC) and the 9 purposively selected non-registered human right organisations were interviewed as well as law enforcement agents and members of a focus group. This study examines the challenges of CSOs in influencing democratic governance in Nigeria. To

understand these challenges, the CSOs, the police and the ministry of information officers were asked the following questions:

Question: *What are the threats to the effective performance of the roles of you r organisation?*

Question: *In your own opinion, what are the problems militating with the acti vities of the CSOs in Nigeria? (This question was for the police, Ministry of In formation (MOI) officers and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) participants)*

Findings

Constraints to Effective Performance of the Civil Society Organisations

Many of the CSOs would have loved to perform better but they are constrained by some challenges. All the CSOs interviewed and 85% of the Police Officers, Ministry of Information Officers and the FGD participant confirmed that their major problem is insufficient to fund.

Inadequate fund: The CSOs performance and activities to the democratisation of Nigeria are not without challenges. The principal obstacle as a cog in the wheel of the progress of the CSOs activities is lack of fund. From the In-depth interview, all the CSOs (100%) interviewed have the challenge of the insufficient fund. Many said they have pencilled down lofty programmes and activities but could not carry them out because the fund for such is not available. Mr. Olasupo Ojo of the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (CDHR) said many of the programmes that are pencilled down by the organisation cannot be executed because of the insufficient fund. Many of the foreign donors are not forthcoming because they believe that Nigeria is richer than their countries; therefore they expect the government to fund the CSOs (Olasupo, CDHR 2013).

Majority of the organisations are self-funding, few get money from sympathizers, well-wishers and foreign donors. For example organisations like Academic Staff of University Union (ASUU), the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), and Save Nigeria Group (SNG) are self-funded.

The few that receive grants from external donors complained that the foreign donors are not forthcoming as they used to do. The spokesperson for Baoba for Women's Human Rights (BWHR) in her words said the external donors are no more forthcoming as they used to be and this has constituted a cog in the wheel of the organisations progress in reaching out to the masses (Oladepo, 2013). In the word of Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) Chairman; our organisation is funded by individuals and some foreign donors. Many Nigerians that are willing to fund CSOs are afraid of the government. They don't want the government to accuse them of funding insurrection. (Zikirulahi in TMG, 2013).

Government interference: Although, 90% of the CSOs interviewed, attested that they enjoyed the freedom to operate because the atmosphere is more relaxed now unlike during the military period. Nevertheless, many of these organisations were of the opinion that the government has many ways of hindering the CSOs from operating freely apart from arresting and intimidating the CSOs officials. For example, Mrs Iheoma Obibi of Alliances for Africa (AFA) said "the government has some unfavourable policies preventing the CSOs from doing their work. The Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) and Economic Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) brought out a cumbersome form to be filled by the Non-Governmental Organisations. This should have been given to politicians and people in power; the government should stop chasing shadows" (Iheoma in AFA, 2013).

Also, Ibukchuku Ejike of Civil Liberty Organisation said there is no absolute freedom for CSOs anywhere in the world, many of the members of CLO had been detained without due process times without number. Comrade Osmond of Enugu Chapter of Civil Liberty Organisation (CLO) was detained unjustly recently, offices sealed and rights of the members abused. Odumakin Yinka of SNG narrated the ordeal of the organisation during their protest against the increment of fuel pump price in January 2012. There is a price to pay for activism in Nigeria. The government, for instance, rolled out military tanks to stop our rally in Ojota after we took a weekend break. There were cases of the extrajudicial killing during that struggle although none at our own venue (Odumakin in SNG, 2013).

Ezechukwu (2013) the Secretary of NUJ during the interview said the government has several ways of suppressing free speech and opinion of people in opposition, recently four editors of Leadership Newspaper were arrested, two have been charged to court. This was due to what they wrote about the government and the nation. From all the above it is obvious that the government though not using the old military methods of suppressing the CSOs, nevertheless, they still hinder the CSOs by not giving them free hand to operate. Cracks and feuds among the CSOs: Another problem besetting CSOs in Nigeria is the inability of the various organisations to close ranks and fully mobilise for democratic struggles. This has constituted a series of barriers for the activities of the advocacy groups. On several occasions, there are indications of cracks within and feuds among some of the organisations. Olasupo (2013) of CDHR said the cracks and feuds at times do arise as a result of leadership problem at both the units and national level because some members who are not well grounded suddenly find themselves at leadership positions. Often times this has led to the emergence of splinter groups or total breakups. A ministry of information officer said the CSOs are so many and they have different goals and aspirations. The government realises this and uses it to destabilise them. The government does engage some of these

organisations secretly and at the end of the day such organisations automatically become government stooges and antagonise others (MOI, 2013).

