

Ethical Appraisal of the Role of Civil Society in Nigeria: Pathway for Social Inclusion and Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary studies surrounding the creation of civil society in Africa have revealed two important findings. First, despite the effort of civil society organizations in supporting inclusive democratic governance, promoting participation, advocating for transparency and accountability, sustainable development and stability remain elusive due to the challenges of social exclusion. Second, institutions central to the exercise of governmental powers exhibit inefficiency, weakness, lack transparency, and low credibility which worsen extreme poverty, inequality, and deprivation. Drawing upon extensive contemporary literature on social exclusion and inclusive growth, this study examines the role of civil society organisations as a pathway for social inclusion and sustainable development. Findings reveal that the management and distribution of services in the Nigerian society is largely inefficient and exclusionary, leading to myriad of social problems. This study has a significant implication for cumulative research on the subject of inclusive society and sustainable development.

KEYWORDS

Civil Society, Development Actors, Moral Obligation, Social Inclusion, Sustainable Development

INTRODUCTION

Creating a society for all is a moral obligation and one that must reflect the commitments to upholding at least the minimum core of fundamental human rights and the principles of equality and equity (Busatto 2007:45). Despite efforts made toward achieving socio-economic development, promoting wider support for democratic values and strengthening collaborative relationships among societies, social institutions and civil society worldwide; inequality and exclusion does not only persist, but are expanding in many parts of the world, both within and between societies. Many societies are facing negative social conditions, such as widening disparities and marginalization of certain groups and/or communities (Beall & Piron 2003:88). This has also resulted in conflicts and violence as well as militancy, as in the case of Nigeria's Niger Delta region.

To prevent the further increase of social tensions among their members, it is vital that societies be equipped with strategies and tools for adequately assessing the realities and addressing existing challenges in a more proactive, constructive and holistic way, so that they may become better prepared

for new challenges, more resilient in confronting them, and better able to adjust to emerging imbalances. Against this backdrop, there are strong instrumental reasons for promoting social integration and inclusion. Deep disparities, based on unequal distribution of resources or wealth and/or differences in people's backgrounds, reduce social mobility and ultimately exert a negative impact on growth, productivity and well-being of society as a whole (Agbaje 1993:122). The simple understanding is that promoting social integration and inclusion will create a society that is safer, stable and just, which is an essential condition for sustainable economic growth and development.

For any society to be stable, it must interact with many who are engaged in associations that directly participate in the public sphere. The core ideas of a good society include equality of opportunity, well-being, non-violence and tolerance (Agbaje, 1997:123). These lend credence to the fact that associations within the society must therefore collectively draw on these values and give opportunities for participation as well as voice to all groups in society without recourse to discrimination, marginalization, intolerance or violence. In this regard, one significant area of progress recorded over the past decade has been the growing influence of civil society organizations toward influencing and driving policy change, be it local, national and international. In many societies such as Nigeria, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community based organizations (CBOs), professional associations, trade unions and other civil society organizations (CSOs) or groups are regularly called upon to help in designing and implementing key development strategies, especially poverty reduction (AfDB 2011:19). This invitation is based upon the three fundamental roles of civil society in every society: as participants in the designing of strategies for development, as service providers through community based organizations and national NGOs, and as watchdogs to ensure governments fulfil commitments.

The cardinal objective of this paper, therefore, is to analyze and assess the contributions of these increasingly important development actors in Nigeria. What can civil society organisations do to promote inclusive local economic growth and development? Are civil society organisations truly effective advocates of policy change in Nigerian society? Do they have a role in ensuring greater accountability and transparency in governance? These are some of the questions this study attempts to address. In trying to do this, efforts were also made to underline the opportunities, challenges and threats faced by civil society organisations in the pursuit of their objectives.

CLARIFICATION OF KEY TERMS

The concept of social inclusion or an inclusive society is not particularly well defined and theorized by scholars (Faria 1995:33); it lacks a clear definition and coherent theoretical core. There are however, many competing and sometimes complementary definitions of concepts related to the idea of an inclusive society. These definitions have changed over time and differ according to the theoretical perspective or paradigms used. Even though there is no consensus and no single agreed understanding, for clarity a few key terminologies will be explained. They include the following: inclusive society, social inclusion, social exclusion, social citizenship, social integration, social cohesion and social participation.

Inclusive Society

An inclusive society is a society for all in which every individual, each with rights and responsibilities, has an active role to play (Gore 1996:106). Such a society must be based on respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms, cultural and religious diversity, social justice and the special needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, democratic participation and the rule of law. It is promoted by social policies that seek to reduce inequality and create flexible and tolerant societies that embrace all people. It also connotes a society that over-rides differences of race, gender, class, generation, and geography, and ensures inclusion, equality of opportunity as well as capability of all members

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