From the foregoing, the various organisations have failed to achieve the desired unity of purpose required to successfully prosecute the democratic struggle. Illiteracy and Poverty: The incidence of the high rate of illiteracy and poverty among Nigerians is another challenge facing the CSOs as declared by some of the CSOs. The twin problems are responsible for weak CSOs. This factor affects the activities of the CSOs in that the population would not be easily mobilised for concerted action against antidemocratic policies. In the focus group discussion had in Edo, one of the participants attested to this. Many Nigerians are after what goes into their pocket, so when the CSOs are trying to educate them of their rights or mobilising them against anti-democratic policies without backing it up with cash as the politicians do, they will not mind them or give them attention (FGD Edo, 2013).

On the part of the CSOs, high poverty rate in the country has affected some of these organisations; a policeman has this to say It is true that the CSOs monitor elections but some of them when they get to polling booths assigned to them, they compromise their stand the moment the politicians or party agents give them money. Some even falsify records and reports in favour of a particular party as soon as they are "settled" (Police, Enugu State).

Financial impropriety: This is another short-coming of the CSOs, which is financial impropriety and lack of accountability. Oftentimes, members of these groups have levied allegations of financial misappropriation against some of their leaders. Almost all (98%) of the Police and Ministry of information officers interviewed on the activities of the CSOs in curbing reducing corruption accused the CSOs of corruption. A ministry of information official in Plateau state said some of these organisations receive a substantial amount from foreign donors but instead of using it for the benefit of the masses they claim to be helping they pocket it (MOI Plateau, State).
Moreover, because of the allegation of corruption on some of the CSOs officials and leaders, some of the donors have withdrawn their assistance. The spokesman for Human Rights and Ethics and Development confirmed this as the major challenge facing the organisation is funding, Nigerians don't have the culture of funding Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and many foreign donors are no longer willing to assist the NGOs anymore because some of these organisations have abused the privilege. They are not accountable for the funds given to them. (Salvage CHRED, 2013).

***Identity problem*:** The last constraint confronting the CSOs is the issue of identity and poor public perception of the CSOs. Some Nigerians, most specifically the illiterates do not know what the CSOs stand for, some know but see them as 'rogues' who are out there to canvass for the fund and embezzle it. This was established by the responses from the FGDs (Kaduna & Taraba) that one of the challenges these CSOs have is that they are too many. They are not better than the politicians; they are out for what will go into their pockets at the end of the day (FGD Kaduna, 2013). Many of these NGOs are only making noise to be recognised by the government. The government has a way of keeping them quiet, that is, cash inducement. The moment they are paid off, you see them singing the praises of the government. He, who pays the piper, dictates the tune. A sure way to make money in Nigeria today is to found an NGO (FGD Taraba, 2013).

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the in-depth interview with the CSO officials, Ministry of Information officers, the Police and the focus group discussions across the nation, it is evident that the challenges militating against the CSOs range from, financial problems to identify the problem, lack of synergy and corruption among some of the CSOs. These have inhibited them from giving their best performance.

This study also concluded that in spite of the CSOs utility for democratisation, they are faced with several challenges, ranging from the inadequate fund to lack of internal democracy; identity problem; and other woes. They seem at best imperilled as to be incapable of standing up against potential reversals of the gains of democratic openness:

i. There is a need for CSOs to become more actively involved in the democratic project. It is also pertinent that these CSOs become virile, articulate and cohesive and focused to engage the state, mobilise the people and provide a credible platform that will aid the quest for the establishment of a durable and dependable democratic order. They must target issues one at a time. As rallies are organised against corruption, for example, the same must be done for women empowerment, poverty, and ethnic marginalisation and so on. Also, aside from the issue of rallies, the CSOs should engage in more pragmatic methods like lobbying which has proved to be more effective than the less efficacious techniques.
ii. CSOs in Nigeria need to become more national in their spread and membership. Also, in the range of issues that they tackle, taking on broad rural as well as urban concerns across the length and breadth of Nigeria. They should take the assessment, strategic and objective needs of the polity and partnership with key stakeholders, government inclusive because isolated and sentimentally independent CSOs may not deliver services suitable for the people. This will transform the CSOs into credible and popular political force that will be difficult for the politicians to ignore or

brush aside. It is important that the civil society organisations ensure that their internal procedures and organisational structures conform to the highest ethical standards. Probity, accountability, transparency and a culture of binding commitment to good corporate governance should be their watchword. These organisations must also fine-tune their method of advocacy such that their messages would be well received by the political elites and well appreciated by the populace.

iii. Operationally, civil society organisations should seek alternative funding sources. This way, they will be able to maintain their autonomy. They must include the creation of autonomous programs as opposed to donor-driven programs; cultivating democratic practices and values, intensifying networking and sharing of information within CSOs as well as improving internal governance mechanisms.

iv. Lastly, there is a need for the civil society groups to be alive in serving as watchdogs for elected public office holders. It is expected that where these are achieved, it holds better prospect for the attainment of good governance and democratic growth in Nigeria.

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